

LOCAL ONLINE SCREENINGS – New Reviews

Heiny Srour's LEILA AND THE WOLVES (Lebanon)

Starting at 7pm on Thursday, October 8, the film will be available to view on Block's Vimeo page for a 24-hour period; RSVP [here](#)

LEILA AND THE WOLVES, the second feature by Lebanese director Heiny Srour—whose 1974 debut film, the documentary THE HOUR OF LIBERATION HAS ARRIVED, showed at Cannes, making her the first female Arab filmmaker to exhibit at the festival—is fiercely imaginative as it combines narrative and documentary elements (some of its footage even shot amongst the Lebanese and Syrian Civil Wars) to explore the collective memory of Arab women, specifically in Palestine and Lebanon from the 1920s onward. Shot over the course of several years and set in 1975, the film begins with a young Lebanese woman, Leila (Nabila Zeitouni), envisioning herself as an old woman surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren; her old-world views (such as asking one of her “granddaughters,” who’s recently obtained her PhD, whether or not she’s married) keeps her from connecting with them. Looking in the mirror, the younger Leila insists that she’ll never become like that. Soon we learn that Leila lives in London, where she’s working on an exhibition of photographs and artworks that reflect the Palestinian struggle. When asked why none of the photos feature women, the curator, Rafiq, replies that, in those days, women had nothing to do with politics. This begins a journey back in time, through which Leila, adorned in a white dress, witnesses Palestinian and Lebanese women contributing to the fight against the struggles of these distressed but tenacious Arabic countries. In most scenarios, Zeitouni and the actor who plays Rafiq, to whom most of the revelations are addressed, appear again as new characters along with several other actresses. The vignettes include: Palestinian women in the 1920s throwing hot water onto British soldiers; the Arab revolt against the British Palestine Mandate in the years leading up to World War II, during which local women use wedding preparations to hide weapons and artillery to take to their men in the mountains; and the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War, when young, often unmarried Lebanese women were eager to participate as full-fledged soldiers. (Many of the sequences are accompanied by archival footage related to the historical

events happening within them, tinted blue and purple, like in silent film.) In tandem with the women's participation in politics, and even battle, the expressly feminist Srour shows the oppression they face within their own culture. In one affecting scene, a woman whose baby is ill reflects on her husband demanding all her valuables for money to spend on weapons for the revolution, money that could have been spent on taking their sick son to the doctor. We see women fighting for liberation who are themselves not granted liberty by those with whom they're fighting, such as young women whose presence alongside men in battle sparks gossip in the community. Srour explores all this ingeniously, never didactically, as she engages the depths of imagination to show the myriad ways in which Arab women, and, in some ways, even men, are victimized by patriarchal dogma. Throughout there are shots of women, covered head to toe in black niqabs and abayas, sitting on a beach while half-clothed men frolic in the water. Srour's visual metaphors are vivid and evocative, clear but still artful. Just as the film opens with one, it ends with a series of powerful symbols: of rebel women taking off their blindfolds; of the black-clad women finally putting their feet into the sea; and, lastly, of Leila dancing with death. "The visual leitmotiv of the film is Arab women sitting immobile under the high sun, while half-naked men bathe joyfully on the beach," said Srour. "Gradually, women will start getting impatient, as historic events go by, and they will move towards the water for a dip ... but in the Middle-East the dance of death still continues." For those interested, Cinenova: Feminist Film + Video, the UK distributor of the film, is working on a restoration (what's being shown through Block is a scan of the original); there's a [GoFundMe](#) to subsidize the cost of restoring both this and Srour's first film. (1984, 93 min) **[Kathleen Sachs]**

Followed by a pre-recorded discussion between filmmaker Heiny Srour and Professor Rebecca C. Johnson, Director of Middle East and North African Studies Program at Northwestern; registration at the link above is for both a link to the film and to the Q&A.