

Shedding Light on the Cinema of Palestine

The Palestine Film Institute



By Salma Abu Ayyash

For more than 50 years, Palestinian cinema has narrated, documented, and visualized the resilience, struggles, and memories of a homeland and its people. Despite being sometimes a footnote, a reference, or a place of experimentation in the scope of world cinema, it has managed to bring world attention to the reality of this reflection. It offered

a stage for the everyday Palestinian struggle, sparking a collective imagination that never ceased its connection to the land and what it means to be Palestinian – and therefore was never colonized. Indeed, the Palestinian people remain steadfast in their struggle, not only to survive, but also to thrive as artists and producers of knowledge and experiences.

Given the hardships of being a colonized people, the lack of proper attention from distributors worldwide, and the limited resources available for Palestinians making films – Palestine, for example, doesn't have a national fund for film development – Palestinian films are a hard birth. The Palestine Film Institute (PFI) aims to support filmmakers in this endeavor. As an international organization that supports film productions from and for Palestine, it has taken on a considerable responsibility: to provide development and consultancy, increase accessibility to funding, connect film talents and experts, and develop the infrastructures to accomplish their mission.

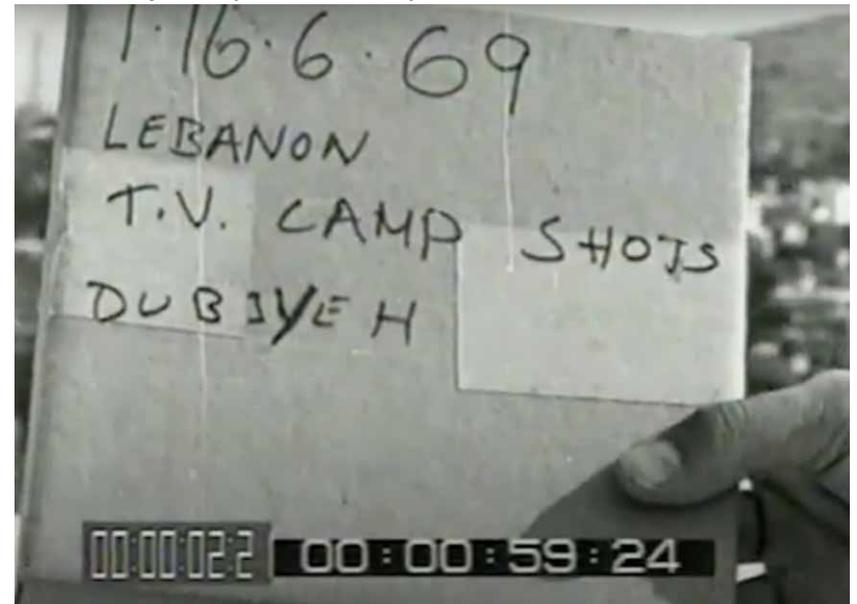
Palestinians have been engaged in the struggle of locating and preserving Palestine's collective cinematic memory and recovering films that were looted, hidden, or forgotten during the last century.

While driving from Brussels to Paris, Muhanad Yaqubi, a Palestinian filmmaker, producer, and one of the founders of the PFI, reflected on the importance of a Palestinian cinematic archive as a historical record that must be preserved. Ironically, the purpose of his car trip was to foster a collaboration with the Institut National du Archive (INA) to train PFI organizers in archiving and restoration techniques of 16- and 35-mm films. Mohanad recalls coming across *The Tokyo Palestine Film Reels* during a trip to Japan. The reels turned out to be a collection of films that addressed the question of Palestine, made by an international group of filmmakers. Some of the first films sent to that archive were captured by Masao Adachi and Koji Wakamatsu, who were on the ground during the Palestinian Revolution of the 1970s, representing the Japanese Red Army (JRA) alongside the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). These films speak to a transnational,

revolutionary, and anti-colonial solidarity movement and document a connection that has been obscured for decades.

The PFI's archival research efforts are a continuation of the revolutionary and cinematic efforts of many before them, most significantly, the monumental project by Khadijeh Habashneh, who founded the Palestinian Cinema Institution (PCI) Archive in Lebanon in the 1970s. The PCI Archive is believed to have been looted by the Israeli army during the invasion of Lebanon. The first evidence of this looting was

Still Image- Recovery Films from Israelu Army- File no25.



— and possibly in
narrow passages —

Still Image from Scene of occupation of Gaza- Mustafa Abu Ali- 1973- T.

the surfacing of two films from the Cultural Arts Section in Beirut – a PLO organization run by the late Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout – from the Israeli Defense Forces Archive (IDFA) that has tight control over access to its materials, and certainly Palestinians are not given access. Looting as an act of colonial aggression or war is nothing new. Israeli homes, museums, and antique shops are filled with Palestinian art, furniture, and artifacts. An example is the documented plundering of ancient Palestinian sites by Moshe Dayan, who served as Israel's defense minister and foreign affairs minister. The theft of close to 7,500 artifacts is chronicled in the film *Theft of Fire* that is currently in the making, co-produced by Rashid Abdelhamid, a founder and organizer at PFI. Notable also is Israel's great book robbery in which close to 70,000 books were looted from Palestinian homes and institutions during the 1948 *Nakba*; they are currently held in Israel's National Library.¹¹ Similar to other settler colonial projects, the deliberate destruction of Palestinian cultural institutions that range from film archives to libraries,

schools, and universities is a testimony to the hegemonic necessity of erasure by a power bent on replacing the indigenous inhabitants of the land.

Mohanad's interest in reviving cinematic memories, stories, and historical records of Palestine is not new. His film *Off Frame AKA Revolution Until Victory* (2015), where he pieces together archival footage of recollected films, is one of a few Palestinian cinematic acts of resistance and a contemplation on the attempts at erasure. Before that, filmmaker Azza El Hassan documented her search for missing archives in her film *Kings and Extras: Digging for a Palestinian Image* (2004), which led her to literally dig in graveyards in Lebanon upon rumored tales of the films' whereabouts. *Tel El Zaatar* (1977), a film by Mustafa Abu Ali, Pino Adriano, and Jean Chamoun that documents a massacre in which 2,000 Palestinians were killed, was one film of about 200 reels that were smuggled by Mustafa Abu Ali and Rhanda Chahal through the Italian Communist Party to Rome during the invasion of Lebanon.

Artist and filmmaker Emily Jacir, in collaboration with Monica Maurer who worked in the PLO Film Unit in the 1970s, carried out the impossible act of restoring these reels, which included the heart-wrenching discovery that many films disintegrated into dust upon removing the canisters' lids. The restored film premiered in Jordan's Darat al Funun in 2015. It reconstructs the history of Tel El Zaatar Camp and tells the story of the destruction and the resistance of its inhabitants through the recollection of those who survived the massacre. This restoration includes severely damaged fragments that tell their own stories of surviving and resisting erasure; fragments which Jacir refused to discard, saying she would "find a story in a grain of dust."¹²

The FilmTek, is a PFI initiative that collaborates with cinema houses such as CINEMATEK in Brussels, and Cinémathèque Française in Paris, to recirculate Palestinian film collections, with a focus on locating and cataloguing previously lost or stolen films. Two such efforts are underway: A digitized archive of Palestinian films that were looted and hidden by the Israeli government, in particular during the invasion of Lebanon, has been recently made available by an anonymous Israeli filmmaker with limited access to the Israeli Defense Forces Archives. The PFI is collaborating with other researchers and filmmakers as part of an effort to inventory these films and reclaim their history by telling the stories and the details of the time and place of their making. Another collection that the PFI is cataloguing with a more positive spin on its history is the aforementioned *Tokyo Palestine Film Reels*, comprising films made by British, Italian, German, Palestinian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Japanese filmmakers

that document an era of collective transnational history of revolutionary filmmaking. The PFI believes that unearthing this memory and making it available is critical for putting in context the colonial machinations of continued erasures.

With no institutional address to support film development and dissemination, the PFI as an organization has a unique access to enable it to plug Palestinian filmmakers and producers into the appropriate film circuits for the necessary connections to bring Palestinian films to life. Most notable and for the fifth year in a row, the PFI, in collaboration with Cannes Docs 2022, is organizing the Palestine Showcase at Marché du Film and the Producer's Spotlight for four selected documentary filmmakers and producers to participate in the festival. Feature films that were produced with the help of PFI and Cannes Doc include *Ibrahim* by Lina Al-Abed, *Their Algeria* by Lina Soualem, *As I Want* by Samaher Alqadi, and *Devil Drivers* by Mohamed Abu Ghaith.

Other efforts include regular participation in the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (IDFA), with five selected Palestinian films this year; a social program called Finjan Qahwah (A Cup of Coffee) that provides free



Cinematic Dialogs 4-ENG.

consultations with PFI film experts and is open to any filmmaker or producer working in Palestine; and a student exchange program in filmmaking between INSAS (Institut Supérieur des Arts) in Brussels and Dar al-Kalima in Bethlehem. The PFI also holds regular Cinematic Dialogues that feature conversations with filmmakers across the globe. These conversations are streamed on their Instagram and Facebook platforms, reaching 6,000+ and 12,000+ viewers, respectively.

Sadly, however, most Palestinian films have a short lifespan that is often limited to festival circuits, despite their success and their positive reception in festivals. This limited exposure to viewership is central among the concerns of the institute's organizers. Recognizing the importance of online streaming in the culture of film viewing, the PFI made available, free-of-charge, an independent film-screening platform, the Palestine Film Platform (PFP). Secured by the organizers' efforts and their valuable connections as producers and filmmakers with distributors

worldwide, the PFI was able to secure many films from distribution houses and bring them to screens. This past March, it launched the third season of the PFP, with weekly free screenings of Palestinian films. It also recently succeeded in becoming part of NAAS, a network of nongovernmental cinema screens in the Arabic-speaking region with viewers worldwide. This season, NAAS features the PFI films that include directors such as Elia Suleiman, Annemarie Jacir, and Michel Khleifi among many others.

By re-circulating and re-distributing these films, the PFI platform has become an official archive of Palestine's cinema, post-1990s and post-Oslo. In essence, this platform constitutes the third archival project of the PFI FilmTek (in addition to the Tokyo reels and the looted IDFA archives). So, in the end, PFI organizers realized that central to the PFI mission of developing, preserving, and circulating films is their FilmTek program. Recognizing the importance of such an archival process, they decided to create the



Palestinian Film Festivals meeting-Festival du Cannes 2019

organization, the archive, and the necessary infrastructure to make visible Palestine's cinematic culture from a position in exile in Brussels, out of reach of a brutal colonial entity. If history is to be heeded, that's a wise decision.

The Palestine Film Institute (PFI) is at the helm of making Palestinian films visible and accessible. Established in 2019, as a nongovernmental, nonprofit, independent organization, it is one of a few Palestinian organizations that are rooted in the tradition of committed cinema and use independent films as a tool to create social change and awakening. PFI's mission and goals revolve around the belief that cinema, as an artistic form of expression, has the potential to change lives, and that

Palestinian films, from the cracks and margins of world cinema, can be a prism that can refract the experiences of the oppressed everywhere. Check out the PFI and follow it everywhere.

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Palestinian Film Platform- Season 2

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ⁱ Ed Meza, "Theft of Fire" to Take Back Palestine's Cultural Heritage (EXCLUSIVE)," Variety, April 27, 2021, available at <https://variety.com/2021/global/news/theft-of-fire-amer-shomali-rashid-abdelhamid-ina-fichman-intuitive-pictures-cphdox-1234960600/>.

ⁱⁱ Benny Brunner, The Great Book Robbery, available via Aljazeera, Witness, May 24, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/witness/2012/5/24/the-great-book-robbery>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nathan Geyer, "Find a Story in a Grain of Dust": the Search for Palestine's Lost Cinema," Frieze, November 28, 2018, available at <https://www.frieze.com/article/find-story-grain-dust-search-palestines-lost-cinema>.