THE CATS, THE SEA, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

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Abstract

The cats, the sea, and everything in between is a 74-minute non-fiction film that fuses documentary, essay film, and surrealist elements. The film documents my visit to Lebanon in the summer of 2022, as the country grapples with a deepening economic crisis. Moving through an everyday life that feels both familiar and unfamiliar, I find myself utterly disoriented. One day, I am sharing a large family dinner; the next, I am waiting for hours in line for a bag of bread.

In an attempt to process these contradictions, I capture my visit's stories and emotional textures through observational footage, found footage, daily conversations, moments of mundane life, and internal reflections. Each sequence becomes a portal into a moment, feeling, or truth, forming a maze that echoes a country suspended between collapse and resilience. The film aims to take the viewer on a journey similar to mine, in its chaos, absurdity, sadness, and beauty.

Acknowledgements

Where do I begin? First, thank you to every person who trusted me with their presence on camera, even if only for a brief moment. Much of this film was captured during moments of simply "existing," as raw and unfiltered as possible. I was able to do this only because of the trust, love, and deep bonds I share with the people who appear in the film, who allowed themselves to freely exist in front of the camera—even when none of us fully knew what the film would become.

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To My dad—whoever watches this film instantly understands how much you mean to me. This film is deeply inspired by and dedicated to you. Thank you for your generosity, your openness, and all your craziness.

To my mom and my brother: although you are not on screen, you have always been there, believing in me and supporting me. I am who I am, as a person and as an artist, because of you.

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Disclaimer

I often find it frustrating—and a little unfair—to speak about my own work, especially outside the context of an organic conversation. Writing in retrospect is neither truly honest nor credible towards the work itself. It gives me time to reflect, which quickly leads to confusion between the truths, the analysis of those truths, and how I should present them—especially in an academic context, where pretentiousness often feels mandatory.

I also find this process reductive of the craft, of its phases, of its world—a world that exceeds words, texts, theories, and even the film itself. Since I must open up this world for the sake of graduation, I feel the urge to say everything, which is impossible. Deep down, I would rather say nothing than something incomplete.

I must declare, then, that this paper does not fully represent my work. In many places, it does not do justice to it; in others, it may over-intellectualize what was simple, instinctual, or coincidental. As always, I find myself saying a lot, yet never quite enough, and never exactly what truly matters. This is why, ultimately, I prefer simply to make the movie.

Background on the themes behind this film

I cannot discuss the background of this film without returning to the beginning of my MFA and my first years in Canada. When I applied to this program, I proposed a completely different project—a short fiction about two women in their mid-twenties whose friendship dissolves into co-dependency and loss of identity. At that time, I never imagined making a non-fiction thesis. Little did I know that the moment I set foot in Canada, Lebanon's collapse would begin. "Begin" for dramatic effect; more accurately, it would deepen, intensify, accumulate, and accelerate: wildfires, revolution, economic collapse, the 2020 port explosion, more economic collapse, Israeli attacks, and war—and those are merely simplistic headlines. At that time, I was reading *The Kite Runner*, and I remember pausing at the sentence "You think that these things would never happen to your country" (Hosseini, 2003). In parallel, COVID spread worldwide, and I found myself in strict lockdown, suspended in a foreign land, disoriented, endlessly scrolling through news of Home. I wanted to stay informed, out of worry for my beloved ones and out of fear of no longer belonging. Yet, as the legendary Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish says: "No matter how near you come, you will remain distant." (Darwish, 2011) I felt like I was watching life through glass, helplessly observing as everything absurdly changed.

In 2021, I made the first draft of my short non-fiction film, *Somewhere, but not here.*, which follows my journey from 2019 to 2020, in my first two years as an immigrant: physically in Canada, yet psychologically anchored in Lebanon's slow collapse. Its tagline—"Miles away, I watch the slow erasing of my home, Lebanon. Scattered between two places, I no longer am."—captures the dissociation of immigration, especially when one's homeland shifts unpredictably. In both process and form, that film became a key inspiration for *The cats, the sea, and everything in between*.

Somewhere, but not here. never pretends to understand Lebanon from afar. It is explicitly about witnessing from a distance—wanting desperately to feel and experience what I could not touch. Yet because I had lived my entire life in Lebanon, a tiny part of me believed that accumulated personal and intergenerational trauma, combined with nonstop updates, might give me enough "data" to connect, to approximate the experience. I simply wanted reassurance that I still belonged, as guilt was eating me.

It was only when I returned to Lebanon in summer 2021, a year before filming my thesis film, that I realized how wrong I had been. No news report, voice note, or secondhand description could prepare me for the daily absurdities and hardships I encountered. Friends lived without water and electricity for days, rotating between cafés to charge their phones and filling buckets whenever a weak trickle came from the tap. Food poisoning became commonplace, even though people avoided food that required refrigeration. People waited up to eight hours at gas stations to fill their cars, if they were lucky enough to get any fuel. Hijacked prices fluctuated daily. Fights erupted over bread and medication. All of this while lifelong savings were permanently gone due to the devaluation of the lira, and banks running out of money. And the list goes on. Amidst this chaos, one night crystallized my desire to make a film to preserve and commemorate the absurdity of these moments.

Around 1 a.m., I found myself in a friend-of-a-friend's apartment, on the fourth day in a row of one of the many total blackouts. Candles lit the rooms; we drank, smoked, and had snacks. At 3:30 a.m., electricity suddenly returned, blinding us. Our first reaction was almost comical: "Turn the lights off! My eyes hurt! Go back to the candles!" We laughed at ourselves, realizing the absurdity. A second later, reality hit. Everyone wanted to leave, listing all the things they should be doing now that we were blessed with electricity — laundry, vacuuming, charging

every device. But no one moved. We stayed exactly where we were, content, confident that we will figure out whatever awaited us tomorrow. We dimmed some lights, left a few candles glowing, put on music, and kept drinking. That familiar frustration that I've often experienced due to the impossibility of describing Lebanon, of translating life there into words—sparked the seed of this film. As Mahmoud Darwish wrote:

> You ask: What is the meaning of 'refugee'? They will say: One who is uprooted from his homeland. You ask: What is the meaning of 'homeland'? They will say: The house, the mulberry tree, the chicken coop, the beehive, the smell of bread, and the first sky. You ask: Can a word of eight letters be big enough for all of these, yet too small for us? (Darwish, 2011)

That summer, I kept wishing I was filming every moment. Not just for memory. It was something deeper — an urge to show people a slice of my world, surrounded by characters and places that felt inherently cinematic to me, as Mahmoud Darwish says: "Write, yourself, the history of your heart, from the moment Adam was struck with love, until the resurrection of your people." (Darwish, 2011)

I wanted to create a portrait of Lebanon. I wanted to create a collage—fragmented, emotional, layered—that captured its essence at a moment suspended in time. The nuanced realities, the absurdities, the tiny daily rituals, the things that could only exist in lived experience. *The cats, the sea, and everything in between* attempts to be a not-so-traditional testimony and a vessel of memory not just for myself but for others.

Parallel to this first realization came a more intimate one: my father had changed.

Growing up, my dad—like my mom—was always the star of the show: talkative, playful, inventing games, making endless dad jokes, a ball of energy. But in the summer of 2021, a year before production began, I encountered a very different version of him. On one hand, I

desperately wanted to spend time with him. On the other, it hurt to see him so subdued, so quiet, so dimmed. Even when he teased or joked, he wasn't the same. Being around him filled me with sadness, grief, and a deep kind of longing.

His energy had shifted, though he was physically healthy. He spent his days mostly alone, scrolling on his phone, unmotivated and withdrawn. He declined invitations from friends or family, avoided work, and constantly worried about his health, inventing imaginary, drastic yet illogical theories. The crisis played a huge role in this: lifetime lost savings, unstable work, and daily negotiations with scarcity. All of this, combined with our absence, had driven him to depression.

I tried to lift his spirits with walks or small activities, but he often declined: "I don't feel like it," or "Money is no good right now." Hearing these words felt surreal, shocking; throughout my entire life, my dad never let us feel financial strain, never mentioned money, although we were a lower-middle-class family and we had some tough periods. As I felt truly anxious and worried, I was compelled to "save" him, to retrieve the man I grew up with. These conflicting emotions—love, guilt, worry, grief—became another core layer of the film.

Yet, what surprised me more was his sudden tenderness toward cats — a deep care I had never seen before in a man who once hunted birds and fought in the war. Now he was feeding stray cats, watching them, talking about them all the time, and even talking with them. I was shocked, but also strangely relieved to witness this softer side, one I had always longed for. And yet I knew it emerged from a place of loneliness and yearning, now that my mother, my brother, and I had all left Lebanon. Witnessing him this way intensified my desire to make the film. I remember photographing him that summer without thinking; later, these images became references and emotional anchors during the following year's shoot.

In the past few years, I also realized that we, Lebanese people, live in a constant state of trauma. We are endlessly reminiscing, longing to bring the past back. We often believe that yesterday was better than today, but is it? As the Lebanese poet Nada Tueni said: “I belong to a country that commits suicide every day, while it is being assassinated. I resemble my Foolish Land: we are both expiating a crime of double identity” (Tueni,1982). This ongoing state of trauma fosters dissociation, selective memory, and survival through moving from one challenge to the next without processing the previous one. Much has changed since this project began. Lebanon and its people continue to endure immense hardships. During the editing phase, my editor—also Lebanese—and I had to pause when war on Lebanon erupted in late 2024. Watching the footage felt unbearably sad; we even questioned the film’s urgency. A while after, these atrocities reminded me of why I began this project: to remember, and not to forget. Though events, circumstances, and realities keep drastically evolving and changing, the underlying themes, feelings, and questions at the heart of the film remain the same.

Taken together, these reflections form the foundation of the themes and layers shaping the film. This is how *The cats, the sea, and everything in between* came to life—as a personal diary, a capsule of Lebanon’s collective memory, and an homage to a place that continues to haunt and captivate me.

Background on Genre/Form

As mentioned earlier, the project I initially proposed for the MFA was entirely different. I had always loved fiction filmmaking—with its process, world-building, and imaginative magic—and could not wait to create a new narrative work. What I could not foresee were the personal and collective circumstances that would unfold over the following years, reshaping both my relationship to filmmaking and my understanding of what this thesis needed to be. The decision to make this film non-fiction eventually became obvious, even inherent, to the subject matter. Several factors contributed to this transition.

First, completing an MFA shaped by COVID inevitably altered my creative practices. Like many others, I experienced prolonged isolation, which pushed me toward a more individual and introspective mode of working. Whether I realized it at the time or not, this shift deeply influenced the eventual genre and form of my thesis film.

Second, during my MFA, I created *Somewhere, but not here.* in Phil Hoffman's Process Cinema course, a short non-fiction situated between experimental film and documentary, which explored my experience living in Canada while witnessing Lebanon slowly collapse. I edited the first draft in approximately six days, with almost no sleep, barely any food, and only brief breaks for naps or walks. I felt like I was in a trance—a feverish dream—where the work needed to emerge through me, rather than from me. I was simply the conduit for something larger that demanded to be expressed.

In parallel, I made a short narrative fiction film in Tereza Barta's Production class, *Things No One Told Me*, which engaged with the same emotional period and themes but through a more linear narrative. While editing it, I realized that fiction did not serve me in the way non-fiction

did for this particular exploration. The fiction film required considerable effort to convey what non-fiction articulated with greater immediacy and depth. This contrast made it clear that for my thesis project, *The cats, the sea, and everything in between*, I needed to follow what felt intuitively right rather than conform to preconceived notions of genre. It was a frightening decision, but ultimately transformative—teaching me much about myself, my artistic practice, and the world around me.

Additionally, with the ongoing crises in Lebanon and the lingering effects of COVID, I had no desire or headspace to write a script. What could I possibly say? What would be the point of constructing a story? I didn't want linearity, a single perspective, or a constructed world with characters following a predetermined storyline—none of it served the themes I was exploring. I wanted only to capture what I was feeling, experiencing, and witnessing—raw, vulnerable, and honest. No added layers, no manufactured narrative, nothing artificial. Non-fiction offered me that freedom.

Within film schools and Cinephile circles, debates about what qualifies as documentary, docufiction, or hybrid cinema are endless. I am not a film scholar or theorist, nor do I aspire to be one, and I have chosen not to engage in these debates because I often find them limiting and outdated. A friend once suggested that such classifications serve audiences, distributors, and marketing more than artists themselves. As Trinh T. Minh-ha, the Vietnamese filmmaker, writer, and theorist, once said:

> I don't think of my films in terms of categories—documentary, fiction, film art, educational or experimental—but rather as fluid, interacting movements. The first is to let the world come to us through an outside-in movement—this is what some call 'documentary.' The other is to reach out to the world from the inside out, which is what some call 'fiction.' But these categories always overlap. I wrote 'there is no such thing as documentary' because it's illusory to take the real and reality for granted and to think that

> a neutral language exists, even though we often strive for such neutrality in our scholarly work. (Trinh, 1991)

Some have labeled my film a creative documentary. Since I must fill the "genre" section in every synopsis, festival submission, or thesis paper, I prefer to call this movie non-scripted or non-fiction, even though these terms feel restrictive, as Trinh T. Minh-ha continues: "To use an image is to enter fiction." (Trinh, 1991) I use these labels primarily as a mode of engagement rather than a fixed genre. For me, the film was never intended solely as a documentary, diary, or essay film. It is something beyond these categories—playful, intuitive, and simply what it needed to become.

The premise was simple: I would go to Lebanon for a month and a half, without knowing what awaited me. I would film everything, experience everything, absorb it all, return to Canada, and edit. That is exactly what happened. Although I did not know the specific content beforehand, I knew I wanted a collage-like form—chaotic, layered, and emotionally textured. A palette of feelings, a trajectory through identity, current events, and dreams. And that is precisely what emerged.

The unpredictability of Lebanese lived reality directly shaped my process-oriented method, making the film's form a response to the world and my experience in it. This approach resonates with practice-based methodologies in filmmaking, which prioritize intuition, experimentation, and embodied experience. In this sense, the film's form was not predetermined but developed organically through creation.

When it comes to filmmakers who shaped the film's genre, style, or tone, I cannot point to a single defining influence. Many artists have influenced the project more broadly—beyond questions of genre or structure—but I will discuss those later.

Artistic Background and Practice

My artistic practice spans multiple national contexts, cinematic forms, and production scales. I have been writing and directing films since my undergraduate studies in Lebanon, where I earned a Bachelor's in Communication Arts with an emphasis on Audiovisual Arts. While I produced several audiovisual works during that time, I consider my short coming-of-age narrative, *Words and Lights* (2018), my first fully realized cinematic project. It marked my initial engagement with a larger-scale cast and crew and a modest but structured production budget. The film received international recognition through festival circulation and broadcast platforms and was shortlisted for a BAFTA.

Since *Words and Lights,* my practice has expanded across fiction and non-fiction. Rather than adhering to a fixed genre, my methodology privileges process, inquiry, and experimentation. Each project emerges from the themes, allowing form, rhythm, and aesthetics to arise organically. Regardless of genre, my work maintains a poetic and dreamlike sensibility, tailored to each project's conceptual and emotional needs. For example, my non-fiction film *Somewhere, but not here.* emerged through a lo-fi, associative process over six sleepless days, using archival and found footage in a stream-of-consciousness structure. In contrast, *Words and Lights* followed a conventional fiction workflow with rehearsals, detailed shot lists, and controlled production design. These contrasting processes reflect my commitment to methodological flexibility and the dialogue between form and content.

Filmmaking for me is both a personal and analytical tool—a way to process lived experience, affect, and uncertainty. I do not approach cinema as a vehicle for argumentation or didactic messaging; instead, my work is driven by open-ended quests and emotional inquiry. I am drawn to intimate, character-centered narratives that foreground contradiction, vulnerability, and

ambivalence. By centering characters from marginalized or underrepresented communities, my work prioritizes identification and empathy, positioning affect itself as a political mode of engagement rather than an overt ideological stance.

Thematically, my films engage with womanhood, migration, memory, youth navigating identity within and beyond Lebanon, and dissent under late capitalism. Lebanon functions as more than a geographical setting; it is a fractured site of memory, contradiction, and unresolved tension. Currently creating from Canada, I am aware of my diasporic position and its ethical implications, which informs my commitment to challenging orientalist frameworks and amplifying underrepresented voices.

In retrospect, my recent work forms an unintentional trilogy exploring shifting relationships to place, belonging, and time. *Drained*, a short documentary shot in Lebanon before leaving, examines youth navigating political collapse, economic precarity, and the common dilemma of staying or emigrating. *Somewhere, but not here.* reflects my early diasporic experience in Canada, while *The cats, the sea, and everything in between* builds upon and dialogues with these precedents. The latter consolidates recurring concerns—identity, home, crisis, memory, and emotional survival—while deepening my exploration of cinematic tools and extended narratives. It resists simplification or explanatory closure, reflecting my belief that lived experience, particularly amid displacement and instability, cannot be neatly resolved. The film was driven by an urgent need to bear witness—to preserve a fragile world before it disappears, is overwritten by external narratives, or fades from memory.

Influences and Artistic Lineage

While *The cats, the sea, and everything in between* is not conceived as a direct adaptation or homage to a single existing work, several of its scenes and formal strategies emerged from methodologies encountered during my MFA.

Philip Hoffman's Process Cinema course, in particular, shaped the film's approach to sound, image, duration, and associative structure. The Beach/Military Aircraft sequence—in which the sound of military jets invades what is meant to be a peaceful image of the sea—and the collective memory sequence—where sounds of conflict and explosions become the soundtrack of a club—were directly informed by a remediation exercise from Hoffman's class. The exercise proposed combining two to three minutes of found sound with two to three minutes of found image, without internal cutting. By foregrounding duration, friction, and dissonance between sound and image, this constraint encouraged me to move away from illustrative audiovisual relationships and toward a more affective, atmospheric use of cinematic elements.

Beyond individual sequences, the film's intentionally chaotic, web-like structure was influenced by the found-footage exercise, my final Process Cinema project, *Somewhere, but not here.*, which relied heavily on remediation, improvisation, and free association. I often describe this approach as akin to automatic writing: intuition, affect, and associative logic drive the work rather than predetermined structure. In *The cats*…, I synthesized this process-driven approach with more deliberate, planned filmmaking methods, creating a productive tension between rigor and openness. On a micro level, the two films share tendencies such as collage, diary- or essay-film elements, found footage, on-screen text, and a blending of personal and collective experience. On a macro level, however, they diverge significantly: *Somewhere…* relies entirely

on incidental footage shot without cinematic intent, whereas *The cats…* primarily uses intentionally produced material, slower observational sequences, and multiple interviews.

Within my non-fiction work, pinpointing influences is difficult; inspiration tends to operate on a "feel" level rather than through structural or scenic conventions. Surprisingly, I cannot think about *The cats…* without relating it to Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog*. I first saw the film in Howard Wiseman's Scriptwriting class and was struck by how closely it mirrored my internal world. Anderson moves fluidly from idea to sequence to thought, linking the intensely personal with the philosophical. Although our works differ in many ways, I am deeply inspired by its chaos and web-like structure.

Also surprisingly, Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun* influenced the sensibility I sought in my father–daughter scenes, particularly in its treatment of emotional depth and memory without reliance on condensed or explicit dialogue. In the film's final scene, the protagonist dances in a club while a montage of memories passes through the strobe lights—a technique I echo in my own film, using clubs and parties as spaces of memory, communal experience, and introspection.

As surprisingly, Su Friedrich's work also resonates with me. Her blending of experimental, narrative, and documentary modes, and her use of autobiographical material, archival footage, and interviews, align with my interest in merging the personal and collective.

More obviously, the pioneering Lebanese filmmaker Jocelyne Saab has deeply shaped my approach through her personal yet humanistic political sensibility, essayistic structure, and focus on memory, home, and migration. Her personal, poetic lens on Lebanon and other countries in turmoil resonates deeply with my own artistic and political perspective. I feel a kinship with her belief, in the spirit of Gibran Khalil Gibran: "You have your Lebanon, and I have my Lebanon."

(Gibran, 1963) We both allow this perspective to inform our work, despite the country's circumstances.

Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige inspire me through their curiosity and refusal to provide answers. Their co-directed films—across fiction and non-fiction—often carry a persistent sense of ambiguity, dazedness, and feverish dreaming. This feeling of loss and confusion closely mirrors my own lived experience and inevitably resonates within my work, even when approached differently.

Finally, Agnès Varda's work is also a source of inspiration. Her autobiographical, memory-driven films blend playfulness, whimsy, and humor with serious subject matter. In *The Beaches of Agnès*, she juxtaposes images in a collage-like form, with the beach functioning almost as a character. In one scene of my film, I hold a mirror to capture Beirut through my own reflection—a gesture reminiscent of Varda's poetic use of mirrors in that film. Her inventive playfulness and joie de vivre continue to inspire me to preserve these qualities, even when engaging with heavy themes.

In terms of community, I do not situate myself within a single, clearly defined group of filmmakers. My practice remains deliberately fluid and resistant to categorical consistency. Instead, I identify with a broader community of independent, low-budget, and lo-fi filmmakers who prioritize experimentation, personal inquiry, and formal risk-taking. This community is defined less by aesthetic uniformity than by a shared commitment to process, authorship, autonomy, and cinema as a space for questioning rather than resolution.

Research and Methodology

1. Researching the present and the Self: Epistemology & Positionality

Unlike more conventional research processes for a thesis film, this project was not primarily grounded in factual data or analytical frameworks. While I remained attentive to current events and ongoing developments before, during, and after my time in Lebanon, this research was not intended to produce comprehensive or authoritative knowledge. Rather, it functioned as a way of situating myself within the present moment.

When I refer to "knowing" what was happening, I am describing a deliberately limited and fragmentary form of knowledge—what I would call a knowledge of consequences. This mode of knowing does not grant access to root causes, hidden structures, or definitive truths, but instead to their visible and lived effects. In the absence of direct access to such truths, our understanding of the present is often constructed through incomplete information, retrospective interpretations, rumors, biased narratives, and personal—sometimes contradictory—accounts. This fragmented condition reflects the reality of contemporary experience.

My research of the present therefore relied on sources such as news cycles, social media, and personal exchanges, including voice notes and conversations with friends and family. These materials were not treated as objective facts, but as expressions of how reality is perceived, mediated, and emotionally processed.

Alongside this external engagement, an equally important component of the process was a personal, introspective, and intimate form of research. This involved sustained self-observation and reflection in an attempt to understand my own emotional state and lived experience. I engaged in daily writing for several months prior to filming and continued this practice

throughout and after production. As the film aimed to portray a "palette of feelings," this writing became a way to register emotional states, contradictions, and moments of confusion rather than arrive at coherent conclusions.

However, while the project originates from personal experience, it was never intended to remain purely autobiographical. "I lower my voice to better hear the country's howl" (Tueni, 2006). A central objective was to move beyond the individual toward a collective dimension. This involved engaging with shared emotional and historical experiences, particularly those shaped by displacement, migration, exile, and the loss of home. During and after production, this collective dimension was further expanded through the inclusion of multiple voices.

To support this shift from the personal to the collective, I engaged with literary and artistic works rooted in personal narratives rather than factual accounts. I was drawn to texts that focus on everyday life, memory, emotion, and fragmentation—such as poetry, autobiographical writing, and reflective essays. These works offered ways of approaching collective experience through intimate and subjective perspectives, aligning with the film's broader conceptual approach. Some emerged from my country and my region, giving me access to our history and to the history of our feelings and experiences, including the works of Amin Maalouf, Mahmoud Darwish, Nada Tueni, and Imad Bezzi. Others came from artists across different geographies whose writing similarly traces historical events, portrays places, or explores memory, identity, and migration, such as *Borderlands (La Frontera)* by Gloria Anzaldúa, *Berlin: Portrait of a City Through the Centuries* by Rory Maclean, and *House of Day, House of Night* by Olga Tokarczuk. Please refer to the Bibliography section for an extended list of consulted works.

2. Conceptual and Affective Frameworks

2.1 On Attachment and Belonging

A friend in Toronto once remarked that she had never met someone who spoke so frequently and passionately about their home. Her comment struck me precisely because I had never been consciously aware of it before. Many of my friends in Toronto are immigrants, and conversations about our countries of origin are common: we compare, analyze, and exchange stories, curious about one another's backgrounds. Yet I realized that I am often the only one who repeatedly inserts phrases such as "in Lebanon," "we in Lebanon," or "if you ever come to Lebanon" into almost any conversation, regardless of context.

This observation prompted deeper reflection. I came to understand that this way of speaking is not incidental but inherited. I speak as my parents do, as my society does. Among Lebanese communities, both within the country and in the diaspora, attachment to place is often articulated through a paradoxical language of pride and lament. A commonly repeated phrase—"There is no place like Lebanon"—is invoked both affectionately and bitterly. This attachment persists despite repeated political, economic, and social failure, raising difficult questions about belief, loyalty, and endurance.

I have come to understand this attachment as a form of ongoing grief: mourning not only what has been lost, but also what never fully came into being. Mahmoud Darwish writes, "Longing is a scar inside the heart and a country's fingerprint on the body" (Darwish, 2011). Lebanese identity, in this sense, is deeply shaped by a culture of reminiscence. Each generation grows up longing for an earlier version of the country—often one it never fully experienced. Nostalgia, remembrance, and grief coexist with an intense sense of pride, some of it grounded and meaningful, and some of it mythologizing, bordering on narcissism.

This mode of attachment resonates with what diaspora theory describes as diasporic consciousness: an intensified emotional and narrative relationship to an imagined homeland that often sharpens with distance. Such attachments function as strategies of continuity, allowing displaced subjects to maintain a sense of coherence across fractured geographies. At the same time, they can inhibit critical distance, binding identity to a place that repeatedly disappoints. This tension—between sustaining connection and confronting disillusionment—forms a central emotional axis of my research.

Borrowing from postcolonial perspectives, this attachment to homeland can be understood as emerging from historical, political, and symbolic fragmentation (Homi K. Bhabha, 1994). In Lebanon, repeated ruptures have produced a relationship to place that is less stable and more affective, sustained as much by longing as by lived reality (Edward Said, 2000). In this context, attachment becomes a way of holding together what history, violence, and governance have repeatedly fractured (Sara Ahmed, 2004).

A persistent fear of being misunderstood further complicates this affective attachment. Lebanon's positioning as "exceptional" within the Arab world, alongside ongoing debates over our ethnic identity, has become a defining component of Lebanese self-identification, particularly in diaspora communities.

At the same time, a more naïve part of me wants to believe that this affective attachment—this stubborn faith and love—is precisely what has allowed Lebanon to endure. Even when it risks self-mythologizing, this emotional insistence may function as a form of survival: a way of keeping the idea of Lebanon alive despite its material and political collapse. It is this contradiction—between grief and faith, critique and devotion—that continues to shape both my relationship to Lebanon and the emotional core of my filmmaking practice.

2.2 On Nostalgia, Grief, and Reminiscence

Themes of nostalgia, mourning, exile, and impermanence are far from contemporary; they have circulated through Arab art for centuries, since the pre-Islamic period, "ʿĀṣr al-Jāhiliyya" (the Era of Ignorance), which roughly spans the 5th century until the emergence of Islam in 610 CE. While the term itself is contested and reflects later historiographical biases, the Era of Ignorance is widely recognized for its sophisticated poetic culture, which laid the foundations of classical Arabic language, rhetoric, and aesthetics. Pre-Islamic poetry frequently engaged with exile, mortality, and the fragility of life, establishing formal and thematic structures that have endured across centuries.

The canonical structure of the pre-Islamic ode (qasīda) reflects this orientation: a nostalgic opening (nasīb), often mourning a lost beloved, vanished campsite, or bygone time; a journey section (raḥīl), marked by travel, desert landscapes, and encounters with hardship; and concluding movements of pride, praise, or critique (fakhr, madḥ, hijāʾ). Across these sections, recurring themes emerge—love and separation, impermanence, fate (dahr), tribal belonging, and human vulnerability. The desert itself often functions as a liminal space, a site of both survival and erasure. These poetic forms reveal a profound consciousness of memory, loss, and the passage of time, establishing enduring frameworks for thinking about displacement and identity in Arabic culture.

"Ruins worn by years, among them
Are signs effaced, though memory remains…"
(Zuhair Ibn Abi Sulma)

Such verses articulate a worldview shaped by uncertainty, mortality, and the inevitability of disappearance. Over time, these themes became embedded not only in Arabic literary traditions

but in broader cultural aesthetics, continuing to inform modern literature, music, and cinema. I have come to understand them not merely as literary inheritances, but as intergenerational affective structures—transmitted through family, education, and cultural immersion—that shape our experience, identity, way of processing, and sense of belonging.

Within the Lebanese context, these inheritances are continually reactivated by contemporary conditions of crisis. Nostalgia and reminiscence are not oriented solely toward the past; they are also responses to an unstable present and an uncertain future. Among my peers in Lebanon, some accept these patterns as inevitable, while others resist or critique them. My own work does not seek resolution. Instead, it remains with the contradictions, questions, and unresolved emotions that have circulated across generations and continue to shape Lebanese identity.

2.3 On Forgetting and Cycles of Repetition

Beyond war, economic collapse has played a decisive role in shaping cycles of migration, return, and disillusionment in Lebanon. Growing up, I often heard nostalgic accounts of a time when the Lebanese currency was strong, reinforced by television campaigns proclaiming that “the Lira will speak again.” I was largely unaware, however, that Lebanon had already experienced similar severe monetary collapse in the past. It was only during the most recent financial crisis, beginning around 2020, that the shock and despair of older family members were accompanied by a troubling recognition: this had happened before. They recalled the exact same episode from decades earlier, during the civil war, when lifetime savings were devalued or gone, overnight, and the Lebanese Lira lost all stability. While the currency remained relatively steady in the early years of the conflict, it collapsed dramatically in the mid-1980s, depreciating from a few pounds to hundreds per U.S. dollar within a short period, with inflation reaching extreme levels. What struck me most was not only the repetition of economic disaster, but the collective forgetting that

preceded it. While war is continuously narrated and memorialized, other forms of structural violence—monetary collapse, institutional corruption, and systemic failure—often fade from public consciousness. This selective remembrance produces a dangerous cycle: forgetting enables repetition and fosters resignation rather than resistance.

At the same time, forgetting can function as a survival mechanism. In a context where crisis is ongoing, moving on, minimizing rupture, and maintaining the illusion of continuity become strategies for endurance.

"I survive my own ashes, and know from memory the future of my own time" (Tueni, 2006). This line resonates deeply with Lebanon's historical condition. Stories of war, economic collapse, emigration, and return do not exist as isolated events, but recur as motifs within an unfinished national narrative. Together, they form a history that loops through displacement, loss of home, and the erosion of collective and individual certainties—a cycle that continues to inform both my personal experience and the thematic foundations of *The cats, the sea, and everything in between.*

Denial, dissociation and contradiction are central to how this history is lived in the present. In Lebanon, crisis and normalcy often coexist: celebration unfolds alongside collapse, political paralysis becomes habitual, and opposing sentiments—resentment and admiration, rejection and dependence—are held simultaneously. These paradoxes do not resolve themselves; they condition daily life. Having grown up within this environment, I have internalized these contradictions, which surface both consciously and unconsciously in my filmmaking process. Rather than attempting to make sense of them, the film embraces their instability, allowing confusion, inconsistency, and emotional dissonance to remain present as lived realities.

2.4 On Immigration

Displacement has long been a defining feature of Lebanese history, often experienced not as a choice but as a condition imposed by crisis. Contemporary Lebanese rapper El Rass captures this coercion when he says: “Should we exist or cease to exist? Should we be or not be? We did not choose to leave this country. We have been made to leave.” Across generations, this sentiment recurs in different forms. Fairouz pleads the wind to bring her back to her homeland. Decades earlier, Gibran Khalil Gibran asked: “What can an exiled son do for his starving people, and of what value unto them is the lamentation of an absent poet?” (Gibran, 1963) Together, these voices trace a long history of departure shaped by loss, hesitation, and unresolved guilt.

This history is also embedded within my own family narrative. My parents immigrated during the civil war in the 1990s, after nearly two decades of instability and violence. Their experience mirrors that of countless Lebanese families whose members dispersed globally during that period. Like many others, they eventually returned to Lebanon—after securing foreign citizenship or economic stability abroad—while others remained permanently displaced. These movements were rarely driven by aspiration alone, but by necessity, fear, and survival.

One story in particular has stayed with me. After losing his father during the war in the 70s’, my uncle was sent to France at the age of twelve so that he would not grow up amid violence. He never returned, growing up separated from his mother and siblings. Such decisions, though often framed as acts of protection, carry irreversible consequences. They leave traces across generations, contributing to what diaspora studies describe as inherited trauma: memories of displacement, separation, and loss embedded in familial and cultural consciousness. Even those who did not directly experience war or exile carry its affective residue.

Distance, however, also produces a shift in perception. “I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that has been imposed on me.” (Anzaldúa, 1987) Taking distance from Lebanon allowed me, for example, not only to understand myself differently, but also to see the country and its people with renewed attention. *The cats, the sea, and everything in between* would have been a fundamentally different film had it not been made from the position of a recent immigrant.

The film carries the temporariness of someone who is about to leave, or who has just left—the weight of departure and possible return, the doubts and questions that emerge in between. It is shaped by conversations specific to expatriation, by heightened attentiveness, and by a refusal to normalize crisis immediately. Distance creates estrangement, but also curiosity. From this position, the film does not seek explanation or resolution; instead, it lingers in observation, uncertainty, and the fragile space between belonging and departure.

2.5 On Beirut

Some believe Beirut’s name originates from “Beroe,” a figure celebrated for her beauty. Unlike other women of her time, she wore no ornaments, did not admire herself in mirrors, and was said to possess a beauty comparable to that of goddesses despite her mortality. Whether myth or etymology, this image resonates with how Beirut has often been perceived: striking, unadorned, indifferent to its own reflection, and unaware of the projections cast upon it.

Beirut occupies a central position in both my research and in the film. Rather than functioning as a backdrop, the city emerges as an active presence—a conceptual and affective space. Dense, layered, and paradoxical, Beirut is a place where histories, cultures, and social realities coexist in tension. My artistic engagement with the city predates this thesis film and is already evident in *Drained* (2019), my earlier nonfiction short that followed Lebanese youth navigating political

instability and uncertain futures. Though unfinished, the film captured fragments of Beirut's streets, conversations, and rhythms, foregrounding the city as a self-contained ecosystem that profoundly shapes those who inhabit it.

Certain cities—Paris, New York, Casablanca, Berlin—have asserted themselves in art and cinema not as neutral settings, but as protagonists. They impose their presence, fascinate, and disorient. Beirut belongs to this lineage. While it may not be the wealthiest or most architecturally monumental city, it exerts an intense cultural and emotional force. Its air, sea, rooftops, spontaneity, and contradictions have long fueled poetry, music, cinema, and personal memory, leaving a lasting imprint on those who pass through it.

Growing up in Lebanon, I experienced Beirut as a site of refuge and experimentation—a place where alternative ways of thinking, creating, and living could exist. The city evokes radically different emotions depending on one's position within its social, religious, and political geographies. Its streets hold multiple histories simultaneously, mirroring the broader contradictions of Lebanon itself. As I became part of Beirut's cultural scene, my sense of belonging deepened, alongside a growing need to understand both the city's fabric and the intensity of my attachment to it. This attachment often took the form of romantic love: not directed at a person, but at the city itself. To be remembered in Beirut, and by Beirut—to be part of its art, music, nightlife, and history—felt less like a desire than a necessity to me.

In an attempt to understand this attachment, I turned to Beirut's artistic representations: songs, poems, films. Rather than clarity, I encountered further complexity. "Beirut, the Mistress of the World, We confess before the One God, That we were envious of you That your beauty hurt us … And we offered you a dagger in place of flowers." (Qabbani, 1982)

Similarly, artists who only passed by Beirut evoke it as a sensual, mythic space—timeless, seductive, and charged with longing: “Beirut, your horizon calls me, calls me and smiles at me; Beirut, your charm bewitches me … It’s Venus of all times, the lovers celebrate.” (Macias, 1971)

Across these works, and many others, Beirut resists stable definition. It is experienced affectively rather than explained—felt rather than resolved. This resistance to closure informed my decision to approach Beirut not only as a subject of the film, but as a collaborator within it. My search for understanding became inseparable from the film’s structure, mirroring my connection to the city.

3. Artistic Research and Methodology

3.1 On Experiencing the Artwork

An important dimension of my research process involved engaging with critiques, reviews, and commentaries on existing works of art—sometimes even more than with the artworks themselves. I approached these texts not as secondary or explanatory material, but as tools for thinking about spectatorship: how works are received, felt, and interpreted. They helped me articulate how I wanted my own film to be experienced. I collected particularly striking observations and returned to them throughout the filmmaking process as conceptual anchors—guides for tone, rhythm, and emotional atmosphere.

Critical responses to the work of Lebanese poet Nadia Tueni were especially formative. Commentators note that her writing does not pursue a spiritual quest as much as a search for personal identity inseparable from that of Lebanon—a nation marked by rupture, violence, and contradiction. Her poetry treats the country not merely as a reservoir of images, but as a geographical, socio-political, and psychological space (Darwiche Jabbour, 2005). Fragmentation, madness, and temporal disjunction function as structuring elements in her work, reflecting

fractures between land and nation, citizen and belonging, past and present. These readings offered a framework for understanding how individual subjectivity can be shaped—and destabilized—by national history.

Such insights informed my approach to representing Lebanon. They reinforced my interest in situating personal experience within broader socio-political contexts without collapsing one into the other. In the film, Lebanon functions not only as a physical location, but as an emotional and conceptual terrain—actively shaping structure, tone, and modes of address.

3.2 Process, Structure, and Assemblage

Anzaldúa reflects on her own writing process in a way that resonated deeply with my filmmaking experience. She describes *Borderlands* as a process of hybridization: metaphors and ideas of different origins emerging side by side, sometimes contradicting one another, yet remaining connected within an underlying structure. The work takes shape as an assemblage or mosaic, where structure emerges gradually through layering, texture, and contradiction rather than being fully designed in advance. Meaning, she suggests, reveals itself through process, as the work resists authorial control and develops a life of its own.

This understanding closely mirrors my experience with *The cats, the sea, and everything in between*. The film emerged from the coexistence of fragments, tonal shifts, and seemingly incompatible elements—intimacy and distance, tenderness and violence, clarity and confusion. Rather than imposing a rigid structure from the outset, I allowed it to evolve through intuition, responsiveness, and repetition. Contradiction and instability became generative, shaping the film's rhythm, internal logic, and emotional resonance. Meaning arose not through resolution, but through variation and accumulation, allowing the work to remain open, alive, and responsive rather than fixed or conclusive.

Production Phases

Phase I: Pre-Production (2021–2022)

Pre-production for *The cats, the sea, and everything in between.* began in the summer of 2021, when I first committed to making the film as an open-ended inquiry rather than a predetermined narrative project. The development process aligned with approaches found in practice-based research, in which meaning emerges through observation, reflection, and sustained engagement with lived experience.

During my visit to Lebanon that summer, I attuned myself to settings, spaces, moments, and people that felt both cinematically and emotionally resonant. I adopted an exploratory mode of working: observing, listening, and identifying fragments that might later coalesce into the film's structure. I documented these observations in an evolving digital notebook organized into thematic categories—such as characters, situations, and locations. This document did not function as a blueprint for production, but as a provisional thinking space—a living archive of impressions, questions, and potential connections.

Concurrently, I recorded short visual and sonic references on my phone. These recordings were not intended as material for the final film, but as exploratory sketches. They allowed me to test my sensibility, refine my attention to duration, framing, and atmosphere. Some of these fragments proved particularly formative, remaining with me over time and directly informing the aesthetic choices and affective tone of the footage shot during the following year.

Reading constituted another key dimension of this phase. I engaged with novels, nonfiction, poetry, and prose addressing themes of home, migration, return, and identity, particularly within contexts of political and economic crisis. I paid particular attention to Arabic texts and to writing

focused on the Levant. As I read, I kept extensive notes, transcribing passages that resonated strongly with my own experiences. These texts did not function as direct sources or adaptations; rather, they shaped the film's emotional landscape, tonal register, and thematic preoccupations.

Writing, in the form of prose and journaling, was integral to this phase, functioning as both a reflective practice and a creative method. I wrote consistently throughout my time in Lebanon and continued into the subsequent production period. These writings later became materially embedded in the film: the on-screen text is drawn directly from edited fragments of my entries. Beyond its literal inclusion, my journal informed the film more implicitly, influencing scene construction, rhythm, and editorial decisions. In this way, writing and editing became interconnected processes, a relationship I elaborate further in the post-production section.

In preparation for filming independently, I acquired a lightweight camera, basic sound equipment, and essential accessories before production. I devoted time to familiarizing myself with the equipment, testing configurations, and customizing settings to suit my working habits. As I would be filming alone—responsible for both image and sound—this technical preparation was essential. The aim was not technical perfection, but fluency: the ability to respond intuitively to unfolding situations without interrupting their natural rhythm.

By the time production began, I was as prepared as one can be within a process that deliberately embraces uncertainty. Rather than attempting to anticipate or control every outcome, pre-production functioned as a period of attunement—cultivating the conceptual, emotional, and technical readiness necessary to engage with the unpredictable realities of filming in Lebanon.

Phase II: Production (August–October 2022)

Production took place between late August and October 2022, beginning with my departure from Toronto and concluding upon my return nearly two months later. Filming occurred entirely on location in Lebanon and was conducted primarily by myself, without a crew. This period was both intensive and emotionally demanding, characterized by a continuous negotiation between observation, participation, and authorship.

Filming combined spontaneity with intention. Certain shots and conversations were pre-conceived, like music notes that I had to hit. Yet, the rest of the material emerged organically through unplanned and unfolding situations. Interviews similarly oscillated between prepared questions and spontaneous dialogue, allowing conversations to develop responsively rather than according to a fixed structure.

At the outset, I felt a strong impulse to record constantly, driven by a fear of missing moments that might later prove essential. This heightened vigilance, however, initially compromised my ability to remain fully present, as experiences were filtered through their potential cinematic value. Approximately one week into production, I made a deliberate decision to stop filming altogether. I spent time with family and friends without recording. This pause proved transformative. When I resumed filming, my approach felt more patient and more receptive. Rather than actively searching for moments, I allowed moments to assert themselves. I was more present, which, first, affected my experiences, thus altering my sensitivity to capture them. Rather than forcing filming, I waited for filming to force itself. This recalibration altered not only the quality of the footage I gathered but also the sensibility behind it. And everything unfolded organically from then on.

Much of the production relied on duration and non-intervention. I often positioned the camera and sound recorder and allowed them to run uninterrupted for extended periods, sometimes to the point where both participants and I became unaware of their presence. And that's when magic happened mostly… within these moments of perceptual disappearance. Some filming was planned and based on a certain broad concept, further explored while filming. In other instances, I recorded more discreetly using my phone to capture spontaneous interactions or conversations. All participants were informed in advance of my working methods and consented to the possibility of being recorded. Ethical judgment remained ongoing throughout the process, with participants consulted afterward regarding what they were comfortable including.

Production was highly iterative and self-reflexive. The act of filming continuously generated new ideas, which in turn shaped what I sought to capture next. Conversations with friends and family sparked conceptual associations, while ongoing reading and journaling revealed some gaps that required further exploration. In this sense, production functioned simultaneously as filming, writing, and conceptual editing. The boundaries between these phases remained deliberately porous, allowing the film's structure to emerge through lived engagement rather than predetermined design.

The decision to film in Lebanon during this specific period was intentional and politically grounded. The convergence of economic collapse, infrastructural failure, and social instability was not a backdrop to the film, but one of its primary motivations. The sense that daily life was being reshaped in real time made the film necessary. The historical present was not something the film merely encountered; it constituted the condition of its possibility.

This context demanded an acute attentiveness to the everyday manifestations of crisis. While some events could be filmed directly, others could only be noted, remembered, or archived

indirectly. In response, I began consciously assembling an external archive of videos, images, and sound recordings from other sources. Writing remained essential throughout this process, allowing experiences that could not be captured in real-time to enter the film later. In one instance, a sudden water shutdown interrupted a friend's shower while we were preparing to go out. My immediate concern was obviously to assist, not to film. But I instantly knew that this incident must be included in the film for its symbolic weight. Upon returning to Canada, during post-production, I had to transform this experience in a sonic and visual sequence—not as reenactment, but as an aesthetic translation that conveys emotional and contextual significance rather than literal reality. This strategy reflects a broader methodology within the film, in which memory and experience are sometimes conveyed through abstraction rather than direct representation.

Practical constraints also shaped production. There were numerous situations in which professional equipment was impractical, unsafe, or disruptive. Or when I simply didn't have my camera! In these moments, I relied on my phone to record. Phone footage appears throughout the film, not as a compromise, but as a deliberate aesthetic and ethical choice. Its immediacy and discreteness allowed me to capture fleeting, priceless moments emblematic of everyday life in Lebanon —such as waiting in line for bread, sudden power outages during a party, or my dad's crazy driving on the highway— without altering their dynamics or missing a beat.

The film's formal strategies reflect these conditions of production. In the first half, I appear largely as an absent presence, visible only through point-of-view shots, reflections, or fragmented glimpses of my body. This visual withdrawal aligns with the film's engagement with displacement, return, and disorientation. As the film progresses, my on-screen presence gradually increases. In later sections, I often handed the camera to friends, inviting them to film

me intuitively. Many of these collaborators are artists or expatriates themselves, and their perspectives subtly inform the film's visual language, reinforcing its relational and collective dimensions.

Certain sequences in which I appear were more deliberately composed, particularly those filmed in my apartment or on Beirut rooftops using mirrors. These were shot with the assistance of friends who are also filmmakers. Some other controlled images—such as scenes of me smoking on the balcony or lying on my bedroom floor—were framed and shot by myself, further complicating distinctions between subject, observer, and author.

Overall, the production phase was characterized by density, responsiveness, and process-oriented discovery. Rather than executing solely a fixed plan, filming functioned as a sustained dialogue between experience and representation, allowing the film to take shape through attentiveness, improvisation, and ongoing engagement with place.

Phase III: Post-Production (January 2023 – January 2025)

Editing

Post-production began in January 2023 when I started viewing the footage. At that stage, I was working with approximately thirty hours of video material I had shot myself, in addition to many hours of separate sound recordings. I also had no clear structure or linear pathway in mind. Rather than starting with a conventional assembly cut, I approached the edit as an exploratory process and gradual discovery.

I began by assembling short sequences corresponding to ideas that had accumulated throughout pre-production and production. I relied heavily on the materials generated during those phases: journals, reading notes, written reflections, prompts, and brainstorming documents stored across

multiple Google Sheets. Editing quickly became a mode of thinking through images and sound. I experimented freely, allowing intuition to guide early decisions. This initial phase was particularly challenging and often frustrating and isolating. Although several peers suggested bringing another editor on board early on, I knew this was not yet possible. At that stage, the film existed only as a constellation of impressions and fragments, even to me. I lacked both the clarity and the vocabulary to communicate its internal logic to another person. Editing alone was therefore necessary—not as a preference, but as a means of discovering the film's language.

My daily editing practice varied widely. On some days, I began by rereading journal entries and build on them. On others, I focused on a single feeling, incident, or character and built a sequence around it. Some scenes were easier to edit, as they were clearly imagined in my head; others emerged unexpectedly through the footage itself. At times, I edited the same sequences in completely different ways, until I understood what I actually wanted. While generative, this process was also overwhelming. The sheer number of possible directions, combined with my personal proximity to the material, made decision-making increasingly difficult.

By mid-2023, this exploratory process had resulted in a three-hour cut, which I reduced to approximately two hours by the end of the summer. At this point, it became clear that continuing alone was no longer productive. After months of near-daily editing—often five to seven hours a day alongside a full-time job—I had lost critical distance from the film. More significantly, I became concerned about the risk of self-indulgence. Unlike fiction, where narrative function often provides clearer criteria for selection, nearly every image and sound in this film carried personal meaning. Distinguishing between what was emotionally important to me and what was necessary for the film as a cinematic experience had become increasingly difficult.

This realization led me to seek an editor, but with very specific criteria. I was looking for someone who spoke Arabic, ideally Lebanese, and preferably a woman—someone who understood Lebanon not only culturally but experientially, and who was also familiar with displacement and diasporic subjectivity. Equally important was a strong sensibility for non-fiction cinema and a willingness to engage deeply with the film's emotional and conceptual complexity.

The editor who fulfilled these conditions was Christelle Chebli, a Lebanese filmmaker, cinematographer, and editor with experience in both fiction and non-fiction. We had known each other since our undergraduate studies in Lebanon, though we had not previously collaborated closely. When I sent her the two-hour cut, she immediately connected with the project and agreed to work together. I mailed her my external hard drive and shared an extensive reference document outlining the film's structure, intentions, doubts, uncertainties, and technical organization. I then deliberately stepped back, allowing her to engage with the material independently. I also needed a genuine break from the film.

Two months later, Christelle returned with a revised cut that was approximately ten minutes shorter and significantly more refined. Her intervention brought renewed clarity to the film: she identified redundancies, sharpened emotional beats, and consistently reminded me of the intentions behind certain choices when I had lost sight of them. One example encapsulates her sensibility. She reworked a sequence accompanying the line, *"Sometimes, I feel like I already live in a memory,"* reducing and lightening the visual material. Her reasoning was simple and precise: the sequence itself needed to feel like a memory—fragile, fleeting, and composed of glimpses. This adjustment elevated the scene, and this kind of logic informed our continued collaboration.

From that point onward, we divided the film into ten sections and worked through them methodically. Our collaboration unfolded largely remotely, with me based in Toronto and Christelle moving between Windsor and Montreal. The process involved extensive written notes, weekly video calls, and a shared Google document. Although slow and demanding—particularly alongside both of our full-time jobs—we occasionally met in person for intensive week-long editing sessions when the film required it.

Post-production was also marked by significant interruptions. The most consequential occurred in September 2024, following the outbreak of war in Lebanon. For nearly two months, work on the film came to a halt. During this period, the project felt suddenly irrelevant in the face of ongoing violence. My attention shifted entirely toward concerns for my family's safety and the country's future, accompanied by guilt and emotional withdrawal from the film. This rupture echoed patterns of dissociation I had experienced during previous crises in Lebanon. It was ultimately Christelle's insistence that the work still mattered that allowed me to re-engage. She reminded me that the film was never about a singular historical moment, but about recurring structures of loss, memory, and survival. Each phase of Lebanon's history, she argued, carries its own validity, even as underlying conditions persist.

In late November 2024, we picture-locked a 74-minute cut. This was followed by color grading, final visual effects, subtitles and captions, and the completion of opening and closing credits, that rolled over 2025.

Sound Design

In the summer of 2023—approximately one year after principal photography—I returned to Lebanon while post-production was still in its early stages. Although the film was far from structurally resolved, I made a deliberate decision to begin the sound design process at that

moment and, crucially, to do so in Lebanon. This choice was both aesthetic and methodological. Sound was always central to the film's emotional and conceptual architecture. I wanted to collaborate with a sound designer who not only understood Lebanon culturally, but who lived within its soundscape—someone whose auditory memory was shaped by the same environments, interruptions, and rhythms that the film engages with. Beyond technical skill, I sought a collaborator capable of experimentation, emotional sensitivity, and conceptual dialogue.

After pre-selecting several sound designers, I conducted a series of in-person meetings in Lebanon. I was particularly drawn to Marwan, whose work I knew through both sound design and experimental music. In the final stage of selection, I shared excerpts from the film with two shortlisted candidates. While one conducted an impressive live studio-based experiment, my meeting with Marwan took a simpler form: a long conversation over coffee. Through dialogue alone, it became clear that he deeply understood the film's layered structure and emotional undercurrents. His questions were precise, perceptive, and empathetic—qualities that ultimately guided my decision.

Our collaboration unfolded gradually and in parallel with the edit. As Christelle and I picture-locked individual sections, we shared them with Marwan, who was working from Lebanon while we were based in different parts of Canada. The process was logistically complex, shaped by time-zone differences, touring schedules, full-time jobs, and frequent interruptions. To maintain coherence, I shared a detailed working document outlining technical specifications, organizational structures, and reflections on each scene's emotional and conceptual needs. Marwan developed sound passes, which I annotated and discussed with Christelle before regrouping with him for further refinement. This iterative exchange resulted in numerous drafts and revisions, and required sustained patience and precision from all collaborators.

Conceptually, Marwan and I worked a lot on contrast, texture, and accumulation through Sound. We were particularly attentive to avoiding sonic redundancy across emotionally intense moments. For instance, we didn't want scenes of existential reflection and scenes of panic attacks to sound similar. So we worked hard on creating distinct emotional registers and sound language for each.

Marwan consistently challenged me to articulate the precise affective intention behind each sequence, prompting a deeper understanding of the film's internal rhythm. While our instincts occasionally diverged—particularly regarding sonic intensity versus restraint—these tensions proved productive, often leading to more nuanced and unexpected solutions, that went beyond me or him individually.

Because I am not a musician, my direction relied on descriptive and affective language rather than musical terminology. I communicated sound in terms of mood, color, texture, and emotional temperature. This mode of collaboration echoed the film's broader methodology, privileging sensation, intuition, and atmosphere over prescriptive form.

Ultimately, sound design became not an illustrative layer but an active narrative force—one that carries memory, guides temporal shifts, and deepens emotional meaning where images alone could not. Working with a sound designer embedded within Lebanon's lived sonic reality was essential to achieving this resonance.

Formal and Editing Decisions

One of the most frequent questions I encountered during feedback sessions concerned my decision to use on-screen text to convey inner thoughts rather than voice-over narration. This choice was intuitive but also conceptually grounded. The idea of voice-over consistently felt incompatible with the film's sensibility. I wanted to maintain my position as a largely absent

presence—a ghost or observer within the film—rather than asserting authorial control through spoken narration. Voice-over would have required me to perform my thoughts and impose a specific tone, rhythm, and emotional register. On-screen text, by contrast, allows the viewer to engage more actively. The text can be read—or ignored—at the viewer's discretion, and when read, it is internalized in the viewer's own voice. This choice preserves ambiguity and avoids over-determination. Rather than guiding interpretation, the text functions as an additional layer within the film, present but not dominant. In this sense, I favored subtlety and restraint over explicit narration.

This approach resonates with Trinh T. Minh-ha's reflections on language and meaning, particularly her insistence on the instability of speech and interpretation: "Nonsense can come with an overload of meaning: you can hear the sound of a word rather than its intended meaning." On-screen text allows meaning to remain porous, resisting the authority and fixity that voice can impose.

The film's editing strategy is similarly informed by a commitment to fragmentation and incompleteness. Although the film maintains an overall flow, many scenes appear abrupt or partial, unfolding as brief glimpses. This notion of "glimpses" has been central to the project from its inception. Each return to Lebanon feels to me like a series of fragments—intense, overwhelming, resisting linear cohesion. The film mirrors this experience, acknowledging that lived reality, particularly in a place like Lebanon, rarely unfolds in isolated or singular events. Everything is happening all at once. Rather than striving for narrative clarity through containment and resolution, I sought to preserve a sense of overlap, interruption, and temporal spillover. Scenes often feel as though they begin in the middle of something and end abruptly, maintaining the impression that life continues beyond the frame. This strategy also reflects an

ethical stance: the people, relationships, and histories depicted in the film exceed what can be shown or known. By offering only partial access, the film resists the illusion of total understanding or intimacy.

This approach aligns with Michelangelo Antonioni's insistence on the importance of what exists before and after a scene—the sense that characters and situations extend beyond the moments conventionally deemed significant for spectators. Preserving this gap, this feeling of absence and incompletion, became essential to the film's structure. The audience is given enough to connect emotionally, but not enough to feel they fully know or possess the experiences depicted… because that remains impossible.

Phase IV: Distribution and Circulation

The distribution and circulation phase began in mid-2025 and is ongoing. The film premiered at the Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival in November 2025, where it received a Special Jury Mention in the *First Lights* category for debut feature films. This premiere marked the project's first encounter with an international audience and represented a significant moment of recognition.

Audience reception at Ji.hlava was both overwhelming and reassuring. Viewers—who were unfamiliar with Lebanon or my personal background—engaged deeply with the film and described a strong emotional attachment to the people on screen.

Many viewers told me they felt emotionally attached to the people on screen, describing a sense of intimacy, as if my family and friends were actually theirs. After the film, I received many questions about the characters' current lives and the broader context in which the film is situated. This level of engagement surprised me and suggested that the film strongly resonated across

cultural boundaries. One interaction in particular stayed with me. A woman approached me after the screening with tears in her eyes and said that the film reminded her of "life," and of the need to fight for it. She told me: "Now I want to live again. Thank you!". I was deeply touched by this encounter, which reinforced my sense that the film had reached viewers on an emotional level.

This reception helped ease many of the concerns I carried into the premiere. Given the density of events and information in the film, I was concerned that audiences without prior context might feel disoriented thus disengaged. The response at Ji.hlava suggested that emotional connection and character-driven storytelling can provide an entry point even when contextual knowledge is limited.

Following the premiere, several festival programmers requested screeners, and an emerging distributor based in Spain expressed interest in the film. In parallel, Vtape in Toronto agreed to represent the film, alongside my previous short *Somewhere, but Not here*. This was particularly meaningful, given Vtape's longstanding commitment to supporting non-fiction and artist-driven work.

I continue to submit the film to additional festivals, though this process has been shaped by financial limitations and challenges of categorization. The film does not fit neatly into conventional festival slots: it is neither a traditional documentary nor an experimental film, and while it employs essayistic strategies, there are few festivals dedicated specifically to that form. As a result, it is most often programmed as a creative documentary, a category that remains marginal within many festival circuits.

These challenges are compounded by the film's very low budget and largely solo mode of production. Without a producer, I have been responsible for submissions, communication, and

networking, a process that has been both time-consuming and emotionally demanding. Festival submission fees for feature-length films have further required a highly selective approach, limiting the film's potential circulation.

Reflecting on this phase, the project has been a significant learning experience—not only artistically, but also in practical and logistical terms. It highlighted the importance of considering circulation earlier in the filmmaking process and of approaching distribution as an integral component rather than an afterthought. For future projects, I intend to collaborate with a producer from the early stages and to plan more strategically for distribution, with the aim of developing a filmmaking practice in which creative intuition and practical planning coexist productively.

Ethical Considerations

Representation and Consent

As *The cats, the sea, and everything in between.* portrays real people, ethical responsibility was central throughout the filmmaking process. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to filming. Given the project's extended and evolving nature—including spontaneous filming and informal conversations—consent was treated as an ongoing process rather than a one-time agreement.

I regularly checked in with participants after filming, inviting them to identify any material they wished to exclude. All expressed boundaries were respected during editing. In post-production, where footage was condensed, recontextualized, or layered with sound from different moments, I remained attentive to the risk of misrepresentation. All scenes featuring participants were shared with them in the final cut, and their approval and comfort were explicitly confirmed.

Representing Lebanon and Its Events

The film does not seek to present a definitive political account of Lebanon, but to engage with lived experience at a specific historical moment. Events are shown as they were encountered, without retrospective explanation or authoritative framing, allowing uncertainty and disorientation to remain visible. While my experiences resonate with many, they do not represent a singular Lebanese perspective. Acknowledging the multiplicity of lived realities shaped by class, geography, and circumstance, the film moves between voices and materials—personal, familial, observational, and mediated.

This approach aligns with Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of "speaking nearby rather than about," which emphasizes acknowledging the gap between filmmaker and subject, suspending

authoritative meaning, and leaving space for others to enter and interpret. By refusing an all-knowing position, the film seeks an ethical stance grounded in proximity, openness, and responsibility rather than control.

Copyright, Fair Use, and Found Material

The film incorporates limited found material, including news footage, social media content, and brief excerpts from copyrighted works. News and social media imagery were essential to engaging with collectively experienced events and contemporary modes of witnessing. Their use is brief, contextualized, and transformative, and the project's non-commercial, academic nature supports a fair use rationale.

Where non-original music or sound appears, its inclusion was motivated by irreplaceable diegetic or emotional significance. Permissions were sought whenever possible, and usage remained minimal and contextually justified.

Reflexive Ethical Positioning

Ethical decisions throughout the project were guided not only by legal frameworks, but by considerations of intention, transformation, care, and responsibility. While some choices involve navigating legal gray areas, the film does not seek to exploit, appropriate, or profit from the material it incorporates. Rather, it reflects a conscious and ongoing negotiation of the ethical complexities inherent in contemporary non-fiction filmmaking.

Last Reflections

As I mentioned before, this paper does not begin to scratch the surface of *The cats, the sea, and everything in between* or the world surrounding it. Looking back on the project, the feeling that stands out most is pride. Completing a feature-length film—largely independently and with modest means—required immense commitment, discipline, and care. I am deeply grateful to the individuals who appear on screen and to those who poured their hearts into the work behind the scenes. The process reminded me of the essential role of collaboration, even within a solitary practice.

My relationship with the finished film remains complex. At times, I feel close to it; at others, more distant. I have come to understand this ambivalence not as failure, but as an inherent part of the artistic process. The project was humbling, revealing both the growth I have achieved and how much remains to be learned. I gained clarity about my working habits, my limitations, and my creative tendencies, as well as the emotional demands of first-person engagement. Moving forward, I intend to approach filmmaking more holistically, balancing intuition, collaboration, and strategic thinking.

Finally, this experience has clarified the direction of my near-future work. The challenges of the editing process of such style, the proximity of the themes, and the insufferable vulnerability demanded by every screening—especially in front of people who know me personally—were emotionally exhausting. For this reason, I consider this film my last work of this kind. While I remain committed to both fiction and non-fiction, my next projects will move away from the deeply personal, first-person perspective. Yet I am eager to explore how the methods, sensitivities, and insights developed through this process might translate into new forms and narrative endeavors.

Access to the Thesis Film

Scholars, researchers, and fellow filmmakers who wish to view my thesis film can contact me at: kmalkoun@gmail.com. Please explain your interest and confirm that it is for personal or private research purposes only, and that you will respect my copyright and not screen my film publicly in any manner.

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