



HAUNTED  
(Maskoon)



HAUNTED



## CONTENT

"When the bombs fell, the first thing we did was run away. It was not until later that we realized we had not looked back. We were not allowed to say goodbye to our home, our memories, our photos and the life that was lived within them. We have become vacant like these spaces; our hastily packed belongings and the forgotten things haunt us." An uncertain existence followed the escape and expulsion from Syria that tumbled into a physical and mental nowhere, a non-space between yesterday and tomorrow. "Haunted" tells of the loss of home and security, of the real and metaphorical meaning which a house, a home has in one's life.

# CREDITS

Liwaa Yazji, Syria 2014,

112 min, digital, Arabic with English or French subtitles

Director, Producer, Writer Liwaa Yazji |

Cinematographers Jude Gorany, Talal Khoury, Liwaa

Yazji | Sound DB Studio Beirut | Editor Carine Doumit

| Composer Kinan Abou Afach





HAUNTED

## FILM-MAKER

Liwaa Yazji

Liwaa Yazji was born in Moscow in 1977. She is a graduate of Theater Studies in Damascus/Syria and worked in the fields of theater dramaturgy, playwriting, and screen writing. She acted Abdullatif Abulhamid's September Rain (Syria 2009) and was assistant director of Allyth Hajjo and Ammar Alani's docudrama Windows of the Soul (Syria 2011). In 2012 she published her first play Here in the Garden and is currently preparing the second one with the Royal Court. 2014 her poetry book Peacefully, we leave home was published in Beirut.

Liwaa Yazji wrote the screen play for the TV drama series The Brothers (2013) which was broadcast on Abu Dhabi TV, CBC Egypt, and LBC Lebanon.

Haunted is Liwaa Yazji's directorial debut.



## FESTIVALS

FID Marseille (France)  
Insan Film Festival Ramallah (Palestine)  
International Mediterranean Film Festival Tétouan (Morocco)  
Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Czech Republic)  
Festival des 3 Continents Nantes (France)  
Dubai International Film Festival (UAE)  
If Istanbul Independent Film Festival (Turkey)  
DocPoint Helsinki (Finland)  
Mediterranean Film Festival Tétouan (Morocco)  
Human Rights Film Festival in Kiev (Ukraine)  
Fribourg International Film Festival (Switzerland)  
ALFILM - Arab Film Festival Berlin (Germany)  
Visions du Réel Nyon (Switzerland)  
Mosaic Rooms London (UK)  
Ecrans du Réel Beirut (Lebanon)  
Refugee Film Days Anakara (Turkey)  
UCLA Film & Television Archive (USA)  
cinemigrante (Argentina)  
Alexandria Film Festival for Mediterranean Countries (Egypt)  
Films Femmes Méditerranée Marseille (France)  
Arab Film Festival San Francisco (USA)  
DocLisboa (Portugal)  
Cinema Days Ramallah (Palestine)  
filmforum Duisburg (Germany)  
Kino im Walzenlager (Germany)  
DOK.Leipzig (Germany)  
Documentary- and Video Festival Kassel (Germany)  
CPH:DOX (Denmark)  
his Human World Vienna (Austria)  
Globale Berlin (Germany)

## AWARDS

FID Marseilles: Special Mention of the First Film Prize



# INTERVIEWS

(filmfestivallife.com, May 2015, excerpt)

The film represents a very intimate topic of exile, specifically the moment of making the decision to leave home. It follows nine stories of this inner difficult struggle in the context of the Syrian war. What was the first impulse to start to speak about this topic? Based on what criteria did you choose the main characters?

The motive was quite personal; I found myself bare and surprised facing it personally. Seeing all those displaced within Syrian cities, news referring to increasing numbers of Syrians escaping the country, images saturating media screens of destroyed houses (with very shocking details showing to the streets) etc. Starting from the end of 2011, whenever-wherever you go or whomever you meet you will find this topic present directly or indirectly: what do we do next? What do we do if we are faced with the same destiny? It was very possible; rather expected.

For Syrians, like maybe all other people, the idea of home is very essential and crucial. The Syrian citizen pays almost all his life (even literally) to get a house of his/her own, and it is the very first thing he/she loses with any instability. Home was – during that period – manifesting itself in various concepts, meanings, symbols and definitions: it was linked with all life savings, history, memories, identity, meaning of past life itself...etc.

I started to hear various unbelievable stories about how people are reacting to this question of home; how they are dealing with the fact that they should leave, that they lost their homes, that they might any minute be left on the streets or even change their status from citizens to refugees!

The stories were painful and most of the time surreal, yet some people still maintained sometimes this black comedy sense of expressing what is happening with them.



I went into a scouting period of collecting and archiving as much as I can from these stories; whether I documented them verbally or visually. I went into this frantic process of collecting those stories. Then I started to think of the structure of the film and artistic structure. I was sure that I will be doing fragments and therefore I tried to see which stories can fit and make together a good structure; a good film.

Of course not all stories that I heard can be used or knitted in the film, I even was not able to get to shoot two stories that I really wanted to include (the people already fled the house on the day of the shooting, and the other lady was too afraid 'of secret intelligence' to say what is happening with her).

The choice of stories was made to cover different approaches to the idea of home and its meaning in the Syrian context now. It also covered the variations of Syrians, Palestinian Syrians (with their history of moving from one country to another) and Syrians who also belong to the occupied territories since they have a very complex and deep meaning of home.

I tried as well to range between situations trying to reflect contradictions, variety leading to integration.

The film has been supported by the foundation of Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Middle East. How difficult was it to reach financial partners for the film and its topic?

I started shooting the film before seeking any financial help; for it was very important to capture the moments that were running fast in the cities: people are leaving or obliged to leave. So I depended on very basic tools and mediums especially since I was shooting in the areas which are under the control of the regime (which means I have security risks of detention).

Taking into consideration the topic and my political stands, it was impossible to seek any financial support in Syria. I headed to Lebanon where I applied to some funds and did a couple of interviews. I was determined to do the film anyway, and that was very clear to all since I already had started and would try to go on till I found a fund to accomplish.





I was lucky enough, though, to be able to convince Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Middle East with the project. They viewed the materials I had and believed in the film's abilities and potentials. They were so collaborative and months later they called to state their full and exclusive support.

I know it must have been a very difficult process and an obstacle to have a production partner in such conditions, especially when the film is not tackling direct issues related to the revolution events.

Your previous professional experience has been linked with the film industry as well. You know the role of actress, assistant director and now you tried the role of director. HAUNTED represents your first work with the medium of documentary film. Why did you decide to use this particular film form?

As a matter of fact I do writing as well (playwriting, poetry and script writing), I work in theater and film. And I believe that the relation between theme and form carries within sometimes the genre that I will approach.

In this particular case the documentary was the sole carrier of the idea from the beginning for me. I believed that having those people saying or showing their stories is the best and most effective way... to be honest I even did not think of any other genre. Reality was so present that the documentary was even screened in my head when I started shooting, of course the freedom and the challenges of this film were also present and crucial... for the film was open to all curves dominated by day to day realities around.

What was interesting for me is that what the film will offer was real and happening, and that those Syrians are real people that anyone can identify with. It has the desire within to show different images of Syrian people who are not being numbers in statistics, dead, injured, or just wailing in front of screens. They are not masses but rather individuals who could be in any country in any time era... that is why the document was so essential to me, added to that the visualization I had of the film layers.



## Syrian filmmaker Liwaa Yazji discusses the dangers and inspirations she encountered whilst shooting her first documentary

"This ethical issue was crucial in the process of the project. It was such a dangerous thing for us all – especially inside Syria where I was shooting in areas which were under the regime's control. This could have resulted in detention and imprisonment for any one of us."

Q1/ Can you briefly introduce yourself and tell us why you became interested in working in film?

I am a Syrian filmmaker born in Moscow. I studied Theater Studies in Damascus, Syria and then went on to work in the fields of theater dramaturgy, playwriting, and screen writing. In 2009 I acted in 'September Rain,' a feature film by Syrian director Abdullatif Abdulhamid. Then in 2011 I went on to work as assistant director in 'Windows of the Soul,' a docudrama directed by Allyth Hajjo and Ammar Alani. I published my first play 'Here in the Park' in 2012, and in 2013 I wrote the screen play of the TV drama series 'The Brothers.' Last year I published my first poetry book in Beirut, entitled 'In Peace, we leave home,' and a translation of Edward Bond's play 'Saved' in Arabic.

I also directed my first documentary film 'Haunted' in 2014, which will be screening at The Mosaic Rooms 22 April. I am also a board member of Ettijahat-Independent Culture

Q2/ Your documentary Haunted (Maskoon) is about the Syrian people's relationship with their homes during the war, what inspired you to make a film on this subject?

It started as a personal concern; the war was crawling to Damascus, the capital was full of internal refugees from other cities hit by its destruction. Wherever you went, whomever you spoke to, there was only one question: what do we do?

It was something we were not able to deny: the war was coming and we had to have an answer to the question: what do we do next? When our houses are destroyed what is left for us? Do we stay or do we leave? Do we stay until the last





minute, or take the decision to leave before?

We had seen what was happening in other cities, and we knew we were not excluded from the same destiny; doomed to the same fate sooner or later.

The issue of “home” was an issue for all of us – family, relatives, friends, refugees around me and those abroad in camps. There were dozens of photos and videos of wreckages and ruins on TVs, websites and mobile correspondence, haunting us every day.

So that is how I started thinking of the film; as a way to “archive” the sad, surreal and absurd stories of people abandoning their history, memories, identity and life – to throw themselves into the unknown in most cases. It started as an archive, to record the different conversations about, and variety of experiences of, the same situation. The majority of those who had to leave their houses did not even have the luxury to ask such questions, or to look for answers... they just found themselves out in the void running for their lives.

Q3/ For your documentary you conducted a series of interviews with people who had fled Syria, can you tell us about the process you went through to find interviewees and about any unexpected stories you uncovered in the process?

I spent a long period scouting before shooting, during this time I tried to archive and collect as many stories as I could, whether told orally or to the camera. That scouting period took place in Syria at first, later I realized that I needed to follow the journey of those stories to one of the refugees hosting countries: I chose Lebanon. There I scouted in various areas hosting Syrian refugee communities.

Another important factor I have to mention is the risk we were all taking in doing these interviews and shooting. This ethical issue was crucial in the process of the project. It was such a dangerous thing for us all – especially inside Syria where I was shooting in areas which were under the regime’s control. This could have resulted in detention and imprisonment for any one of us.

Even in the refugee camps it was so difficult to shoot due to the problems the hosting communities could cause if the refugees started to talk about how bad the conditions they were living in were! Or, the hosting communities were against the Syrian revolution altogether and allied against them.

Some of the stories I encountered during shooting were really surreal and unexpected. I came across an elderly couple who did not want to leave their house for the Free Army snipers, and so decided to live with them, sharing the same house! I also used to go back to film certain families only to find that they had already fled!

Whilst talking to the people who had already fled their homes I noticed that they all regretted one thing most: that they had not brought photographs with them. Photographs to register life as it was, the life they had left behind, to tell new generations about the old, dead or disappearing ones, or to tell their children about how they lived and who they were before. I used to tell people who were still in their houses and thinking of leaving 'take photographs'.

The lady in the film living in Chatila Camp in Lebanon had to change her house while we were shooting and that was really unexpected and so important for the film.

Another unexpected thing also happened whilst I was shooting on the international road between Syria and Lebanon. It was highly forbidden to film there so I decided to try and film it alone. I was filming at the same time as driving the car. The result was that I had a bad car accident that was all captured on film!

(The Mosaic Rooms, London)



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