



The Experience of Conflict: A transnational language?

Written by [Paul Cooke \(University of Leeds\)](#)

Lebanon: The Youth Roll is a participatory arts project exploring the multiple and often competing ways in which the legacy of Lebanon's civil war [continues to impact society today](#). The civil war lasted for 15 years, between 1975 and 1990. It was a hugely complex conflict, involving shifting religious and political alliances and causing widespread displacement of the population, with Lebanon providing the location for a conflict that spread far beyond its borders, a product of tensions in the geopolitics of the Cold War, on the one hand, and their particular manifestations in the Middle East on the other. The focus of our project is on how this legacy is experienced by diverse communities of young people in Lebanon today. This is a generation that might have no direct knowledge of, or contact with this war, but who live in a society that has been fundamentally shaped by it. The project's title draws on filmmaking terminology. In order to make a good film that tells a fully-rounded story you need different type of footage, generally termed 'A Roll' (or the main footage) and 'B Roll' (or supplementary footage that helps to enhance the story being told by the 'A Roll'). In our project we're looking to bring in a new dimension to the story of Lebanon's troubled past that will raise awareness of questions the participants feel have largely been ignored by the mainstream media. Hence our project focuses on generating 'Youth Roll'.

This project, in turn, is part of a wider group of projects that form the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI) project [Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Communities](#), led at the University of Manchester by [Professor Stephen Hutchings](#). In particular **Lebanon: The Youth Roll** supports the [Transnational Strand](#) of this project, co-led at Durham University by Professors [Andy Byford \(MLAC\)](#) and [Anoush Ehteshami \(SGIA\)](#). The starting point for **The Youth Roll** was earlier work carried out by the [Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures](#) for this OWRI project on how changes in the production, distribution and consumption of audio-visual texts have created [opportunities for 'subaltern' voices to express their cultural and linguistic identity](#), acknowledging the influence of global north cultural conglomerates in shaping who can be heard. In this subsequent project we want to explore how digital media can be used to investigate the plurality of conflict landscapes in Lebanon, and the ways in which young people might co-create new narratives through creative practices that can challenge dominant discourse of war and silence. In particular, given the language-focus of OWRI, we are interested in the ways in which this is inflected by linguistic hybridity amongst young people and the role this plays in generating new societal narratives that are engaging with the nation's difficult past, with the ultimate aim of supporting increased social cohesion and stronger civil society.

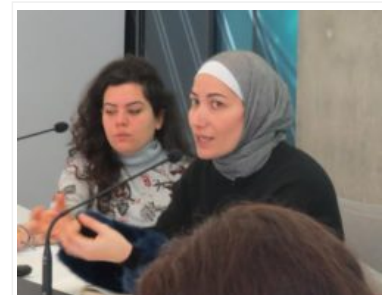
A short film made during our planning workshop held in September 2018 at the Issam Fares Institute, American University of Beirut.

The Centre for World Cinemas and Digital Cultures at the University of Leeds is working in close partnership with [British Council's Global Research Team British Council Lebanon](#), its in-country networks and [Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs](#) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) to deliver this project. However, the main research will be conducted by young people who are supported by NGOs working with vulnerable communities in and around Beirut. The young people will be filming interviews with members of their wider communities about their attitudes to the past and how this is inflected differently in different language communities.



Our student facilitators from the Media department of AUB

In preparation for this work, we spent a week working with our partners, as well as some of the hugely talented media students from AUB to train many of the young people who are going to conduct the research (specifically young people from the Ghbeyré and Bourj Hammoud centres of [Mouvement Social](#) and from the Dom community, supported by [Tahaddi](#)) in the principles of video production. In line with the ‘learning by doing’ approach that I favour for these sorts of projects, the focus of this week was on producing their own films, taking as their starting point what they know about Lebanon’s past and why they wanted to get involved. They had, prior to the filmmaking training, been introduced to the broad principles of participatory action research. In particular they had learnt how to conduct interviews for data collection. In this workshop, we took these principles and showed them how they could be used as the basis for documentary filmmaking. At the same time, we explored other things that are possible in film that might not be as easy to achieve via other media. Here we encouraged participants to experiment with the equipment we provided, giving them free reign over the films they wanted to produce during the workshop.



Our AUB lead, Dr Hana El Ghali

Over a period of three days, the young people planned, shot and edited their films, under the mentorship of the AUB students. The films produced ranged from interview-based documentaries about xenophobia to docudramas about drug addiction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of the films addressed the Lebanese Civil War directly. However, all of the issues examined in the films were clearly shaped by this past, as well as the broader legacies of war in the region. Given the speed at which the project team had to work, and given the fact that most of the people involved had never made a film before, some of the films were remarkably strong aesthetically. You could see the influence on these young people of Lebanese film, which is currently riding high internationally, with Oscar nominations of late for films such as [Capernaum](#), a story about street kids in Lebanon by [Nadine Labaki](#), the first Lebanese woman ever to be nominated for an Oscar.



The group try out filming an interview for the first time, supported by Professor Paul Cooke

More interestingly, however, was how the films particularly reflected the voices of the Syrian refugees who are taking part in the project. This brought a transnational dimension to our work that has also led me to reflect differently on the place of language in the project as a whole. For most of the participants, while they were interested in the underlying research questions of our project, when given

free reign to take these questions in any way they wanted, there were clearly other issues that were more important to them. Rather than language highlighting differences between the various groups of young people involved in the project, Arabic could be celebrated as a *lingua franca* language that helped to overcome difference. At the same time, as the films highlight, the ability to speak the same language is often not enough to prevent xenophobia towards Syrian refugees, and the Palestinian refugees that preceded them.

At the same time, what also came across very strongly during the workshop, and in the films that the young people produced was that while the specificities of the Lebanese Civil War were not necessarily seen to speak directly to these young people, the experience of living with and through conflict certainly did. This provided another *lingua franca* through which the group could share their experiences. This became particularly clear in a session during the workshop led by Ziad Saab from [Fighters for Peace](#). *Fighters for Peace* is a group of ex-fighters from all sides in the Civil War who came together in 2013 when violent clashes between the Sunni and Alawite sects in the north of the country looked like they might spread:

“We were once young and angered by the political and social situations around us. We were handed guns and decided to fight. Twenty-five years since the end of the civil war, which deprived many of us of normal teenage years, some of us are still struggling to rebuild their lives. We did not want to see this happen to a new generation of Lebanese youth – we did not want history to repeat itself.”

Lebanon’s civil war veterans fight for peace – BBC News

Ziad still lives with the scars of what he did as a teenager during the war and has dedicated his life since to trying to build links between once divided communities. While Lebanon is the starting point for his group’s work, they feel great affinity with people dealing with the legacy of other conflicts. In a recent trip by the group to Belfast, for example, they were struck by what they had in common with the two ex-combatants that showed them around the city, one a Loyalist, the other a Nationalist. The one significant difference being that while these two people were happy to talk about their experiences of conflict to Ziad and his colleagues, they refused to talk to each other.

Film made by young people during the project’s second week training.

Being involved in **Lebanon: The Youth Roll** has been a fascinating process that continues to develop in surprising directions. The films produced during the training week are something of a bonus set of outputs that we didn’t expect. Not only did they support our training programme, providing a starting point for the young people to use filmmaking as a tool for participatory action research, they have also provided an unexpected set of advocacy materials, allowing these young people to raise awareness of issues that directly affect their lives but that they feel are either ignored or misrepresented in the mainstream media. I’m looking forward to seeing how this side of the project develops over its lifetime.

TAGS: [FILM](#) [LEBANON](#) [TEAM POST](#)