

Important Palestinian films, new and old, available for viewing

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5 January 2024

In the course of the Netanyahu-Biden onslaught against the population of Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces have killed dozens of artists, including poets, fiction writers, painters, muralists, actor, directors and others, along with innumerable journalists.

Whether the slaying in each case is intentional or not, the overall project of obliterating the most articulate and sensitive Palestinian artistic figures is a conscious and desperate feature of the ongoing genocidal campaign. The Zionists are acutely aware of the need to wipe out both witnesses of their murder spree in general and, specifically, anyone who might be capable of representing the terrible events in important creative work.

Tel Aviv, Washington and their allies are engaged in falsification on a Hitlerian scale, and that lying can only be sustained in an atmosphere where no one is permitted to challenge the official version. Hence, the almost universal acquiescence of the media and the rigidly enforced silence in the film and television industry. Everyone knows the most horrible atrocities are being committed—all the more reason they cannot be exposed or even touched upon in front of masses of people.

The situation in the Middle East is one of the most traumatic in modern times. Palestinian and principled Israeli voices will be heard from. The attempt to stamp out opposition and resistance will not succeed today, any more than it has over the previous 75 years.

The drama and tragedy have already produced what is probably the most significant body of filmmaking in the last several decades.

The WSWs has commented on a good number of these works and interviewed some of their makers. Certainly, Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad's films stand out, including *Rana's Wedding* [*Another Day in Jerusalem*], *Paradise Now* and, in particular, *Omar*. The first work appears to be available only on DVD at the moment, while *Paradise Now* can be viewed on a number of streaming platforms and the remarkable *Omar* is presently on Netflix. We spoke to Abu-Assad in 2013.

Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman has also created some memorable works, including *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, *Divine Intervention* and *The Time That Remains*. The first two are accessible on Netflix, while the third is on other major streaming platforms.

One of the most memorable non-fiction works in recent decades is Mahdi Fleifel's *A World Not Ours*, as we commented in 2012, "both a personal memoir and a tracing out of the Palestinian condition." His short films *Xenos*, *A Man Returned* and *A Drowning Man* are also noteworthy. All four films are available on Netflix. We interviewed Fleifel in 2012 and again in 2018.

Susan Youssef's *Habibi*, Mai Masri's *3000 Nights* and the more recent *200 Meters* (Ameen Nayfeh), *The Present* (Farah Nabulsi) and *Farha* (Darin Sallam) are also valuable films, shining light on aspects of the Palestinian condition. All of them, except *200 Meters*, are presently streaming on Netflix, and that film is available on other platforms. *Gaza Mon Amour* (Arab Nasser, Tarzan Nasser), a semi-comic treatment of conditions, is currently streaming on Amazon Prime.

Tears of Gaza, by Norwegian filmmaker Vibeke Løkkeberg, to whom the WSWs also spoke, is available on a number of platforms.

Numerous valuable Israeli films, also reviewed by the WSWs, including *Waltz With Bashir* (Ari Folman), *Ahed's Knee* (Nadav Lapid), *The Law in These Parts* (Ra'anan Alexandrowicz) and *The Gatekeepers* (Dror Moreh) can be streamed on various sites.

However, there are other films, new and old, devoted to the Palestinian question that we have not previously commented on. All of the following are available on Netflix.

***Born in Gaza (Nacido en Gaza)* (2014)**

For over one month, in July-August 2014, the world watched in horror as the Israeli military pounded the densely populated and impoverished territory of the Gaza Strip with bombs, missiles and shells, while deploying tens of thousands of troops against an entrapped population. The onslaught killed nearly 2,000 people, wounded over 10,000 more and left nearly half a million people displaced by the massive destruction of homes and basic infrastructure.

The documentary *Born in Gaza* by Argentine-Italian Hernán Zin depicts the tragic fate of the children of the beleaguered Gaza at the hands of the Israeli military. Documenting their stories, the film is a drama of the terrors of the war and its impact on every aspect of life in the territory.

In July 2014, shocking images of an air strike on a Gaza beach that killed four soccer-playing youth went viral. Zin's film focuses on 10 children as young as six. It is preoccupied with their horrific, almost unimaginable difficulties, generating candid interviews about the psychological and physical devastation inflicted by the Israeli military. The film's conclusion coincides with the cessation of the Israeli offensive.

Born in Gaza demonstrates an intimacy, clarity and straightforwardness toward its suffering, but resilient subjects.

Mohamed: "A war every two year and we can't stand it. People close to us die pretty often." His daily activity is searching through mounds of trash for things to sell and support his family:

"The sea is closed; tunnels are shut down and we can bring neither food nor money and we can't do anything." Mohamed guides his horse and buggy amidst war-produced disaster and poverty. **Udal** has post-traumatic stress disorder from seeing his brother die. "The largest piece of him left was this size." His hands form a small shape.

Mahmud is the son of a farmer whose land is in ruins and whose camels and lambs have been slaughtered by the bombings. "We grow vegetables, not bombs." **Rajaf**'s father was killed while trying to save lives. He was one of the six ambulance drivers and 13 paramedics that died rescuing people during the 2014 attacks. "We never thought he would be bombed in the ambulance," says his son sorrowfully.

"We don't have missiles or tanks," one child mutters plaintively. Three months after the August 2014 ceasefire, director Zin returns to follow up on the children's stories. The majority of the Gazan population depends on humanitarian aid as unemployment increases drastically. The promised help from all quarters is non-existent, and the filmmakers criticize not

only the Israelis carrying out the bombings, but also implicitly the Palestinian authorities. Most neighborhoods are pulverized nearly to the ground.

"I have shrapnel in my back, hands and legs," describes **Motasem**. As bad as physical injuries are, psychological ones are worse. He tells his mom that he wants to die. "A few days ago, I tried to jump from the balcony, but my sister held me."

Gazan children play in the rubble that was once their homes and suffer in inconceivable ways. **Mohamed**: "My mom is sick. She has liver problems and thyroid problems and is diabetic. I have two mentally handicapped sisters and everywhere there is a Palestinian boat, Israeli war ships shoot it. They stop our boats and take our nets away. They kidnap and take us as hostages."

A postscript informs us that 1,475 Palestinians died between July 7 and August 26th, 2014. Seventy percent of the dead were younger than 12. The names and ages of the victims flash across the screen with explosive dramatic effect.

Salt of This Sea (Milh hadha al-bahr) is a 2008 Palestinian film directed by Annemarie Jacir and was an Official Selection of the Cannes International Film Festival that year. It features Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad as Soraya, an American-born Palestinian woman, who heads to Israel and Palestine on a quest to reclaim her family's home and money taken during the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli War.

The film opens as her grandfather and thousands of other Palestinians flee in boats from the coastal Arab enclave of Jaffa when the boundaries of the new state of Israel are violently established in 1948.

In the present day, Soraya, arrives in Palestine and is immediately subjected to interrogation and an invasive body search. Although she carries a US passport, she's Palestinian to the Israeli inquisitors. Ever frustrated, she organizes a bank robbery for the 315 Palestinian pounds owed to her grandfather's heirs, plus more than 60 years' interest. Moreover, things don't go well with the condescending Israeli woman who now owns Soraya's ancestral home.

Dotting the landscape are daunting walls, brutal checkpoints, menacing rifle-toting guards and barbed wire, backed by a viciously anti-Arab government. When Soraya tries to set up permanent residency in Ramallah, she is denied by the authorities. Once her two-week tourist visa expires, she must go back to New York City.

On the other hand, her new boyfriend Emad (Saleh Bakri) wants the right to travel out of Palestine. In fact, he has a scholarship to a Canadian university that he can't accept since he hasn't been allowed to leave the territories in 17 years. While Soraya desires nothing but to take up residence in Palestine, all Emad wants is to leave. Such is the irrationality of borders.

Pomegranates and Myrrh (2008) is writer and director Najwa Najjar's first feature film and opens with the wedding of Kamar (Yasmine Al Massri) and Zaid (Ashraf Farah), a couple living in the occupied territories. Just days after the wedding, Israeli troops show up to confiscate the family's olive farm and arrest Zaid.

The writer-director explained that the idea for the film originated with "the second Palestinian Intifada. ... When violence, hate and anger became the only life around me, it almost broke my spirit and soul, and my faith in humanity. I needed to find a way to survive, to find hope in what seemed to be a hopeless situation, to breathe again despite the suffocating weight of frustration."

Najjar continued, observing that in her efforts, "I was also confronted with barriers in a Palestinian society—those which can hinder individual development, dreams and aspirations, but none as challenging as those which force people to turn to losing themselves when despair, uncertainty and loss prevails." Writing offered her "the escape I needed and a way to release my frustrations. The result was *Pomegranates and Myrrh*."

She created the story of a Palestinian female dancer trying to fulfill her

dreams in a traditional, conservative society. "The film," the writer-director added, "is in some ways a prediction of how a worsening political climate and the consequent lack of hope can directly affect Palestinian daily life, pushing the society to further isolate itself and the individual to regress into conservative traditionalism and religion if there isn't hope, determination and a continuation of life. ... It is my hope [that this story] will ultimately deepen the understanding of the present Palestinian story, transcending the barriers of culture and language."

At the center of *Pomegranates and Myrrh* is the theft of Palestinian land by the Israeli authorities, a phenomenon that has been going on for decades. The soldiers claim the land is being confiscated because boys threw stones at them, and Zaid's imprisonment is justified because he attacked the soldiers. Any possible justice is forestalled as the Jewish settlers illegally occupy the groves and vandalize the olive press.

Children of Shatila (1998) is directed by Palestinian filmmaker Mai Masri.

Some 210,000 Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon, most still in the refugee camps, such as Shatila in southern Beirut, set up for their forebears who arrived during the *Nakba* in 1948 and afterward, fleeing the violent Zionist gangs.

As *Children of Shatila* opens a young boy laments: "This is where the Sabra and Shatila massacre [in 1982] took place. There were dead people everywhere. They were buried with bulldozers. The dead lay all along this street. The bulldozers dumped them in a big ditch. Palestinians and Lebanese from all walks of life. Many were killed with machetes. My aunt was also killed. That is where they cut off her head off."

The film explains: *June 6, 1982, Israeli army invaded Lebanon and besieged Beirut and the Palestinian refugee camps for three months.*

September 16-18, 1982, pro-Israeli Right-wing Lebanese militias acting in connivance with the Israeli army, massacred hundreds of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Images abound of the dead and grieving.

Issa is a young, crippled boy who lives with his grandfather: "I was about 10 years old when my father died. He died alone. He became paralyzed and began to suffer. He suffered and then he died alone."

Issa works with people injured in the war. "The drinking water in Shatila is yellow and filthy... My grandfather tells me that he is from Haifa in Palestine. I ask him why he left Palestine. He told me that they did not have enough weapons with which to resist. A lot of people were dying."

Another youngster, Farah, lives with her parents and two sisters. Her father moans: "Shatila has become a gathering place for all the downtrodden in this country. And not just the Palestinians. Beirut's poor ended up in Shatila. All of the disposed have moved to Shatila. Since 1982, we've been caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. We, the people have had to put up with the mistakes of our leaders, who have abandoned us and forgotten about us... No one gives a damn. No one talks about the Palestinian refugees that are here."

Farah's mother's two brothers were killed, as well as Issa's uncle during the Shatila massacre.

"Almost every household is stricken with grief," says Issa's grandfather matter-of-factly.

Another child, perhaps five, boldly asserts "We have to get our land and our country back." Issa agrees: "Your land is your land no matter what."

The children's psyche and history are shaped by the barbarity that threatens to engulf them. They have lost family members to massacres and attacks that followed 1948, as well as the invasion of Lebanon by Israel.

According to a review of the film at *palestinecinema.com*, "An aunt was decapitated, an uncle shot—every family and friend they know has lost someone to the violence."

"The filmmaker gives Issa and Farah a small video camera to film their lives and learn how they see their own world. Both children start asking their elders how they felt about leaving Palestine. When queried about

what he wants to tell the new generation of Palestinians, an old man asks that Palestine must never be forgotten. 'Promise me that,' he tells the children.

"The poverty of Shatila offers little escape. Farah's mother says that when her children tell her their dreams she feels 'awkward and afraid to shock them with the truth,' and wonders about the kind of future that lies ahead."

Like Twenty Impossibilities (2003) is another fiction film by Annemarie Jacir shot in occupied Palestine during the Second Intifada. It is about a Palestinian film crew attempting to cross a checkpoint, who are fascistically harassed by armed Israeli militia. The film became the first short film from the Arab world to be chosen as an Official Selection of the Cannes International Film Festival.

The Crossing (2017) by Ameen Nayfeh is also a short film about the nightmarish Israeli checkpoints. It concerns a family attempting to visit a sick grandfather on the other side of the wall. The journey is not a long one, but it is filled with tribulations. The film won the 2017 Jury Prize as Best Short Film at the Arab Short Film Festival and was selected for the Muhr Arab Short Award at the Dubai International Film Festival.



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