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THE PALESTINE CAUSE IN THE CINEMA


Reviewed by Soraya Antonius*

The first inter-Arab meeting to concern itself, peripherally, with Palestine in the cinema was held early in 1970 in Amman, a spin-off from the official conference on radio and TV. The handful of documentary films shown there barely filled two afternoons. Two years later, at the international festival of the "other cinema" in Damascus, a special section, "Palestine on the Screen," ran concurrently for the five days of the festival, and the critics' prize was awarded to a feature film on the Palestinian resistance. And a year after that, in Baghdad, the International Festival of Films on Palestine ran for five days of continuous showings, eight hours a day, of documentaries, shorts and TV films from the Arab world, Europe and the US, while several commercial cinemas in the city showed features with Palestine as their subject.

And yet, from 1956 until 1967 no film produced in Egypt, by far the most important centre of Arab film industry, had referred to any aspect of the Palestine question. (And before 1956 the few feature films concerned with the subject, so central to decades of Egyptian history, were melodramas in which brave young Egyptian soldiers married weeping Palestinian heroines who promptly settled into Egyptian domesticity and forgot their country.)

At first sight the reason for this extraordinary neglect lasting over twenty years would seem to be a lack of popular interest, pessimism and shame on the part of producers and directors. The productions of Egypt's Misr Studios have always been resolutely aimed at making money, rather than art or thought, and it would seem that mass audiences in the Arab world were simply indifferent to the Palestine problem until the rise of the resistance and the romanticization of the Battle of Karameh (1968). But even if there is some

* Soraya Antonius was the scriptwriter and producer of "Limatha al-Muqawama?" (Resistance — Why?).
truth in this, it does not appear to be the only reason. During this same twenty-year period no feature film was produced that seriously treated any of Egypt's political or social problems. No film for mass audiences dealt with the last days of the monarchy, or the British in the Canal Zone, or the agrarian land reform, or even the tripartite attack of 1956 in anything but the most superficial way. The two exceptions are revealing in their subject matter: "Djamila" being about the Algerian War of Independence, and "Salahedin," although clearly referring to twentieth-century imperialism and Gamal Abdul Nasser's struggle against the new Crusaders, was protectively cloaked in the past.

Censorship, rather than the public's indifference, has been the stumbling block. It still is. Of the three outstanding feature films on Palestine, not one has been shown in all the Arab countries; one has been commercially shown nowhere at all; and the other two, after being released in Algeria, Syria and Iraq, have had to depend on European film festivals and politically committed cinemas in the various European capitals. Even Yusuf Shahin, the well-known and admired Egyptian director, faced this problem when he made "Al-'Usfour," (The Bird) on the 1967 war.

He could not get financial backing for it in Egypt, although his previous films had enjoyed commercial as well as critical success and the film, co-produced by Algeria, was only released in Egypt after the 1973 war and the infitab. It requires a burning sense of commitment for a producer to finance a film that will not be shown in its natural markets, for a director to devote months to a work that few people will ever see. To the honour of Arab cinéastes this commitment, not to say foolhardiness, does find expression, but at the cost of years of enforced silence. "Al-Makhdu'un" (The Duplicates), the most thoughtful film on the Palestine situation to date, was completed in 1971: since then Tewfik Saleh has not made another film. Burhan Alawiyeh, a young Lebanese, made his first feature on the Israeli massacre of Arabs at Kafr Kassem in 1956, a subject which can hardly be construed as implicit criticism of any Arab regime, but the film has been shown only in Algeria, Syria and Iraq, and its director has worked on documentaries ever since. Christian Ghazi's "Mi'at Wijh la Yom Wahed" (A Hundred Faces for a Single Day) was finished in 1971: it has not yet been released in any Arab country. All three films have won international awards, while their directors have been reduced to silence. Even a straightforward action film like the Algerian Selim Riad's "Sana'oud" (We Shall Return) has sunk like a stone.

What are the censors so frightened of? "Al-Makhdu'un" is critical of all Arab countries twenty-five years ago and specifically of Jordan, Iraq (which
nevertheless released the film) and Kuwait. But above all it condemns the attitudes then widespread among Palestinians and its most savage contempt is reserved for the Palestinian leadership, or lack of it, in 1948 and immediately after. Intellectually lucid, it does not mobilize politically by being “exaltant,” as Saleh has said, “but by making the public reflect.”

Another reason for this long absence may have been despair. Tewfiq Saleh mentions here that in the week following the battle of Karamleh four film projects on the Palestine cause were submitted to the state-controlled Egyptian cinema organization. And in Lebanon a spate of shamelessly commercial feature films attempted to exploit the popular appeal of the resistance and undoubtedly succeeded in causing it much harm. Hassan Abu-Ghanima says, rightly, that one cannot be too harsh in condemning these lamentable “mujaddarab westerns” which presented the fedayeen as invincible Tarzans in a keffiyeh.

Also, until 1968, when a Palestinian film unit was established by Fateh, all available images of the Palestine struggle — the Mandate and occupation, the rebellion of 1936-39, the 1948 war and subsequent dismembering of the country, the exile, the 1967 war and the fall of Jerusalem — all were recorded from a foreign point of view, most commonly by the colonizers and attackers themselves. These were primarily concerned with self-justification, so the pictures they give of events in Palestine are seriously distorted, when they are not downright lies. As Serge Le Péron observes (p. 45), in collecting these old films, these fragments of a national memory, Palestinian cinéastes are faced with a major problem: the Zionists had to deny the existence of the indigenous population, so they “absented” them from the images of the new colony, the “land without a people.” Nor were the British mandatory authorities much better: while actively discouraging potentially neutral observers (a role American news reporters might have played in the 1930’s) the documentary film stock produced under their control is not only heavily biased in their own favour but blind to aspects and events that were of prime importance to the Palestinians. Nor were independent photographers or newsreel film-makers allowed to record the opposition and popular resistance to the mandatory policies. It is sometimes forgotten in the West that the French and the British imposed as stifling a censorship on the countries under their “protection” as anything that followed independence.

1 It is incorrect to suggest (p. 41) that Ghassan Kanafani was referring to Gamal Abdul-Nasser in the original novel, Rjal fi al-Shams (Men in the Sun), which was written in 1962.
2 Mujaddarah is a common lentil-based Arab dish. The reference is the Arabic equivalent to criticisms of Italian-produced “spaghetti-westerns.”
Even after 1948 there is little archive material. The Egyptians made some documentaries, and UNRWA compiled a great deal on the refugee camps, much of it of outstanding technical quality, but pruned of anything that any UN member state — and Israel is a member of the UN— might consider “political.”

Unfortunately no Palestinian or Jordanian recorded the nineteen years on the West Bank, the appalling Israeli attacks on Qibya and Qalqilya, for example, or the official founding of the PLO and the Palestine National Council in Jerusalem, or the pioneering efforts that turned the Ghor into a richly productive oasis. After the Israelis invaded the West Bank and Jerusalem in 1967, and a new wave of young film-makers began to grapple with the subject, this was to prove a major difficulty.

There are many others, and several contributors to this book discuss them. Ezzeddin Kalak, of the PLO, speaks in his preface of “internal hesitation” due to the fact that this form of creation, of self-expression, is not as inherently familiar as a traditional form such as poetry; and Burhan Alawiyeh maintains that the Arab cinema has not yet found its own rhythm, referring to Hassan Fathy’s theory that the manner in which every civilization inscribes letters on a white surface is distinctive, the style reveals a rhythm which is particular to each (p. 156). In a culture which customarily buys films by weight, in which the producer makes a larger margin of profit from a film weighing three kilos of which at least 1200 grammes are songs and dances than from a “skinny” film of two and a half kilos—in such a culture, or mercantile tradition, IDHEC graduates will certainly find incorporation difficult.

There is also the evident temptation to aim at the art et essai audiences of Europe, both from personal inclination and because political censorship is so likely to bar the film to Arab audiences. One of Kalak’s “external obstacles,” Western ethnocentrism, “which either denies the cultural reality of colonized peoples, or relegates it to the rank of an exotic and sterile folklore,” is much less true than it was ten years ago, not only for Algerian, Senegalese or Bengali films, but also for Palestine — if only we had the films. The student revolt of 1968, the advent of the New Left, the changing attitudes to racism have produced new audiences, if they have not changed the old. Mustafa Abu-Ali seems much nearer the mark with his “cinematographic orien-

3 In Haifa Saleh al-Kayyali and a group did make some documentaries in the 1930’s, which are apparently still in existence, although their whereabouts are in some doubt. Kayyali also shot footage in Gaza on the Palestine Liberation Army in 1964. Jordan started a film unit in 1965 or 1966, for which Hani Jawharrriyya filmed on the West Bank, but the unit’s prime purpose was to record royal events.
talism” which leads the Palestinian or Arab cinéaste to treat the Palestine problem from an external, foreign point of view because he has not understood the cultural effects of colonialism and is therefore acculturated to foreign models. Anyone who has seen a few dozen Arab films on Palestine will agree, and it is interesting that Abu-Ali himself made the most ideologically intelligent (from a nationalist point of view) film that the resistance has yet produced. “Scenes of Occupation in Gaza” turns the enemy’s weapons against himself in the simplest and most convincing manner. It presents an emotional truth in such a way as to be intellectually unanswerable, yet it is not at all an intellectual film in the elitist sense. (Compare it with “Nahnou bi Kheir” (We’re All Well) which uses roughly similar means to achieve the opposite effect, depressive rather than galvanizing.)

The first Palestinian cinema unit was established in Amman after the 1967 war, under the auspices of Fateh. It was richer in political commitment than in money, its processing laboratory was a small kitchen and its first film, “No to the Defeatist Solution” (1969), was screened for its sponsors on the rubble wall of an underground shelter. In 1972 its production of “Bi al-Ruh, bi al-Dam” (With my Spirit, With my Blood) was awarded a prize at the Damascus festival, the first time Palestine was mentioned as a nation at a film festival. Other film units were set up by the PFLP in 1971, the PLO (1972) and the Democratic Front (1973). This book does not mention it, but in fact the Fifth of June Society was first in the field with “Al Quds” (Jerusalem) in 1968. In Damascus the state-run Cinema Organism4 was placed under the direction of Hamid Mer’e who provided help and support for all the young cinéastes. He is only referred to once in this book but everyone involved in those years owes him a real debt of gratitude, and during his tenure he made Damascus the capital of the new political cinema. But after his transfer in 1974 the Organism suspended all activity, and has only recently reopened.

In the West the first anti-Zionist films were produced after 1968; there are still only a handful, twenty to twenty-five, made for non-commercial distribution (or at any rate, that is what they got). To date there is only one pro-resistance western feature: Jean-Luc Godard’s “Ici et Ailleurs,” (Here and There) shot in Jordan in 1969-70 and released in 1976 after six years of rumours, mysteries and self-doubts, the greatest single disappointment to the hopes of the Palestinian film world. All other western films have vied in their attempts to out-zionize Zion, and projects such as “The Brothers” that attempt a show of impartiality evaporate with coincidental regularity. (One

4 This is the official English title of the organization.
possible exception is "The Jerusalem File," not mentioned in this book, which may originally have been intended to be "fair," but which was so mutilated to appease Israeli objections that its final form was perfectly incomprehensible.) Zionist influence remains all-powerful in the western cinema, particularly when it comes to distribution. The few cinemas in Paris that have risked financial loss to show pro-Palestinian films have all received bomb threats, one cinema that refused to submit to blackmail and continued to show "Ici et Ailleurs" was attacked in October 1976. Britain and North America have preempted the threat by never showing any pro-Palestinian film at all.5

La Palestine et le Cinema, edited by Guy Hennebelle and Khemais Khayati, is a communal effort with contributions by and interviews with the cinéastes engaged in the Palestine question; as the first such compilation it is essential reading for the Arab film world and ought to be published in Arabic. If and when it is, the very useful filmography could perhaps be amended to include some surprising omissions: Cranmer's "Kuneitra," Sturken's film on Jerusalem, and several UNRWA films, "Bridge on the Jordan," "Peace is more than a Dream," "Until such a Time" (coproduced with Oxfam). And why is "Al-Ard" (The Earth) not included, when Shahin says quite explicitly (p. 99) that it is "also a contemporary parable of the destiny of Palestine"?

5 A two-and-a-half hour documentary, Vanessa Redgrave's and Roy Battersby's "The Palestinian," was due to be released in London before the end of 1977.