

Anwar Film  
presents

# طرابلس / حكاية المدن الثلاثة

## Tripoli / A Tale of Three Cities

Lebanon / 2024, 88 min.

a film by  
Raed Rafei

### PRESS NOTES

World premiere  
IDFA  
Frontlight

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)



# Contacts

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## Production

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# Technical specifications

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## Production country

Lebanon

## Year of production

2024

## Duration

88 minutes

## Language

Arabic, English

# Logline

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A queer director returns to Tripoli, Lebanon to confront a hometown that once rejected him. He interviews the city's inhabitants about their cultural and social beliefs.

# Synopsis

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While living abroad, a filmmaker returns to Tripoli, Lebanon to confront a hometown that once rejected him as a queer child. With a microphone in hand, he walks around coffee shops, public squares and a park to ask the city's inhabitants about their cultural and social beliefs and their embrace of new ideas.

Gradually, he meets a group of marginalized individuals whose eccentric life choices contradict the general lifestyle in this religiously and socially conservative city. Through intimate conversations with a communist activist, a queer music producer and other unconventional characters, he explores the complicated relations one forms with a hometown in crisis.

This contemplative urban symphony paints a picture of a city trapped in a self-spun web, paralyzed by a deep economic crisis, a faltering revolution, and a looming doomsday.



# Director's notes

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Tripoli, Lebanon is my hometown. It's where I was raised and where parts of my family and friends continue to reside. As a queer teenager, I felt alienated by the city's dominant heteronormative culture. But since I started residing elsewhere, every time I return to visit, I feel an unexplainable magnetic pull towards it. Through cinema, I found ways to reorient myself in the city. Through a queer lens and editing style, I reconstituted it under a new light to reimagine it and redefine it against prevalent assumptions about it as a rigid, conservative, and oppressive place.

To me, the importance of the film is that it sheds light on the richness and diversity of the social and cultural fabric of the city. It presents a new way to look at queerness in the Middle East beyond stereotyped portrayals of the region as homophobic and of its queer people as helpless victims. It offers audiences an insight into a rich, colorful, and multi-layered slice of life in a region that is routinely presented in the media as a place of violence and perpetual conflicts.

The film upholds an attachment to the spirit of Lebanon as a place where minorities have found refuge historically and where diversity has always been an essential component of public life. Made at a time when the country was living through a potent revolution against an antiquated system, it captures the dynamics of change in society. It's also a poetic reflection on longing, belonging and exile in times of crises.

Finally, the film is an affirmation of life and a statement of resistance in this current bleak moment for Lebanon when many parts of the country are being relentlessly destroyed by the Israeli army.

# About the director / producer

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## Raed Rafei

**Raed Rafei** is a filmmaker, researcher, and multimedia journalist. Rafei directed award-winning documentaries and experimental films. His films '74 (The Reconstitution of a Struggle)', 'Here I am ... Here You are', 'Salam' and 'Al-Atlal (The Ruins)' have screened at international film festivals and venues like the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Doc Lisboa, Visions du Réel, and the Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley.

He is an Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. His research focuses on queer cinema in the Arab region and its diasporas.

As a journalist, he worked for international publications like The Los Angeles Times and news outlets like CNN and Al-Jazeera Documentary Channel.



**Rafei** holds a PhD in Film and Digital Media from the University of California, Santa Cruz and an MA in Journalism from the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York.

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## Filmography

**Tripoli / A Tale of Three Cities** (2024) – Documentary, 88 min

**Al-Atlal (The Ruins)** (2021) – Experimental, 15 min

**Salam** (2017) – Docudrama, 19 min

**Eccomi ... Eccoti (Here I am ... Here you are)** (2017) – Documentary, 68 min

**74 (The Reconstitution of a Struggle)** (2012) – Docudrama, 95 min

# On Identity, Belonging and Utopia

An interview with the director Raed Rafei conducted by film curator Rabih El-Khoury

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**Tripoli, the second largest Lebanese city, has a very rich history and political life as well as complex cultural and religious customs. It's a city that has been long marginalized and its inhabitants have been struggling to be seen. Tripoli is also your city. How emotional was it for you to rediscover Tripoli through the making of this film?**

It was very emotional. I grew up in Tripoli. I spent all my childhood there, but I left when I turned 18. I have always felt that I am somehow too marginal as a queer person to fit into that seemingly conservative place. But I also felt captivated by its colorful people and places every time I visited my parents there. When I started filming the city in the summer of 2018, I did not have a clear idea of what I wanted to discover. So, I spent the next six years going back and forth between California and Tripoli. And every time I filmed, I felt a renewed sense of fascination. For instance, returning to the old souks where my grandfather once owned a fabric shop filled me with warm emotions of nostalgia. But there were also difficult times when I was too scared to confront the city. The whole experience was an exercise in orientation and re-orientation to find a sense of home again.

**The film feels like a portrait of the people of Tripoli: the strangers you come across in public spaces like coffee shops or a public garden, the friends or acquaintances you interview intimately like the communist activist or the queer singer, and there is also you, Raed, not the filmmaker, but one of the natives of the city. How did you weave in all these multiple voices?**

Initially, I just wanted to engage with people I met randomly in public spaces to challenge homophobic beliefs and society's understanding of what it considers to be "unnatural". An antiquated and vague Lebanese law that we inherited from the French mandate in the 1920s criminalizes "unnatural" sexual relations. I was inspired by the cinema vérité style of the 1960s, films like 'Chronicle of a Summer' by Jean Rouch or 'Love Meetings' by Pier Paolo Pasolini. But after a while, I felt the need to look for individuals like me, who felt both seduced by the city but also antagonistic towards it. I wanted to explore how other non-normative people managed to live in Tripoli and accept it. I wasn't only interested in individuals who were queer because of their sexuality. I was looking for people who rejected the common norms and who carved a special

space for themselves despite the crushing traditions of the city. My voice-over and my personal story came at a later stage. It was important to me that the spectators understand my positionality as a filmmaker.

**Identity plays an important role in the film whether it's the various characters trying to define the contours of their multiple identities, what they accept and reject, or you, Raed, rediscovering your identity in the city by looking through your childhood photos and writings. How difficult was it to dive into the complex identity of the city?**

It took me a long time to turn the camera on myself and look through my own memories in the city. I found a poem I wrote in 1996 as a teenager and that I had completely forgotten. It was a spiritual poem about struggling with my faith in God. It was emotional to reconnect with how I must have felt as a troubled queer teenager. Of course, now I am more confident. But discovering this raw text and other personal photos helped make the film more personal without it being autobiographical. I didn't want to make another typical film about a gay man in the Middle East rejected by a Muslim society. I wanted to engage with the complex nature of our multiple identities and our layered feelings of belonging to our hometowns. The more I filmed, the more I felt the queerness of the city itself. There was something very seductive in the way men looked at me and socialised among themselves. I wanted to capture that queerness at an affective level that transcended the homophobic discourse.

**You also engage with the contemporary history of the city and the country at large, the October 2019 Revolution against the political system and the subsequent period of economic collapse. We understand through your characters how hard it is to make ends meet in Tripoli and how difficult it is for women to acquire basic rights within its patriarchal environment, even though several female characters you film provide magnetic statements that counter this perception. Through your observations, did you find a place for utopias and dreams in Tripoli?**

There has always been a strong sense of defeat and failure in Tripoli. But I witnessed a change in attitudes and a burst of hopeful aspirations during the Revolution. Even when the situation became bleak and people realized that change will not happen as they expected, I could still sense an attachment to another possible reality even if it was relegated to a postponed future. One particular space encapsulated this sentiment, the Oscar Niemeyer Fair. You see it in the beginning and at the end of the film. This was a place conceived by the renowned modernist Brazilian architect in the 1960s, but construction was

stopped because of the Lebanese Civil War. So, now it is a ruin suspended between the past and the future. In the film, I wanted my friend, Leah, a transgender woman from Tripoli, to be the spirit of an awaited brighter future.

**Part of the editing of the film was done during the war on Gaza and later the postproduction was finished as Lebanon was being bombarded relentlessly. How did you manage to finish the film in these difficult conditions?**

The horrors that we saw unfold in Gaza had a deep impact on me as an Arab living in the United States. I asked myself numerous times what the point of making a film about queerness was at an urgent time when Palestinians were brutally killed and displaced. But I was surrounded by an Arab queer community in San Francisco that saw very clearly the link between queer liberation and the liberation of oppressed people in Palestine and elsewhere. That spirit was inspiring to me. Later, finishing the sound mix and exporting the film proved extremely complicated as all the members of the team I worked with were in Beirut. The heavy Israeli bombardment of the country had started and my collaborators as well as my friends and family were suddenly in a situation of unsafety. I am deeply grateful for all the people who insured the finishing of the film on time for its world premiere in Amsterdam at IDFA despite all the challenges.

**There is a line in the film that I find deeply reflective of being in diaspora. You say, 'I am part of the city but also a stranger in it'. My final question is about belonging. Now that you live in the United States, do you feel you belong there? Has the film affected your sense of belonging to Tripoli?**

I think I am always in a liminal, in-between space. Even when I am elsewhere, I carry Tripoli and my memories there within me. That makes me feel connected to my roots especially in times of adversity when I know that my friends and family are suffering back home while life continues as normal for me here. And I think I made this film specifically to immortalize this hometown that I can never let go of. It is certainly devastating that Lebanon and the region experience so much loss, so fast. But maybe cinema can capture and preserve some of the beauty before we lose it.



# About the production entity

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**Anwar Film** is an independent production entity that includes the films of siblings Raed and Rania Rafei. An homage to our father, Anwar (means 'luminous' in Arabic), whose enlightened spirit was a source of inspiration and sometimes antagonism. The world of Anwar Film contains passionate documentaries, docu-dramas, fiction, and experimental films that we have made together and separately. These award-winning films have been screened at international festivals and venues around the world like FID Marseille, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Doc Lisboa, Visions du Réel, and the Pacific Film Archives in Berkeley.

[www.anwarfilm.com](http://www.anwarfilm.com)



# Credits

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Writer, director & producer	Raed Rafei
Associate Producer	Rania Rafei
Executive Producer	Eliane Raheb
Cinematography	Jocelyne Abi Gebrayel
Editor	Raed Rafei
Editing Consultant	Grace Zahra
Sound design & mixing	Lama Sawaya
Colorist	Chrystel Elias
Post-Production	Lucid
Produced by	Anwar Film

In cooperation with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V. & with support from: The University of California, Santa Cruz, The University of Pittsburgh, The Human Rights Center at Berkeley Law, The American Council of Learned Societies, the Social Science Research Council, the UC President's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program and The University of California, Davis.



An Anwar Film Production

# طرابلس TRIPOLI

A TALE OF THREE CITIES  
حكاية المدن الثلاثة

A film by  
Raed Rafei

Director, Producer & Editor Raed Rafei Associate Producer Rania Rafei Executive Producer Eliane Raheb  
Cinematography Jocelyne Abi Gebrayel Sound Design Lama Sawaya Colorist Chrystel Elias  
Graphics Abraham Zeitoun Produced by Anwar Film In cooperation with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.

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