Review of Middle East Studies (2023), **57**, 192–201
doi:10.1017/rms.2024.27

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Liberatory Images: A Palestinian Film Series

Nandini Sikand

Lafayette College, PA, USA.
Email: sikandn@lafayette.edu

Keywords: Palestinian Cinema; film series; Lafayette College

> *"[O]n the one hand, Palestinians stand against invisibility, which is the fate they have resisted since the beginning; and on the other hand, they stand against the stereotype in the media: the masked Arab, the kufiyya, the stone-throwing Palestinian – a visual identity associated with terrorism and violence."*
>
> – Edward W. Said, Preface, *Dreams of a Nation*[1]

In late October 2023, alongside two historians and an anthropologist, I co-organized and spoke at a teach-in on my home campus of Lafayette College, titled *Thinking Through Palestine: Perspectives from Anthropology, History and Film and Media Studies.* Held over the lunch hour, this was one of the first and most visible events our campus community held in the wake of October 7. The large room overflowed with students, faculty, staff, and administrators. After each of the four faculty members on the panel gave 12-minute presentations – on the history of the region, settler-colonialism in Palestine, a comparison with U.S. settler-colonialism, and how to critically read relevant media examples – we opened up a space for conversation with the audience. The first response came from a retired full professor who, positioning himself as a presenter, stood at the front of the room for several minutes and accused the panelists of "shoddy and pernicious" scholarship. Although we attempted to engage his critique, we soon realized there was no room for meaningful discussion. Most audience members were cowed and afraid to speak up, including members of the administration. Panelists and others

[1] Edward Said, "Preface," in *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, ed. Hamid Dabashi (London: Verso, 2006), 3.

tried to intervene, but after a few more questions, the teach-in ended, the hostile takeover attempt lingering. Immediately following the event, several students, faculty, and staff members expressed privately to me and my co-presenters that they were appalled at the retired professor's incendiary comments and behavior while also insisting they had learned a great deal from the teach-in. I provide this incident as a partial context and impetus for initiating a Palestinian film series at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania.

With the siege on Gaza well underway, made worse by a decades-long project of ideological disinformation and erasure found across most of higher education and mainstream media, I collaborated with my Film and Media Studies colleague Drew Swedberg and a student, Ari Ismail, to organize a Palestinian Film Series. The series began at the end of fall 2023 and continued in spring 2024. It was co-sponsored by the Skillman Library, a few academic departments and programs, the Middle East Studies Association, Pards for Palestine, and the Provost's office. Neither Professor Swedberg nor myself are Middle Eastern or Palestinian film scholars, and we believed it was crucial to screen work by Palestinian filmmakers. We curated an array of films and framed discussions on the history of Palestine and Palestinian cinema, often using interviews with the filmmakers. In some cases, filmmakers provided pre-recorded commentaries or written statements about their film.

At a time when most institutions were (and are still) stifling association with Palestine, canceling academic appointments, and censoring comments about Palestinian liberation, we hoped to address the epistemic violence being generated in the United States by screening work that encompassed the breadth of Palestinian life. While the works included the ongoing violence, lawfare, and dispossession of Palestinian people, this was not the series' only focus. The films were inevitably screened within the context of the Nakba, and also focused on the artistry, wit, humor, aesthetics, and land as well as Palestinian solidarity with other struggles. Or, as Leena Habiballa describes, "to demand not just a break from death, but the full spectrum of life."[2]

Inspired by Edward Said's identification of the Palestinian visual fate of invisibility or reductive, racialized stereotype, a question guiding our curation was, "What constitutes a liberatory image?" This meant selecting works that use cinematic language and film form beyond the codes of conventional cinema, works that pushed the edges of the filmic frame. Each of the four films described below, whether a documentary, fictional narrative hybrid film, or poetic essay, explore realms of visuality; each an example of liberatory cinema that refuses the gaze of the surveillant, ocular lens both in form and content. Instead, the filmmakers give the viewer a gaze of joy and refusal, whether it is through a counter-reading of cinematic codes (Farouky), a foraging camera (Manna), a circular dance ritual (Abed), or the glitch of broken pixels (AlSalah).

[2] Leena Habiballa, "Visualising the Palestinian Struggle: Khadijeh Habashneh and the Palestine Film Unit" *Ultra Dogme*, March 19, 2024: https://ultradogme.com/2024/03/19/khadijeh-habashneh/ Accessed July 11, 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Before discussing each of the films in the series, a brief sketch of Palestinian film history is helpful. All the works[3] showcased in our series are in sharp contrast to early Orientalist images of the region that rely on the Zionist mobilizing fiction, "A land without a people for a people without a land." These Palestinian filmmakers speak of their work as being in conversation with early Palestinian cinema, sometimes referred to as "militant cinema." The Palestinian Film Unit (PFU), founded in Jordan in 1968, was built on other anti-imperialist movements such as those in Cuba, Vietnam, and Angola. PFU filmmakers developed a cinematic language of anti-colonial, anti-Zionist visuality and anti-carceral narratives such that, "[the] birth of this revolutionary, militant cinema is therefore inseparable from the birth of the Palestinian revolution and is deeply wedded to the spirit and freedom dreams that defined that movement."[4]

After the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, much of the archives of the PFU (later renamed the Palestinian Cinema Institute [PCI] in 1976) were scattered and destroyed. The institute "adopted the condition of its makers, becoming fragmented and dispersed globally, with much of it lost without a trace – perhaps seized by the IDF."[5] This aspect is seen in the works of many of the filmmakers, who collaborate across borders with kin but also collapse established boundaries between fiction, archive, memory, documentary, narrative, poetic, and other non-linear categorizations. What we saw in these films and what we thought essential to share, is a deep resistance to colonial classifications. The films enact what novelist Ghassan Kanafani[6] has described as a "conversation between the sword and the neck"[7] – a refusal to engage with the language of colonialization. In these films there is no civility discourse between colonizer and the colonized; there is simply liberation.

Importantly, each film features the land either obliquely or directly. Not just a backdrop, "place" in these films is beyond settler-colonial boundaries and even beyond colonial time. Here, filmmakers are not bringing a place to life, they are engaging with what exists, from the day-to-day vulgarities of encroachment to the ongoing ecocide, and everything in between, the films are an insistence on survival.

In hopes of avoiding some version of what happened at the teach-in, we created the following slide to frame the discussion of each film. The slide remained on the screen as people entered the space and during the post-screening discussion.

[3] A complete list of films screened in alphabetical order:

Effect of All Peoples (Farouky, 2010); *Foragers* (Manna, 2022); *In Vitro* (Lind and Sansour, 2019); *Our Songs Were Ready for All Wars to Come* (Abed, 2021); *Paradisso, XXXI, 108* (Aljafari, 2022); *Scenes of the Occupation from Gaza* (Abou Ali, 1973), *Stitching Palestine* (Mansour, 2017); *Tale of Three Jewels* (Khelefi, 1995); *The Time That Remains* (Suleiman, 2009); and *Your Father was Born 100 Years Old, and So Was the Nakba* (AlSalah, 2017).

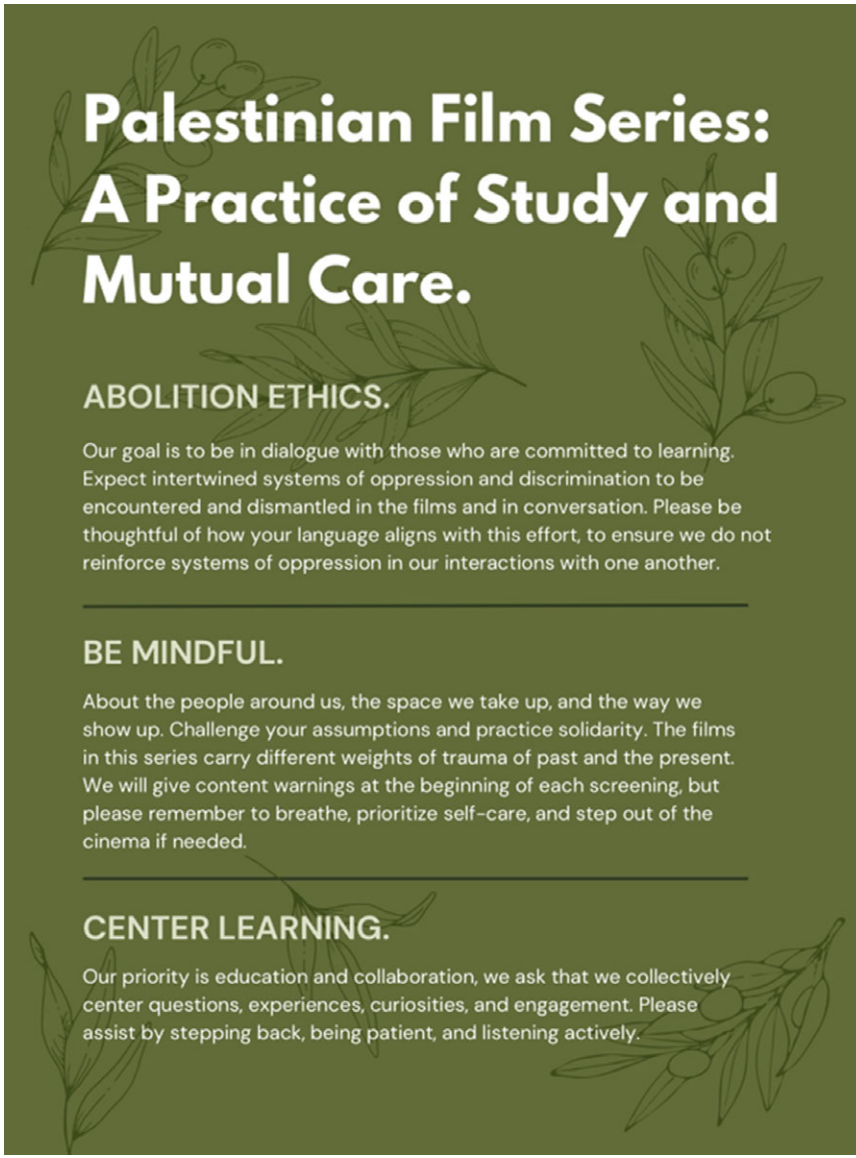
[4] Habiballa, "Visualising the Palestinian Struggle."

[5] Ibid.

[6] Kanafani was a novelist and a spokesperson for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). He was killed alongside his 17-year-old niece in a car bombing by Israelis in 1972.

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHgZdCJOUAk. Accessed July 11, 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Design by Ari Ismail.

I expand on four short films below; each fits easily in a classroom setting. The first film screened was *Effect of All Peoples*[8] (2010, 4:35 minutes) by Saeed Taji Farouky, a Palestinian-Egyptian-British filmmaker and founder of the Radical

[8] https://vimeo.com/23867645. Accessed July 11, 2024

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Film School in London. He describes his work as a distinct vernacular cinema, defined by isolation, denial, loss, and alienation and concerned with "what isn't there." Farouky's framing of his own work helped to curate the series – to show the holes, the absences, and the resistances.

Not quite five minutes in, the opening shots of *Effect of All Peoples* are pointed skyward. We see television antennae and buildings while the camera goes in and out of focus, an eerie reminder of surveillance. We hear traffic and voices as vehicles wipe across the screen obstructing the view momentarily. In silence, a title card asks "What deprives the spirit of its colour?" We hear wind and see sky, an unfocused glimpse of a kite in the air and then another title card: "What can Abu Tawfiq's jeep do in the middle of this absurdity?" We see a kite soaring again and hear wind. A child, a kite. The titles ask "What anniversary after today, Naji, And what birthday after today, Ghassan?"

Via *Effect of All Peoples*, Farouky is in conversation with Lev Kuleshov who is described as the father of Russian cinema. Kuleshov's famed montage experiment from 1918 shows three identical closeups of an actor, Ivan Mosjoukine, juxtaposed alongside three unrelated shots, a woman, a bowl of soup, and a child in a coffin. This was then shown to an audience, as they marveled at his ability to emote, to show us love (woman), hunger (soup), and grief (coffin). Kuleshov ascribed it to the power of montage and it became known as the Kuleshov effect. In other words, we the viewer ascribe meaning to the images and imagine what the actor must be feeling. Farouky asks Kuleshov (and the audience) in his accompanying artist statement:

> Kuleshov, can we not also define a Palestinian cinema and photography unrelated to Palestinian music and poetry? Unencumbered by Palestinian history and politics? Can we not simply create fragments and construct an assembly of those fragments? An interpretation through immediacy and proximity, rather than context? Or will someone still say "everything is political in Palestine?"[9]
>
> "We see a boy. We read a name. We view a landscape. We see a man. We see two children. A valley. A kite. A bicycle. A wall." The emotions are yours, not theirs. Not mine.

In the film, Farouky does not translate the child's words nor does he perform as a native informant. Instead, he asks the audience to ruminate which bodies are pre-coded before we encounter them on screen. Do Palestinian bodies receive the same treatment as those in Kuleshov's experiment considered normative within Western cinematic codes?

Foragers (2022, 64 minutes) directed by Jumana Manna, a visual artist and filmmaker, explores the articulation of power with a focus on body, land, the materiality of colonial inheritances, and histories of place. The film stages absurd dramas around foraging for wild edible plants central to Palestinian cuisine, a practice which predates agriculture and Israeli occupation.

[9] https://vimeo.com/23867645. Accessed July 11, 2024

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Filmed primarily in the Golan Heights, Galilee, and Jerusalem, the film uses a mix of fiction, documentary, and archival footage to portray the impact of Israeli laws on these ancient customs. Manna offers the following context for framing the film:

> The restrictions prohibit the collection of the artichoke-like 'akkoub and za'atar (thyme), and have resulted in fines and trials for hundreds caught collecting these native plants. For Palestinians, these laws constitute an ecological veil for legislation that further alienates them from their land while Israeli state representatives insist on their scientific expertise and duty to protect.[10]

The opening shot of the film uses drone shots, a constant reminder of ongoing surveillance, immediately setting up a contrast to other camera work, low to the ground, at the level of the plants, furtive and resistant, what Manna calls a "foraging camera" – a handheld movement to mimic the act of foraging these edible plants, and a recognition of the plants and of "being in movement in the landscape."[11] Being on the land is playful and central to the film and is sharply contrasted with sterile courtroom scenes of Palestinians being criminalized by the Israeli legal system through lawfare under the guise of environmental protections.

In a joint interview with Manna, Rabea Eghbaria,[12] a human rights attorney and the co-writer of the court scenes in *Foragers*, says, "the plants tell the story of the Palestinian person who loses control over the smallest details of her life and connection to the land, who is suddenly subjected to the violence of the Israeli legal system. By going out to the field she ends up in court. This is the Nakba in a nutshell."[13]

Our Songs Were Ready for All Wars to Come (2021, 21 minutes) was shot in the village of Al-Jib, northwest of Jerusalem, at a site that predates the Roman era. Director

[10] Filmmaker's website: https://www.jumanamanna.com/Foragers. Accessed July 11, 2024.

[11] https://www.momaps1.org/post/213-jumana-manna-and-rabea-eghbariah-in-conversation. Accessed July 11, 2024.

[12] Eghbaria published an article in *The Nation* which was originally to be published in the *Harvard Law Review* blog. After many rounds of substantial revision, *Harvard Law Review* blog decided not to publish it. The article was eventually published in *The Nation.* Originally titled "The Ongoing Nakba: Towards a Legal Framework for Palestine" it is now "The *Harvard Law Review* Refused to Run This Piece About Genocide in Gaze," *The Nation*, November 21, 2023. In the article, Eghbaria argues that the framework of settler colonialism is both useful and insufficient and "[t]he Nakba is both the material reality and the epistemic framework to understand the crimes committed against the Palestinian people." https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/cmos_formatting_and_style_guide/web_sources.html. A similar incident was repeated by *Columbia Law Review* with another article by Eghbaria. The student editors refused to take down the article so the board of directors shut down the entire website. It was later re-posted. Ryan Quinn, "Unprecedented Steps: Board Pulls Plug on Columbia Law Review Website," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 06, 2024. Accessed https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/academic-freedom/2024/06/06/unprecedented-board-shutters-columbia-law-review#.

[13] "Jumana Manna and Rabea Eghbariah In Conversation," *MoMA PS1*, https://www.momaps1.org/post/213-jumana-manna-and-rabea-eghbariah-in-conversation. Accessed July 11, 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Still from *Our Songs Were Ready for All Wars to Come* (2021). Courtesy of Noor Abed.

Noor Abed describes her first time in the place as an encounter that "haunted me fully,"[14] and her practice of "choreography through cinematography"[15] revolves around constructing rituals specific to this particular site as an attempt to understand Palestinian history. In the film, women place their heads in small holes as a ritual of mourning, of silence, looking into the darkness and slowly suggesting a reach to the underground, to the womb of the land. Another scene of dancing comes from a memory of village weddings and the jump dance where two women compete with a fierce look of joy and strength.

The film is a collaboration with Abed's father, local historians, a choreographer, the camera operator, and musician/singer Maya Khaldi. Khaldi and Abed create the film's narration from a pastiche of Palestinian folktales that center the land and connect to communal rituals of transformation, mourning, and death. Filming on Super 8mm was important to Abed, who wanted the film to look like a historical document of the quotidian, so that it becomes a tool of claiming history:

> My purpose here is to provide a liberating response – through image making – to the codes of colonial history and its tools of fragmentation and discontinuity by conveying the oppositions of real social conditions. My

[14] Prerecorded statement from Noor Abed. February 2024.
[15] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Still from *Our Songs Were Ready for All Wars to Come* (2021). Courtesy of Noor Abed.

> aim is to decentralise images of fixity while at the same time foregrounding the gaps, silences, and abscesses those fixed structures produce.[16]

The sprocket holes and the edges of the frame visible, Abed's film reminds us that the image is always constructed, but her haunting document of choreography, song and ritual of indigenous folklore, myth and daily encounters challenges fixed ideological positions, ultimately creating an alternative to colonial time, space, and visuality. Abed's work offers us embodied ways of knowing that go beyond colonial explications and classifications.

Razan AlSalah is a third-generation Palestinian exile and the director of *Your Father was Born 100 Years Old, and So Was the Nakba* (2017, 7 minutes). The film is "about a Palestinian grandmother who returns to her hometown of Haifa through Google Streetview, the only way she can see Palestine. Channeling glitch aesthetics and digital erasure in a subversion of the physical borders and the checkpoints imposed by Israeli occupation."[17]

The film opens with a familiar overhead view of Google maps before entering Haifa through the portal of Google Streetview in Haifa with the halting, robotic

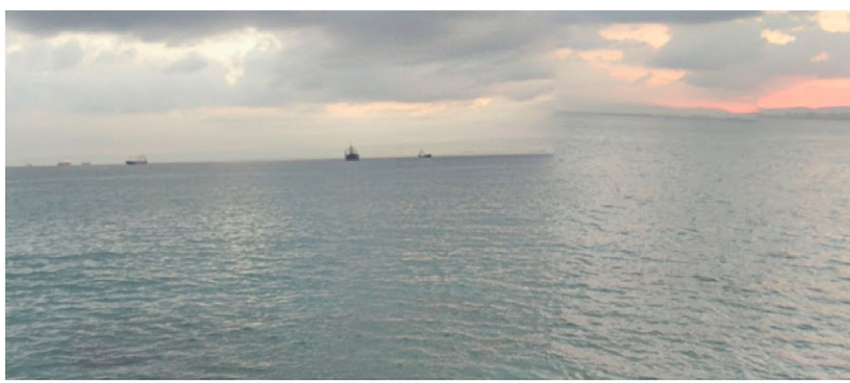
[16] Adele Jarrar, "'For All Wars to Come': An Interview with Noor Abed," *Interview* Issue 18, August 2023, https://no-niin.com/issue-18/for-all-wars-to-come-an-interview-with-noor-abed/index.html. Accessed July 11, 2024.

[17] https://www.cinemapolitica.org/film/your-father-was-born-100-years-old-and-so-was-the-nakba/. Accessed July 11, 2024.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Still from *Your Father was Born 100 Years Old, and So Was the Nakba* (2017). Courtesy of Razan AlSalah.

camera of digital technology. We wait for the images to catch up with memory. A moveable "X" marks the presence of AlSalah's grandmother as she attempts to return to her home, but the history of dispossession and the Nakba is flattened into a two-dimensional crossroads, the hyperreal in place over what was real – a well, a village, a home. She remembers. A ghostly superimposition of a black and white photograph lingers over the street view, a sign with two arrows and a cracked road as we hear about a deep well that has been paved over, "the crossroad of history between colonialism and Palestine." Later, we hear the grief of erasure and loss as we see static images of a ship and tourists with an array of cameras. Our guide, AlSalah's grandmother asks, "We're being killed and displaced, and you're taking pictures?" Her grandmother then asks to be taken to the sea, because "the sea is all we have left." We see the water now but the image continues to fragment, the straight line of the horizon is split into two. "Even the sea is broken," she says.



Still from *Your Father was Born 100 Years Old, and So Was the Nakba* (2017). Courtesy of Razan AlSalah.

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27 Published online by Cambridge University Press

AlSalah troubles the digital terrain to infiltrate and rupture digital and colonial borders. Scholar Samira Makki describes AlSalah's work as about loss but "understood not as becoming less, but rather as a proposition for becoming otherwise"[18] and that "within the growing site of experimentation which artists from Palestine have undertaken, [it] further forg[es] spaces of opacity as potential zones of disappearances."[19] Like the other filmmakers showcased here, AlSalah has succeeded in staking out a filmic space that spills beyond the frame such that her creative processes are collaborations with kin beyond the restrictions of colonialism, a methodological refusal of the violent, enforced scattering and shattering of families.

While representation foregrounds a preoccupation with realism, reality is not knowable by a camera. Instead, we have the opportunity to ask what kinds of discursive formations are being addressed, what ideologies are being constructed and for whom. The series, I hope not only teaches us about Palestinian cinema but more broadly about media literacy and its fraught construction.

These are a few of the films[20] we screened during the Palestinian Film Series. The audiences for each screening were a mix of students, faculty, and community members who came to learn about Palestinian cinemaand became a space of learning, witness, and solidarity as we developed a small but eager following. Perhaps film screenings fly under the radar in ways that a teach-in does not, or more bleakly, the arts are considered a defanged, value-neutral commodity and therefore outside of the political realm. Either way, we continue to learn from the Palestinian Film Series and in Fall 2024, we will welcome filmmakers Noor Abed and Saeed Taji Farouky to campus.

Nandini Sikand is a filmmaker and a Professor of Film and Media Studies at Lafayette College. The author is grateful to Professors Andy Smith and Drew Swedberg for their feedback.

[18] Samira Makki, "Even the Sea is Broken: Return and Loss in Razan AlSalah's Video Works," *Film-Philosophy* Vol. 28.2 (June 2024), 248.

[19] Makki, "Even the Sea is Broken," 265.

[20] More about Palestinian films can be found at these websites: https://arabfilminstitute.org/palestinian-voices/ and https://www.palestinefilminstitute.org/ and Palestine Film Index.

Cite this article: Nandini Sikand, "Liberatory Images: A Palestinian Film Series," *Review of Middle East Studies* (2023), **57**, 192–201. https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.27