

QUINZAINÉ  
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT  
CANNES 2022



# THE DAM

A FILM BY ALI CHERRI



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● Countries	France, Sudan, Lebanon, Germany, Serbia
● Duration	80'
● Language	Arabic
● Screen	2:39
● Sound	5.1
● Premiere	Cannes 2022 - Directors' Fortnight

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A film by | Ali Cherri  
**THE DAM**  
"LE BARRAGE"

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● Cannes Film Festival - Directors' Fortnight

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Public & press screenings

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24.05.22	11:15 a.m.	Theatre Croisette
24.05.22	5:00 p.m.	Theatre Croisette
25.05.22	10:00 a.m.	Cinema Le Raimu
25.05.22	4:30 p.m.	Cinema Alexandre III
26.05.22	9:00 a.m.	Cinema La Licorne

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Sudan, near the Merowe Dam. Maher works in a traditional brickyard fed by the waters of the Nile. Every evening, he secretly wanders off into the desert to build a mysterious construction made of mud. While the Sudanese people rise to claim their freedom, his creation slowly starts to take a life of its own...

● Director

Ali Cherri

● Screenwriters

Ali Cherri, Geoffroy Grison, in collaboration with Bertrand Bonello

● Producer

Janja Kralj (KinoElektron)

● Co-Producers

Galerie Imane Fares, Vega Foundation, DGL Travel, Twenty Twenty Vision Filmproduktion GmbH, Trilema

● Cast

Maher El Khair



# Ali Cherri

Screenwriter and director

*Born in Beirut, Ali Cherri is a visual artist and filmmaker living in Paris. Combining films, videos, sculptures and installation, his work examines the construction of historical narratives. Ali is the Artist in Residence at the National Gallery in London (2021/22) and has been awarded with the Silver Lion for promising artist at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia (2022). His short films The Disquiet and The Digger have been shown in prominent film festivals. The Dam, a fiction shot in Sudan during the revolution, is his debut feature film.*



# Ali Cherri

Screenwriter and director

**You said that *The Dam* is part of a trilogy. Can you tell us more about it?**

The film is part of a larger project devoted to what I call the geographies of violence, or the landscapes of violence. It consists of identifying how violent crises are inscribed in particular environments; in scrutinizing them carefully enough to make tangible how political, social and geopolitical events are embedded in these environments, even if not necessarily explicit.

The trilogy is composed of films that can stand alone. The short films: *The Disquiet*, *The Digger*, and *The Dam*.

The first one was shot in Lebanon and examines the violence of a catastrophe, more specifically an earthquake, a frequent phenomenon in my country. Obviously, it is also a way of looking at other earthquakes that keep affecting the region.

The second one was shot on an archaeological site in the desert, in the United Arab Emirates. It questions the construction of historical narratives on which a nation builds itself, starting with ancient artefacts.

The feature film was shot near the Merowe Dam, which was built by the Chinese in North Sudan. As it is often the case with this type of infrastructure, this dam is a destructive project, which led to the violent expulsion of the Manasir people, who lived in the vicinity. It materializes the brutality of the dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir, leader of Sudan from 1989 to 2019. It is also a catastrophic in environmental terms. Today in Merowe, we see a beautiful and peaceful

lake, but underneath these waters lie a lot of brutal events, death, and destruction.

**You make violence a major issue in your films, yet they are not violent films in the usual sense as we witness very few acts of violence.**

I am precisely interested in the way in which violence becomes invisible. How it inhabits our world even outside of the sensuous, and how it is therefore difficult to transmit and to share what we have suffered. This comes from my own history. I was born at the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon. I grew up in Beirut in the midst of the fighting, and yet I bear no physical trace of it. My body was not wounded, I am not disabled, I was not killed.

I try to make perceptible how the violence I experienced is present, in the bodies and in the landscapes, beyond explicit traces, ruins, wounds – the apparent visible scars. This is at the heart of all my work.

**You have also defined the whole trilogy as telluric. In what sense?**

I have always tried to look at landscapes and bodies, earth, and flesh, in the same way.

I am sensitive to what they have in common. The earth, the ground, is what carries us, but it is also shaken by earthquakes – a theme that was at the core of the first short film.

It is the archaeology and thus, both the traces of our long history, and the current construction of narratives from these traces.

There is a great plastic force in the



materialistic side of the earth, which has always inspired my artistic work.

***The Disquiet* and *The Digger* are more art films, while *The Dam* is clearly intended for the cinema. How has your approach changed?**

I didn't live with the fantasy of becoming a film director. I used the camera, sound recording and editing more as a visual artist. Video was part of my tool kit.

When I went to Sudan in 2017, I was in the same frame of mind. It was on the spot, through encounters with people and places, that I felt the need to mobilize the resources of cinematographic language. I like the cinema as a spectator, but it was

not my preferred way of expression. It is the situation that imposed it on me. Making a film required more means, but it was a great joy to explore this different scope step by step, and to find the answers that this project called for. This evolution was made little by little: when I started to shoot in 2019, I still had a similar approach to the one of the short films.

**But political events interfered with the story...**

When I arrived in Sudan to start shooting, the protests against al-Bashir had just started. But it was far away, in Khartoum, and the people I was dealing with didn't care about it. However after ten days of filming, al-Bashir left, overthrown by the

army, cutting the popular revolt short. The country closed down and we had to leave, not knowing if it would be possible to return. And after this, the pandemic forced everything to stop.

However, I never abandoned the project. On the contrary, during this absence I considerably fleshed out the script, starting from what I had already shot. This is when *The Dam* became a true film project.

**The Sudanese revolution interfered with the film, but also fed into it.**

From the outset, the film had a political stake, linked to the dam, but it was unforeseeable that this political aspect would emerge so

explicitly. It appears in the film with a particular focus: the workers of the brickyard are aware of what is happening. They follow the events on the radio and television, but they do not participate in them. They live on the margins of the world. Most of the members of the film crew were Sudanese and of the same age as the workers. They were very involved, at least emotionally and on social networks, whereas the brickmakers, who are also Sudanese, do not see themselves as citizens. They have largely internalized a feeling of political powerlessness. It is important to understand that they are all younger than 30. They were born after al-Bashir took power in 1989. They have lived their whole lives under a dictatorial regime. Thus, the film also shows this influence on their



behavior.

**Besides the multiple political dimensions of the film, it also deals with the global issue of water, which is particularly relevant to this part of the world.**

The political stakes around water are at the origin of the project from which *The Dam* was born. I had first considered shooting in Egypt, where the Nile is a economically and politically strategic asset, which would also have allowed to inscribe the film into a very long history, going back to the pharaohs. But it was too dangerous to shoot in Egypt, especially in the desert,

far from large cities, while in 2017 Sudan seemed stable. Conflicts around the Nile are equally present there. There are tensions which may turn into armed conflict, with Ethiopia (building its own large dam in order to control and limit the flow of the river, against the will of its neighbors). While shooting in 2021, we had to stop because of joint military maneuvers by the Egyptian and Sudanese armies. A bombing of the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia was likely. A lot of the major powers started to intervene in the region, like of course the United States, Russia, China...

**At the same time, the place where you filmed is**

**also marked by a long history. In the film we see pyramids, which date back to ancient Egypt. Can you specify what characterizes this place on the outskirts of Gebel Barkal?**

There is an astonishing layering of temporalities. Major events are being played out, on a contemporary scale - the dam and the regime change - but those are part of a very wide and long history: since the Pharaohs and the cult of Amun, to which this mountain, Gebel Barkal, (where the film begins) is linked.

The brick workers that we see in the film use the same techniques as in the Pharaonic

period. They make bricks in the same way as the pyramids were built. However, this region of Sudan is also the one where a form of Sufism, called Afro-Sufism, a mixture of Muslim and animist rituals, is practiced. It has been violently repressed by the Islamist power of al-Bashir.

Sufism, and especially this particular current, posits that all that exists is the work of God, and is therefore sacred: the mountain, humans, water, trees, animals... The mountain of Gebel Barkal, where the temples of ancient Egypt and the tomb of a Sufi saint are united, merges these different relationships to the world.



**In the film, there is a creature that appears to be materializing this syncretism, this presence of a force of beyond, or below a particular religion.**

It refers to a very popular belief, the idea that the mixture of earth and water gives birth to life. This vision can be found in the Jewish myth of Gilgamesh, of the Golem, as well as in Chinese and Amerindian traditions. This phantasmatic creature is what inspires the construction that the main character Maher is building, a construction that I did not want to define too precisely, but which somehow embodies this idea.

**This motif of mud can be found in several of your works, including the one that has just been awarded at the Venice Biennale: *Of Men and Gods and Mud*.**

Of course, mud is an exciting material, a hybridization that is both very simple and very rich in possibilities. Humans have made countless uses of it. We use it for healing, for housing, and of course to create. It is also a very durable material. A chunk of mud is like a time capsule that allows extraordinary journeys.

**The film features daring cinematographic choices, especially in terms of mise-en-scène.**

I hope so, but this is not the result of a strategy, or an aesthetic project decided in advance.

I tried to find the appropriate cinematic answer to those questions. I didn't think in terms of style. During the shooting, as during the editing, the choices seemed always obvious to me. If *The Dam* has its own language, it is because, and this is what I believe and hope, it imposed itself on me under the influence of places, lights, and materials, without having looked for particular references in the history of cinema.

**An important dimension of the film concerns the wound in the back of Maher, the main character.**

The wound is an important motif in all my work, for personal reasons and related to an illness I had as a child that left a deep scar for a long time.

The wound for me is a place of passage between the interior and the exterior. It is the circulation between the body and the world. Sometimes I have used the classic image of the disbelief of Saint Thomas, the finger in the wound, as the moment of an encounter, a suffering, a disturbance. This motif is also at the heart of what I am currently presenting at the National Gallery, with the title, borrowed from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* 'If you prick us, shall we not bleed?'

**Who are the people that we see in the film?**

They are all people who live and work there. Including the boss, who plays himself. But I have nonetheless fictionalized the situation a little. Among the workers many are Manasir who were chased off their land by the construction of the dam but have remained in the vicinity. They have no other means of living than the brickworks or becoming gold diggers, which many of them try to do. But not Maher, who, unlike the others, loves his work. While there is a high turnover among the brickmakers, he stays and trains the newcomers. He has a very intense relationship with these places and practices. He invested a lot in the film. We basically made it together. We became very close and maintain a frequent exchange on WhatsApp. And of course, he will be with me in Cannes for the premiere of the film.





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● *The Dam*, 2022 - feature

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Cannes, Directors' Fortnight

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● *The Digger*, 2015 - short

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CPH:DOX (2015)

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New Vision Prize - Rotterdam Film Festival (2016)

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Imagine Science Festival (2016)

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Ann Arbor Festival (2016)

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Cinéma du Réel (2016)

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New Directors/New Films (2016)

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● *The Disquiet*, 2013 - short

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Toronto International Film Festival (2013)

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Dubai International Film Festival (2013) - Best Director Prize

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Videobrasil, Southern Panorama (2013) - Honorable Mention

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