

# A Broken House

Jimmy Goldblum, The New Yorker, 2020

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*Hiraeth* (Welsh, no direct translation):  
‘[...] a state of extreme homesickness to a homeland that is no longer existent or has never, ever existed’ (A Broken House, 2020).

What is home? This is the question at the heart of the documentary short film *A Broken House* (Goldblum 2020) that carries the viewer through the story of a

life that exists in both the ‘here’ and the ‘there’. The film was one of a dozen or so documentary short films shortlisted for the 94<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards® and recipient of nominations and awards such as the International Documentary Association (IDA) ‘best short’ in 2022. Now available to watch on YouTube on The New Yorker channel, the film is

described in the video title as ‘Re-creating the Syria of His Memories, Through Miniatures’. However, *A Broken House* seems less a film about an artist re-creating home, than an artist in an ongoing process of remembrance and memorialisation that lends itself to the creation of a new understanding and reality of home. The film’s subject, U.S.-based Syrian architect, Mohamed Hafez’s, politico-legal status and lived experience is tied to a temporal context of war, but he seems to live almost a kind of atemporal experience with his art, as we see in the film, as he attempts to capture what he remembers of his native Syria and what is happening to it now, bringing it all together in the single space of an architectural model.

When Mohamed first arrived to the U.S. from Syria, there was a post-9/11 travel ban, so with a ‘single-entry’ visa he could not leave the country for fear of being prohibited from entering upon return. Although his profound homesickness drove him to start planning an eventual return to his family, his parents discouraged him from sacrificing his professional work. After war broke out in Syria in 2011, as a result of watching news coverage and

worrying about his family, he lost his appetite, stopped creating art for an extended period, and tried to maintain a demeanour of normality at work. In the wake of these emotional and psychological difficulties, he asked himself, ‘If you can’t get home, why don’t you make home?’ He then began to construct his memories of Syria with foam, paint, styrene, bits of wood, miniatures, and other materials he collected.

Director Jimmy Goldblum manages to avoid some traps, and tropes, in the representation and interpretation of the life of a refugee or displaced person who has no choice but to stay in his new home, through narrative choices that show the deep connections between Mohamed and his family. This is not a ‘tragic refugee’ story, nor a life in limbo per se, but one that, even throughout Mohamed’s experience of displacement and longing, is universal in its specificity. Goldblum employs a lyrical direction that carries the viewer through waves of emotion and contemplative gazes upon Mohamed’s creations, a striking vision of Syria composed of a mixture of the present and the absent. Slow reverse

zooms show models of bombed-out buildings, awash in creams and shades of blue, some with façades torn off, revealing abandoned and extinguished lives, the artefacts of Syrian – of our – human existence. Yet not all is destruction; Mohamed’s models are also homages rooted in memory and appreciation, displaying the beauty of his home(land). Set against a black background as if they are floating within the void, they convey a sense of mystery about this lost reality, and a sense of awe at the horrors of war. We are looking at memories.

Mohamed’s story is accompanied by a stillness that belies an unsettledness. Silence is commonly used in stories about immigrant lives, often seen in narrative fiction, and routinely told through a White Western lens (e.g. *Limbo*, 2020; *Lion*, 2016; *Brick Lane*, 2007), and this film is part of that perspective; however, Goldblum deftly employs a *sense* of silence in this film without allowing for much actual silence within the soundtrack. The film’s soundtrack contains a sustained hum of strings, and strings with piano, often lilting and melodic, but throughout quite melancholy, even

urgent, at points. The score by the band From the Mouth of the Sun (duo of Dag Rosenqvist and Aaron Martin) complements the emotionality of Goldblum’s storytelling without veering into manipulative sound work to specifically prompt reactions. Rather, the music evokes a tender feeling and a sense of yearning that draws on the idea of *hiraeth*, the homesickness for home and homeland.

Goldblum incorporates sweeping, slow tilts, and pans of Mohamed’s art, with a voiceover by Mohamed about the destruction of culture, history, and heritage through war. While aided by the soundtrack, Mohamed’s voiceover remains the dominant diegetic sound throughout the film, allowing him to frame his own world and articulate his experience and memories. His words call to mind the need to document sites of cultural importance, to preserve the memory of such places, and to appreciate their beauty and magnitude. The film’s title, *A Broken House*, may have innumerable interpretations, moving from the specificity of Mohamed’s experience and his ‘broken home’ and broken homeland, to a representation of universal experience

of family and loss. In the sense of cultural memory, a broken house might be the result of destruction of that with immeasurable significance to human culture.

Home movie footage is interspersed throughout, showing Mohamed and his family when he was still a young, growing boy, dancing with them, laughing, and playing. Goldblum follows Mohamed through his artistic process as well as his journey to Lebanon where he visits a refugee camp and reunites with his mother who has traveled from Syria to see him. (Although Mohamed's parents had joined him in the U.S. after they decided to flee from the war in Syria, his mother's profound homesickness drove her to decide to return to Syria, but her husband stayed in the U.S. with Mohamed.) In a particularly poignant scene in which she is preparing to return to Syria from their visit in Lebanon, Mohamed implores her to come to the U.S. to be with him and his father again, the only other member of Mohamed's family who is geographically close to him. It is in this sequence that their exchanges of 'I'll miss you' and his kissing and embracing his mother, turn

to an emotional, desperate entreaty from a son to his mother for them to be together again as a family. Perhaps the most affective sequence in the film, Mohamed beseeching his mother to be physically present in his life, illustrates that home is not simply a place, but also people and family. Without them, you are left with a broken house and a loss of a sense of home. In the final line of the film, as Mohamed speaks about his family being separated and not having been under a single roof in many years, he laments, 'I miss home', evoking a deep sense of *hiraeth* in a desire for home and family.

*A Broken House* rests on a question of home and explores the ontological realities of Mohamed's experience and his quest to recreate home through art that is informed, and powered, by his memories. It may be an endlessly complicated challenge to answer concisely 'what is home?' Mohamed centers the experiences of those who are refugees and have been separated from their homes by saying 'We come from established lives. We had a life. You can't explain millions of people with one stab, "refugee", full stop'. It is through his focus on refugees and

recreating the Syria of his memories in material form that Mohamed mounts a resistance to the psychologically colonising effects of war that arise through various means, including separation from family, but also media coverage, sensationalism around conflict, and simultaneous hyper-vilification and invisibilisation of refugees. There is most certainly a past, and a present, lived and experienced by those with ‘refugee’ as a politico-legal descriptor, but what is the future in the sense of finding home, or recreating it when you cannot physically return to the source of your memories or bring together those you love who are part of those memories?

The writer and theorist Mark Fisher explored the concept of hauntology (a term uniting ‘ontology’ with a sense of ‘haunting’ and coined by Jacques Derrida), specifying one direction as ‘that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality’ (2013, p.19). A Syria ravaged by war has become an absence to some degree; this is the ‘agency of the virtual’ (p. 18), a Syria that continues to affect lives as it lives on in memory. Syria may now represent

a future haunted by impossibility for Mohamed, a future he can only grasp through memory.

If we take Jamie Ann Rogers’s concept of (African) ‘diasporic communion’ (2020, p.132) as a hermeneutic for how meaning might be related across time and space between diasporic subjects, we can see how these textual depictions of Syria created by Mohamed are part of a broader, atemporal cultural memory that is also part of the imagined, rather than simply the material. His art becomes part of the experience, memory, story, history, culture, and meaning of Syria within the diaspora. In fact, the art that Mohamed creates is part of his voice, an immigrant voice that often goes unacknowledged, a voice that Myria Georgiou calls a ‘storytelling praxis of agentive self within conditions of unequally distributed freedoms’ (2021).

Is Mohamed’s ‘house’ – his family, his homeland – a broken house? This word, ‘house’, can be interpreted as ‘home’, a spirit of belonging, place, and experience of family and established life, or as a literal house in which he grew up, the house of his family, the place and space that was lost to war. The

Hafez house has been broken through war, through displacement, and through reluctant separation. The evocation of brokenness is also striking in that there is actual, tangible brokenness present in the form of the artistic architectural models created by Mohamed; the models require materials that are snapped and cut, reshaped to fit together in these manifestations of his memories. However, it is also through this manifestation – the process of recollection – that Mohamed may create new memories of his life in Syria without being present in Syria. This recollection represents the merging of different timelines and simultaneous experiences: the ‘here’ of now and the ‘there’ of memory.

In the film, Mohamed states, ‘There was this fire inside me to just start humanizing refugees and to tell their stories’. In dealing with this trauma

and motivation to act, he focuses on his art, but with a process that entails creating a ‘nostalgic and sad emotional state’ (Khan 2018), including looking at images of destruction. ‘[W]e were so unmoored it was hard to fathom a next step’ (2019, p.3) is how Dina Nayeri describes her experience of becoming a refugee, and in Mohamed’s case, his distance from Syria and his family is a process of unmooring. The art he creates of places and spaces in his memory tether him to Syria as his home, although that home as he knew it and as he remembers it no longer exists in material terms. With continued separation and loss, this being outside of time and between places fuses the ‘here *and* there’ (the present and memory) with the *hiraeth* he feels for Syria and all it represents, perhaps both loss and hope.