

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Experiencing a dream without sleeping

By Matthew Mosley

Review

BEIRUT: We've all learnt to be wary of listening to others recount their dreams. What seems dramatic and profound to the dreamer usually turns pretty turgid in the telling.

Despite the tedium of listening to other people's dreams, filmmakers have grappled with the challenge of creating a dream experience, often to compelling effect. From the whacked-out visions of David Lynch in "Mulholland Drive" to the more conventional high jinks of Christopher Nolan's "Inception," dreams have proved a productive muse.

Wednesday evening saw the first Beirut performance of "Aegri Somnia" (A Sick Man's Dream) to a capacity crowd at the Beirut Art Center, Jisr al-Wati's best-loved art space.

A collaboration between electronic musician Jawad Nawfal (whose recent output has been produced under the name of Munma) and photographer Caroline Tabet, the work simulates an individual's confused mingling of memory and reverie.

Originally performed at Avignon Festival in 2009, "Aegri Somnia" was instigated when festival organizers asked Nawfal to work on a marriage of music and video. Using Tabet's archive of video footage, the pair began to work on layering images with sound.

The resulting 40-minute performance is an elusive yet absorbing work, eschewing narrative yet conveying an uneasy journey into dark corners of the psyche.

Working with a number of previously composed tracks, including the titular "Aegri Somnia" from Munma's 2008 album "Unholy Republic," Nawfal's contribution was typically uncompromising. Using a laptop and several touch-sensitive synthesizers, he conjured a troubled soundscape of industrial groans, juddering beats and dystopian clankings and hissings.

Nawfal is impressive, however, in his ability to suggest a variety of subtle moods without altering his distinctive aesthetic. Washes of synth reminiscent of Vangelis' soundtrack for "Blade Runner" lent a warmer tone at various moments. Sounds of scratching and clicking were blended with sampled song and piped melody, softening Nawfal's rumblings from the electronic abyss.

Such moments intensified the darkness later on. Although not a beat-heavy set, Nawfal let loose

at various points with pounding, insistent rhythms that could hardly be contained by the modest interior of the BAC auditorium.

Tabet's videos were an intriguing counterpoint. A blend of grainy black-and-white Super-8 film with digital footage, the video element was divided into a series of thematic movements.

A frequent motif was the angular skyline of Beirut. Looking down at the city from what appeared to be a great height, Tabet's lens has an omniscient yet lonely perspective, like the view from a satellite camera or a disembodied sprite.

The cityscape of Cairo also made an appearance. A bird's-eye view of traffic streaming back and forth across the Nile was intercut with shady characters lurking under the bridges.

Sometimes Tabet's footage approached abstraction. Rooftop vistas of chimneys, television aerials and telephone cables formed chaotic grids against the pale sky.

One segment was surprisingly pastoral. Wind-tousled grasses dipped in and out of the frame. Delicate flowers trembled as the sun shone through their petals.

Perhaps referencing Luis Bunuel's dream-inspired masterpiece "Un Chien Andalou," Tabet repeatedly screened an extreme close-up of an eye, disturbingly unfamiliar as it blinked and glanced on a monumental scale.

The interaction between Tabet's images and Nawfal's music was pleasingly subtle. Glitches and blasts of interference would manifest as flickers and blips on screen. As the music morphed from one passage to the next, the images would overexpose or fade out.

As "Aegri Somnia" drew to a close, the husk of Beirut's Charles Helou bus station hove into view on screen. Immense, disused and full of dark corners, the edifice formed an ideal architectural expression of this unsettling, melancholic dream-vision.

Munma tracks can be heard at www.myspace.com/munma. To learn more about Caroline Tabet, visit www.engrambeirut.com.

Copyrights 2011, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved

04/03/2011