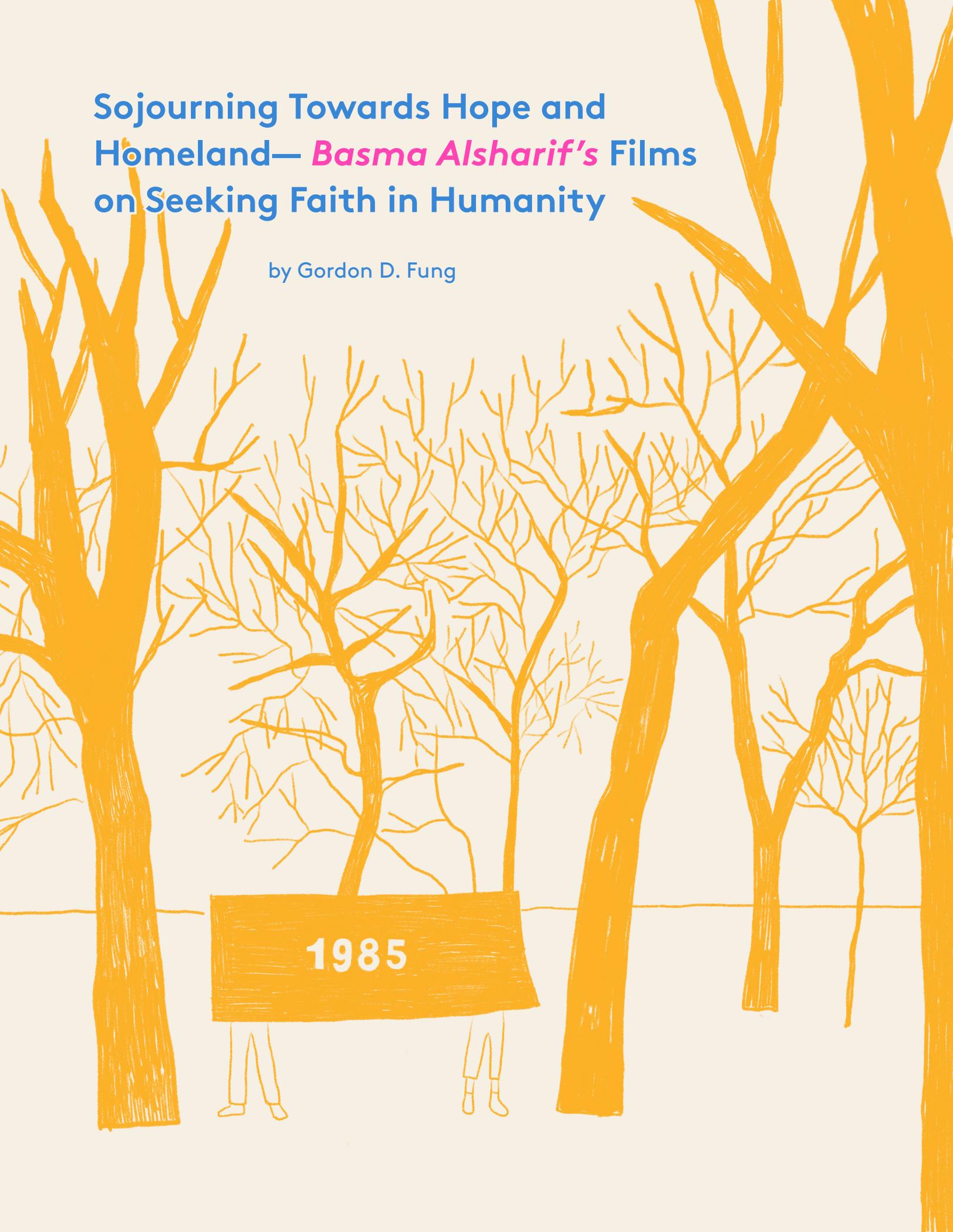


Sojourning Towards Hope and Homeland— *Basma Alsharif's* Films on Seeking Faith in Humanity

by Gordon D. Fung



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Basma Alsharif is a nomadic filmmaker and artist born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents. She was raised in France and the U.S. away from her geographical root. Her never-ending sojourn during the year of consolidation inspired her to explore and question the meaning of home. Though Alsharif's family resides in the Gaza Strip, she is physically disconnected from this region. Instead of retelling the never-ending military conflicts the Gaza residents encounter, Alsharif examines the oppression, injustice, and suffering of humanity in a more general sense. Alsharif presented her works in the Voices in Moving Image Series—a lecture series organized by Alison O'Daniel in the CCA Graduate Film department.



A screenshot of *We Began by Measuring Distance*, 2009, from Alsharif's presentation

We Began by Measuring Distance (2009) was Alsharif's first work after graduating from the MFA program in School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois, Chicago. This video is part of the program in the 9th edition of Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. After her graduation, she resided in Cairo, Beirut, and Amman. She worked at a news agency and developed an interest working with news footage and documentaries. This 19-minute single-channel video consists of long still frames, news footage, text, voiceover, and sound. The theme addresses the conflicts between Al-Aqsa Intifada and Gaza in Palestine, ongoing since 2000. Witnessing the ceaseless conflicts and warfare, she is disheartened as nothing has improved for a whole decade.



A screenshot of *We Began by Measuring Distance*, 2009, from Alsharif's presentation

The work opens on an ominous cityscape, unsettled by sirens and wailing children. After the opening, the voiceover, spoken in an Arabic dialect, narrates the rest of the video. The storytelling reveals the backdrop where the sojourner encounters boredom on their journey searching for home. The journey leads to a “game of measurement” to pass the time. In the game, two anonymous people, whose faces are never shown, walk towards the foreground from a far distance as a staged performance. The casts carry and stretch a blanket in a woodland as a metaphor to measure the distance between two spots.

The narrator starts to describe the distance between ordinary objects like an apple and an orange; and later he depicts the distance between cities such as Rome and Geneva, Geneva and Madrid, Madrid and Oslo, among others. These comparisons appear neutral and nonsensical at first. However, when the narrator compares the distance between Gaza to Jerusalem, the tension rises. This tension is also dramatized by setting gradually lengthening pauses between the voiceover. When the voiceover illustrates the distance between Palestine and Jerusalem, the political implication becomes evident. The English-translated caption text shows that the distance shrinks from 78, to 67, 48, and eventually, 17 kilometers. This series of numbers then loops back and crossfades into the counting of years from 1967 to 2009, suggesting the timespan of conflicts in Palestine.

After this “measuring game,” the video plays some unrelated footage of an old-growth forest and an underwater scene in an aquarium. The biodiversity appears peaceful and contrasts to the satirical measuring game. Suddenly, the air raid footage of missile bombing the city interrupts the tranquil scene of the joyful jellyfish dance as a cutaway. The clips then alternate between the aquarium and warfare. The aquarium fish appear frozen, but then twitch in a loop for a few seconds. This glitch crossfades into the final scene: news footage of a Palestinian woman is displayed in slow motion. She wails to the reporter, querying who they are to record the devastating scene after the attack. This question not only targets the agency of who shot the footage, but also the world that is constantly watching this endless conflict in Palestine.

This hopeless and disparate shout echoes the opening scene where the sound of a screaming child engulfs the city’s soundscape. That soundtrack came from news footage Alsharif watched with her family in the back in 2006. The television broadcasted a young girl in Gaza screaming to find her father until she found his corpse covered with blood. This tragic footage looped ceaselessly in the Palestinian news broadcast. This endless torture brought her and the family heavy sighs, sadness, anger, dismay, and apathy. Through the use of news footage and archival documentaries, Alsharif interrogates what the images in the news represent, and what images affect the victims and the audience. In this endeavor, Alsharif tries to move beyond a personal or cultural tale to express a message that resonates universally.



A screenshot of We Began by Measuring Distance, 2009, from Alsharif's presentation

Continuing her homage to Palestine, Alsharif presented the trailer of *Ouroboros* (2017), a 77-minute feature-length experimental film, which premiered at the 70th Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland. An ouroboros is a mythological symbol of a snake encircling itself and swallowing its own tail. It symbolizes the lack of beginnings and ends. This cyclic and endless form is not unlike the never-ending conflicts and warfare in Palestine, as well as the birth, death, renewal, and destruction in the area. Alsharif explores the concept of eternal return as a hope to acquire a place for a peaceful home through sojourn.



A screenshot of *Ouroboros*, 2017, from Alsharif's presentation

Taking the Gaza Strip as the point of departure, the trailer shows drone footage over the heavily ruined enclave, where a man stands over the collapsed buildings. This heartbroken man embarks on multiple journeys to shed his emotional pain. In this film, the protagonist walks across different landscapes: the Gaza strip, a Breton castle, Matera in Italy, and the Mojave Desert. Though he attempts to get rid of his internal wounds, he is trapped in the perpetual cycle of pain. This cynical and nihilist storyline is not unlike the situation in Palestine. However, Alsharif believes the only way to “get out” of such eternal pain is to forget the wounded past and move forward. Failures in history, civilization, and humanity are nowhere near extinction, yet Alsharif's films urge us to reexamine how well-planned storytelling can guide us to rebuild trust and home with hope and faith.

Gordon Fung is a transdisciplinary artist who works across various fields, including: installation, music composition, sound art, video art, multi-/ new media, experimental and conceptual arts, etc. With the use of unconventional materials like noises, lo-fi presentations, and glitches, his immersive and synaesthetic works challenge the viewers to expand their experiential horizon.