

News from home (82 min, full HD)**Layal Nakhlé, with the generous participation of Malak Mroueh**

On the 4th of August, I started to receive calls and messages from people asking me if my family and friends back home were okay. I didn't understand what was happening. I googled Lebanon quickly from my phone and as I was reading the headlines, my heart started to race in my chest. I called my family, they were alive. Some lost their houses. I checked on my friends, the rare ones that haven't left the country yet. They were safe. But everyone was in shock. I don't think that I understood the impact of what had happened until I opened social medias. Then I saw the photos, the videos, the stories, the reactions. As the events started to unfold, I was following the quick destruction of my city on this tiny screen, thousands of miles away, from my bed. I felt useless. I couldn't stop watching. Then I had to take my dog out for his evening walk. What a slap in the face. I was here, I was safe, and even though it felt like life had stopped for me, everything was following its course around me. My city was destroyed, my people were killed, but in the meantime I still had to take the dog out? My routine seemed so ridiculous. Everything seemed so futile at that time. I took the dog, went to the park, sat on a bench and continued to look at the pictures and videos online. As tears were running down my cheeks, I could see people in the background playing with their dogs, with their kids, young people kissing and laughing, people reading and enjoying the warmth of the summer. I could see life going on behind my phone, while on the screen my people were looking everywhere for their loved ones under the rubbles of my destroyed city.

The superposition of the two images (Beirut in the foreground and Barcelona in the background) was so uncanny. My body was here, in Barcelona, in a safe environment where despite the corona virus, people were doing okay. But my mind was there. It's all I could think about. I was stuck on my phone, repeatedly and nervously scrolling down with my thumb on the top of my feed for it to get updated. The carelessness of the people around me was very disturbing. I realised that I wasn't ready to be out yet. I just couldn't be physically part of an environment that hadn't been introduced to such a shock. I went back home and stayed in my bed until I could start to process what had happened. Everyday tasks became so meaningless, the errands I had to run seemed so futile; I didn't understand how I could cook, or do my laundry, or go grocery shopping while in my country people were mobilising to find the last survivors, to distribute food,

to give mental support. They were cleaning the city while mourning the dead, and I was here, waiting in line at the supermarket with toilet paper in one hand, a kit kat and toothpaste in the other.

Besides my family, my friend Malak had been my direct link to the events. Malak and I met in 2011. We were in the same class in college, studying audiovisual. Most of the friends I had made back then had left the country. Malak had left for a year after graduation, but she came back and never left again.

She would send me voice notes, telling me about the people we know, the places we used to go to, her anger, her sadness, the sounds of the destroyed city and the mourning of its inhabitants. I would be walking around Barcelona trying to make sense of what had happened while I would receive a voice note from her, telling me about her own ways of coping with the situation; and her voice would mix with the sounds of my surroundings and I would be hearing about this little girl that lost her life in my right ear while in the left one I would be overhearing two teenagers complaining about not being able to go to this party in the south. It was all so very disturbing.

But it was these very experiences that inspired this work.

...

News from home (2020) aims to express a feeling of loneliness, homelessness, frustration and hopelessness. The video takes us on a journey around the city of Barcelona, where a young Lebanese woman drifts aimlessly as she tries, from a distance, to acclimate to her new place of residence. Drifting from one neighbourhood to another without precise destination, not unlike the flâneurs, she somehow disappears behind the camera and leaves the spotlight to the space. The long and slow shots of urban views and cityscapes are accompanied by a voice over, the diary-like narrative of another young Lebanese woman, currently living in Beirut. She shares her daily occurrences, her experiences as well as her feelings about a city in decay. Through her personal story, we unfold a moment of history that affected the entire country on August 4th.

A dialogue takes place between the visual and the sound, the narrative of someone in Beirut answered by the narrative of someone that escaped to Barcelona. The two cities become the main protagonists. One through day to day stories in the aftermath of recent trauma, political unrest, economic collapse and mass emigration; and the other through images of a semblance of normalcy, of a city in full function, of its people living, smiling, talking, going to work, going home; going on with their daily chores and tasks, without the disturbance of having to watch the collapse of a country; live through the tiny screen of their cellphone.

News from home (82 min, full HD)
Layal Nakhlé,
with the participation of Malak Mroueh

dob_
ra

Nonetheless, let's not forget that *News from home* is, of course, a movie by Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman. The desire to reappropriate her movie, from the title to the main concept, springs from the will to establish a point of comparison between the type of news one would receive from a Western country, compared to the ones one would receive from parts of the world that are viewed as "third world countries". In this case, it happens to be from a tiny country in west Asia (AKA the Middle East), renowned for its constant state of restlessness. Furthermore, I believe that Akerman's movie creates a contextual reference that enables the viewer to consider and understand this "remake" from a new standpoint.

We can, in fact, distinguish many similarities between the two movies. First, the silences that punctuate the voice over, leaving space for the city to express itself through its ambient sounds and noises; emphasising the importance of its role, clarifying its establishment as a protagonist à part entière. The long and slow shots reflect on the will of the director behind the camera to self-identify as a mere observer. She is filming but is practically absent from the movie, from the city. She is not part of it. She is almost alienated from the environment that she films. The separation created by the camera, between her and the environment surrounding her body suggests a distancing between her physical presence and her absent mind. She is not here, nor there. The camera movements are almost robotic, almost non-calculated, which emphasises her absence and creates an overall feeling of loneliness, even in the crowded scenes. My goal was to achieve the same overall feel.

But the real interest lies not in the similarities, but in the differences between the two films. These differences are what spark this interchange between the West and the Middle East and between the 1970s and the 2020s. While Akerman focuses on her mother as her link to home, I chose to focus on a friend. The generational gap between the two narratives in her movie is hereby replaced with a desire to portray the different lives of two women from the same age. The focus is no longer on the difference between the domesticated life of a married woman with kids and a young woman stepping into a new beginning. The focus shifts towards the specificities of the locations; showcasing what day to day feels like for someone that stayed, and compares it to the routine of someone that left.

Time is also at the foreground of this film. While Akerman beautifully portrays the city during a historically rich decade, my film, shot 44 years later, permit us to record two separate historical moments happening at the same time: a global one that recollects snippets of a global pandemic, and a local (Lebanese) one witnessing the aftermath of the biggest non nuclear explosion in history.

In Barcelona, the bars and cafes are closed, the tourists went back home and the use of the mask is mandatory in all public spaces. People are angry, sad, isolated, grieving and depressed. In Beirut, people lost their friends and relatives, their homes, their jobs, their hope. They are also angry, sad, isolated, grieving and depressed. But in a different way. This film creates a time capsule to preserve moments of history told not as dry facts from news articles or two minutes over-sensationalised reportages, but through the reality of how such tragedies actually impact individuals in their daily lives.

In conclusion, News from home compares the life of an expatriate who tries to integrate into a new city, with the daily life of a person having to face the harsh reality of a failing country. And finally, this film gives us a perspective on the life of the Lebanese population; whether they choose to stay, or whether they decide to leave.