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## A track in time

Beirut Terminus uses railway to document a bloody history

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Beirut Terminus documents the history of Lebanon through a disused main railway station

### Gautaman Bhaskaran

The railway has spawned a million tales, often romances, often playing Cupid. David Lean's 1945 Brief Encounter set in a railroad station, against the backdrop of hissing steam engines and clanging coaches, had Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson playing lovers in an extra-marital affair.

Much later, Mani Ratnam used a railway station and suburban trains in his Chennai-based Alaipayuthey (2000) to get Madhavan and Shalini together in a passionate affair. They get married, but it does not signal the end of their problems.



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The railway has also been used outside sensual love — like the way Satyajit Ray showed us in his first first movie, Pather Panchali. Two young children, a sister and brother, race towards a rail track to watch a puffing engine and bogies in a scene that went on to become iconic!

Lebanese director Elie Kamal goes beyond all these in his recent film, Beirut Terminus, to document the history of his country, even the region, through a main railway station and the tracks that take off from there.

In an interview, Kamal says, “In Lebanon, we don’t have a lot of parks or public spaces. But there are lots of disused railway stations and tracks. Because they still belong to the State, no one was allowed to build on them. They have been left alone, and over time have become overgrown and turned into fields. So they are safe places for children to play.” And Kamal, now 34, once played on those train tracks that took off from Beirut Terminus. Sometimes childhood experiences can become a source for later creativity, and Kamal’s documentary grips one with its vivid photography, lucid narration and its ability to trace Lebanon’s troubled history in a way that it can be compared with the history of the railway there.

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Kamal shows us the ugly side of it all: how the disused wagons were once used to incarcerate and torture prisoners. After World War II in 1948, the railway was virtually destroyed by an uncaring Lebanese Government. The civil war which came later signed the death warrant of the railway. “The railway now looks like a skeleton, a body left to rot,” Kamal says. “It’s a corpse. And if you don’t pump blood into the veins, eventually it dies.”

Kamal shows the now disused terminus and tracks to interweave personal and historical facts. And several stories emerge which help us understand the country’s past and uncertain future — and even now widespread protests are erupting there.

In a strange way, the railway line which had united men and women became a wall, separating them. It divided East Beirut (where Christians live) from West Beirut, where most people were Muslims. And crossing from the East, where Kamal lived, to the West became problematic.

Kamal’s work documents all these through the railway, and the terminus. It is astonishing to see how he had used a simple rail track to take us through time, mostly tragic — the photography alone colouring the screen with bright hues, the roosters and the ducks and the cows adding a bit of tranquility to what seemed like a horrific era.



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The Tribune, the largest selling English daily in North India, publishes news and views without any bias or prejudice of any kind. Restraint and moderation, rather than agitational language and partisanship, are the hallmarks of the paper. It is an independent newspaper in the real sense of the term.

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