PALESTINIAN CINEMA IN THE DAYS OF REVOLUTION

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Introduction

In 1968, a small group of Palestinians in Amman, Jordan, came together to photograph and film the Palestinian political and military activities taking place around them. Associated with Fatah, the largest of the Palestinian militant organizations at that time, they formed a film unit that continued to produce films until the exodus of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Beirut in 1982. Other political and sectoral institutions within the PLO soon followed their lead. Progressive filmmakers from a number of Arab countries also made films about the unfolding Palestinian revolution, as did solidarity activists from around the world. In all, more than one hundred films were made during this period, mostly documentaries and shorts. The films were screened to Palestinian and Arab audiences in refugee camps, villages and towns, and military bases. They circulated through Arab and international film festivals and were screened by Palestine activists in both Eastern and Western Europe, Japan, and occasionally the United States.

The Palestinian films produced during this time were modest, and, for the most part, not well known outside the circles of Palestinians and their solidarity networks and third world cinema circuits. They are nonetheless significant for a number of reasons. Palestinian cinema of the 1970s arose within the context of political cinema movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly third and third world cinema movements, and shares a number of features with political films produced in other parts of the world. However, it was unique as an institutionalized, though modest, film movement operating within a national liberation movement of a stateless people.

The Palestinians were not the only national liberation movement producing militant films over a sustained period. The North Vietnamese made such films from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, but they did so from home bases in an established state. Other celebrated third world cinema movements, such as those in Cuba and Algeria, flourished after rather than during their liberation
struggles. Palestinian cinema, on the other hand, operated tenuously within the PLO, vulnerable to the political exigencies that shaped that organization. As a cinema movement created and sustained under conditions of extraordinary precarity, then, Palestinian filmmaking can shed light on the nature and possibility of political filmmaking. Beginning in the late 1960s, young Palestinian filmmakers, foremost among them Mustafa Abu Ali, filmed the Palestinian revolution as it unfolded, including the Israeli bombings of Palestinian refugee camps and the Jordanian and Lebanese civil wars, attempting to create a cinematic language consonant with the Palestinian revolution and its needs. The result is a body of work that engages with some of the same ideas surrounding visibility, the photographic image, and media circuits that preoccupied prominent experimental filmmakers of the left in Europe and Japan. At the same time, it remains focused on the processing of violent events and loss necessary for sustaining agential subjectivities and active engagement in the Palestinian political project. This focus highlights an as yet understudied aspect of third cinema, namely, the degree to which it is shaped by the compromises that necessarily accompany revolutionary belonging.

Palestinian cinema is also significant because its rise coincided with the development of an alternative cinema movement in the Arab world. As a major concern of the Arab left, the liberation of Palestine informed much of the political filmmaking that emerged from the region in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The PLO itself was a refuge for a number of independent Arab filmmakers who could not work in their home countries for political reasons. At the same time, the Palestinian cause was championed by Arab regimes as a means of bolstering their own legitimacy with their populations. This situation at times constrained the nature of the Palestinian films that these countries produced, but also offered opportunities, however fleeting, for filmmakers to exploit state resources to create innovative works. In other words, Palestinian cinema operated interstitially within emerging public sector cinema industries within the Arab world, as well as through co-productions and solidarity networks. It therefore offers an important lens through which to understand the development of alternative cinema in the Arab world.

The Palestinian films of the 1970s are also important as an archive of a particular Palestinian experience—one in which Palestinians attempted to control their own destiny in an organized fashion. This archive derives significance not only from its content, but also from the fact that Palestinian archives are continually being erased and resisting that erasure is a key component of Palestinian activism. Archiving Palestinian film and photographic images was an urgent concern for Palestinians during the long 1970s. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, a similar urgency has consumed filmmakers, artists,
curators, and scholars who want to preserve, disseminate, and interpret this work before its traces in archives around the world disappear and while its producers—the filmmakers of the 1970s—are still alive. This book is, to some extent, a contribution to that work.

Most importantly, the Palestinian films of the 1970s are part of the creation of a Palestinian visibility that has been sustained to the present day. In *Global Palestine*, John Collins describes the hypervisibility of Palestinians in the media as both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because it has kept their struggle alive within the world’s consciousness for five decades and a curse because Palestinian visibility is largely controlled by others (Collins 2011, 6). This hypervisibility began in the late 1960s with the rise of an organized armed resistance movement among Palestinians in exile. At that time, some organizations adopted a practice of propaganda of the deed, hijacking airplanes as a means of hijacking the airwaves to bring awareness to the Palestinian cause. The plane hijackings and spectacular acts carried out by Palestinian groups were certainly successful in catapulting the Palestinian cause into the headlines, but they also contributed to the association between the PLO and terrorism—Collins’s curse of visibility—that dogs the Palestinian cause to this day.

The films shot by PLO filmmakers and their fellow travelers during the 1970s created a different type of visibility for the Palestinian cause, one that was far more modest in its reach, but rooted in the ongoing experience of participating in the Palestinian revolution. As representations of the Palestinian experience, the films contributed to the fabrication of the Palestinian revolution by rendering it visible to its participants and allies as a revolution. These works documented events and conditions related to the Palestinians and situated them within the ideological frame of a struggle for national liberation. The filmmakers sought to connect Palestinians living under Israeli rule with those in exile. They participated in the production and dissemination of a Palestinian national culture and its recurring tropes and solidified relationships with allies around the world.

*Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* is an in-depth study of these films, the filmmakers, and their practices; the political and cultural contexts in which they were created and seen; and the afterlives the films have had with communities of Palestinian refugees and young filmmakers and other cultural actors in the twenty-first century. This study situates the works within regional and global conversations and practices surrounding the filmmaking and politics of the era. It offers detailed analyses of the films themselves, their coming into being, their distribution and viewership, and the intense interest they have generated during the past decade.
The Historical Context

After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (known in Arabic as the Nakba), Palestinians were in a state of complete disarray. By the end of the war, approximately 750,000 Palestinians had been displaced and just 150,000 remained within the borders of what became the new state of Israel. In exile in the Arab world, Palestinians found their collective story was frequently unknown or misunderstood by the local residents, often rural and uneducated peasants themselves, with whom they came in contact. Refugees in Lebanon faced accusations of having sold their land or of demonstrating cowardice and lack of proper attachment to the land because they fled rather than remaining and fighting to the death. Palestinians experienced feelings of shame either for having left their land or for remaining and becoming citizens of Israel (Sayigh 1979, 108).

A general lack of understanding of events was compounded by restrictions imposed by both local and international control of the Palestinian story. In the ensuing months and years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), created in 1949 to address the refugees’ humanitarian needs, set up schools, but recent Palestinian history was not taught to children in the refugee camps. This policy was in keeping with the bright line the organization was required to draw between relief work and “politics.” Until the PLO assumed official responsibility for the camps in 1969, personal stories of 1948, involving not only the Palestinian defeat by the Zionists but also the ineptitude on the part of the Arab Liberation Army, were told in whispers (if they were told at all) for fear of political reprisal from the security forces of host countries (Sayigh 1979, 165).

Discredited by the war, the political leadership that had existed in Palestine was effectively sidelined by Arab regimes for whom resolution of the Palestinian issue was not a priority (Khalidi 2006, 136). As early as 1949, refugees were organizing themselves for engagement in political discussions about their fate, but were stymied by both internal divisions and the refusal by Arab nations or Israel to allow them to participate in any planning on their behalf (Talhami 2003, 81; Kimmerling and Migdal 2003, 224). Moreover, it was not always apparent how the clear and pressing need of the refugees to return to their homes could best be addressed within larger political developments in the region. Politically, much of the region was in flux. Syria and Lebanon had just achieved independence at the time of the Nakba. Jordan had annexed the West Bank and sought to subsume Palestinian political claims under its own authority. Egypt experienced its own revolution in 1952, which resulted in the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser and a pervasive pan-Arabist movement. A new generation of Palestinian activists who came of age in the years following the
Nakba participated in the various political movements around them, joining local, regional, and pan-Arab nationalist parties, including the Ba’th Party, the Syrian Socialist National Party, the Muslim Brotherhood, various Arab Communist parties, and the Arab National Movement (ANM) (Khalidi 2006, 138). For many of these activists, the path of return to Palestine ran through Cairo and Damascus and was informed by the belief that Israel would be no match for a properly united and socially progressive Arab world (Kimmerling and Migdal 2003, 226).

By the late 1950s, the idea of addressing Palestinian dispossession through the creation of an independent Palestinian entity (kaʾin filastini), as opposed to this territory becoming part of a larger pan-Arab state or federation, emerged both in the rhetoric of Arab regimes and in various mobilizing efforts of the Palestinians themselves. Palestinians formed or reconstituted sectoral organizations in the diaspora. The first Palestinian militant groups also formed at this time. From the mid-1950s, Palestinian guerillas, or fidaʾiyin (sing. fidaʾi, for the most part organized by Egypt), were already carrying out attacks against Israel from Gaza. In 1959, a group of young Palestinians in Kuwait, including Yasser Arafat, formally founded the militant group Fatah. Fatah’s philosophy was simple but compelling: rather than the liberation of Palestine arising from the social and political transformation promised by the prevailing Nasserist version of Pan-Arabism, Palestine would be liberated by the Palestinians themselves through armed struggle. Moreover, that liberation would itself lead to the desired pan-Arabist revolution. Fatah and other militant groups were attractive because they were action oriented and more broadly based than older, elite-based structures, and their leaders were not the notables and feudal landlords of Ottoman and Mandate Palestine, but rather members of the middle and lower-middle classes and, in some cases, refugees (Khalidi 2006, 142; Khalidi 2010, 180).

By the early 1960s, Palestinians in refugee camps throughout the region were frustrated with Arab states that had failed for more than a decade to adequately address the Palestinian crisis. In a post–Bandung Conference global context, in which movements for decolonization and national liberation through armed struggle were occurring around the world, militant groups dedicated to the liberation of Palestine arose in Palestinian communities everywhere. By 1965, after the collapse of the United Arab Republic dashed the hopes that a unified Arab world could seek redress for the Palestinians’ loss, as many as forty groups had formed for the express purpose of liberating Palestine. That same year, ʿAsifah, the armed wing of Fatah, began to launch organized military operations from Jordan (Kimmerling and Migdal 2003, 238, 251). In an attempt to control this burgeoning movement, the Arab
League formed the PLO in 1964, but by 1968, in the wake of the Arab defeat in 1967 and the propaganda success of Fatah’s military operations, Arafat and his movement had succeeded in reconstituting and controlling the much weakened PLO as an independent movement for national liberation.

Control of the PLO by fida’i organizations meant both a commitment to armed struggle and a wresting of control of the Palestinian cause from Arab states. From the beginning, the PLO was a flawed organization, structurally weakened by rivalries among its various political organizations and other problems. Nonetheless, it offered a framework through which Palestinians could work to build their own institutions and attempt to determine their own political fate. Despite the range of political and ideological positions Palestinians held during the 1970s, a general consensus between them and their allies recognized the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. The movement for national liberation in which the organization was invested at this time was widely known as *al-thawrah al-filastiniyah*—the Palestinian revolution.

**Image Production in the Palestinian Revolution**

Image production played an important role in sustaining the status of the PLO and of the revolution. During the post-Nakba period, Palestinians had little control over the films and photographs in which they appeared or over the ideological frames in which their images were disseminated, even as they worked through their experiences with the 1948 war and its aftermath in their own literature and artworks. Chapter one describes these representational practices. With the takeover of the PLO by the fida’i groups, however, the situation changed. Palestinian militant groups soon began publishing periodicals and posters, mounting exhibits, and filming and photographing their own events and activities. Both performance (theater and dance) and the plastic arts were developed to consolidate and express the emancipatory Palestinian identity that the revolution created and to project it to others. The arts were also an arena through which solidarity activists mobilized support for the revolution from abroad, forging bonds between Palestinians and others fighting for their rights. One of the most prominent of these projects was the 1978 International Art Exhibition for Palestine, a traveling exhibit that included nearly two hundred works by artists from dozens of countries (Hijawi 2015), but there were numerous smaller efforts—lectures, exhibitions, performances, and film screenings—through which the global visibility of the Palestinian cause was maintained. The film unit created in Amman in 1968 became a part of that effort.
As an independent, emancipatory project, the revolution also captured the imagination of politically oriented filmmakers and other artists from the Arab world and beyond. Because the emergence of the Palestinian revolution coincided with the efforts throughout the region to create new forms of cinema that would challenge the commercial productions of Hollywood and Cairo, the Palestinian cause was an early and important theme in that cinema movement, dominating the productions of Arab public sector cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These works became part of the third world cinema movement and circulated through the network of film festivals, movie theaters, and television networks in Eastern Europe and at political meetings and events over the course of the decade. In chapters two, three, and four, I elaborate on the development of filmmaking about Palestine and the Palestinians within the PLO, within an emerging alternative Arab cinema movement, and beyond.

Most of the Palestinian films created during this period were documentaries, and the majority treated Palestinian encounters with violence, militant resistance to that violence, and difficulties related to the Palestinians’ status as a stateless people. The revolution provided a ready framework for addressing such themes. Simply put, the violence was enfolded into the movement’s ideology of liberation through armed struggle such that Palestinians were represented as their own liberators, working collectively and within the national movement. In this regard, they worked implicitly within an understanding of the necessity of the collective for the protection and advocacy of the rights and aspirations of the individual within a global political system organized around the nation state. Films and other cultural texts undertook the framing of Palestinian experiences within the liberation movement, constructing and sustaining the ideals of heroism, martyrdom, and steadfastness that would prove to be extraordinarily resilient in later decades (Khalili 2007).

Eventually, they constructed an imaginative Palestinian geography (Said 1978, 1994, 2000) that defined certain places, architectural practices, spatial configurations—most iconically, the refugee camps and military bases, but also the modern institutions built by the PLO—as specifically Palestinian spaces. Importantly, such films addressed viewers as (potential) fellow resisters from other liberation movements, supporters, and solidarity activists, and they performed acts of informing and engaging audiences in a cause. Rhetorically, then, they sought to engage with their viewers as equals, inviting them to struggle rather than seeking assistance.
Palestinian Film after 1982

The Palestinian revolution ended with the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 and the subsequent departure of the PLO from Lebanon. The September 1982 massacre in Sabra and Shatila starkly illustrated the fundamental difference in the relationship between the organization and the Palestinian people after that war. By leaving Lebanon, the PLO committed Palestinians in Lebanon to the care and protection of the United States and Israel, but neither fulfilled its obligations. More generally, the PLO departure resulted in political fragmentation in addition to the already existing geographical dispersal of the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, tensions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where Palestinians chafed under an increasingly institutionalized and oppressive military occupation, continued to rise, eventually culminating in the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987, a sustained, and in its first years, nonviolent uprising that eventually led to the Oslo Accords and the creation of the Palestinian Authority. The failure of Oslo to ameliorate the living conditions of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories or to advance a long-term political settlement led to the Aqsa Intifada in 2000. As the Palestinian Authority moved away from armed resistance to operate increasingly within the framework of international negotiations, and as it grew increasingly dependent on that framework for funding, the ideology of liberation through armed struggle survived almost exclusively within Islamist organizations, most notably the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hizballah parties.

Today, the political landscape for Palestinians is as fragmented as it was in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 war. The refugees living outside historical Palestine have been largely abandoned within the political framework of negotiations. Since 2006, the Palestinian Authority has ruled only in a small part of the West Bank where increasing settlement activity has rendered the creation of a Palestinian state impossible to implement. The Gaza Strip is governed by Hamas and has endured years of sanctions that severely limit the import of goods and the mobility of its residents. It has also endured repeated military incursions and bombings from Israel.

Nonetheless, the effects of the organized resistance of the pre-Oslo period—the Palestinian revolution based in Amman and Beirut and the first intifada of the 1980s and early 1990s—are still visible today. Sustained Palestinian resistance created a political generation (Mannheim 1952) whose perspective can be felt both in artistic works and grassroots organizations. For many who participated actively in the revolution, or the intifadas, the experience of engaging in a collective political project continues to affect their ac-
tions and outlook today. Memories and postmemories (Hirsch 2012) of life in the refugee camps and experiences with violence, both as a trauma and as a binding collective experience, animate the present. The photographs, footage, and films created during the revolution play a role in sustaining and transmitting memories as they circulate both through organized screenings and exhibits and via social media. Chapter five examines this phenomenon in more detail in relation to the films about and photographs of the siege and fall of the Tall al-Za’tar refugee camp during the Lebanese civil war.

The altered political landscape for Palestinians after 1982 has been accompanied by significant changes in Palestinian filmmaking. In 1982, after the Israeli invasion of Beirut, PLO filmmakers lost the archive of films, footage, and other materials that they had been building since the late 1960s. As a result, while filmmaking did not completely end in 1982, it no longer included the cache of shared material that had been a defining feature of earlier production, and film production within the PLO diminished greatly during this time. Meanwhile, the intifada of the 1980s in the West Bank and Gaza Strip attracted international news crews that began to systematically cover the intensifying and increasingly organized resistance to Israeli occupation. Palestinians on the ground working for these visiting journalists as fixers, translators, and crew acquired important media skills, which they in turn used to create their own documentaries in the 1990s. At the same time, Palestinian citizens of Israel, some of whom trained abroad and others who learned filmmaking through employment in the Israeli film industry, also began to create films. These works differed significantly from the earlier material, ushering in a new era of Palestinian film production, one focused on Palestinian experiences with Israel, Israelis, occupation, and discrimination rather than on exile, refugeehood, revolution, and armed struggle. Solidarity filmmakers also focused increasingly on Palestinian experiences within historical Palestine. This film production has matured in recent decades, leading to a rich body of documentary, fictional, and experimental works.

Although these later works did not arise directly out of the PLO films, they have built on the visibility created by earlier work within the PLO. Thus, Michel Khleifi’s *Wedding in Galilee* (1987), the first Palestinian feature fictional film to circulate extensively, was not only reviewed and discussed as a work of art house cinema, but also as a specifically Palestinian work, with all the advantageous visibility and political burdens that such a classification entails. As a Palestinian film, *Wedding in Galilee* and other fictional Palestinian films that followed have almost certainly attracted critical attention not only for their artistic merits, but also because of the visibility of the political question to which they are attached. In addition, these films have been adopted, dissemi-
nated, and discussed by solidarity activists as tools for sustaining the visibility of the Palestinian cause, most notably through the Palestinian film festivals that began to emerge in the late 1990s and that constitute a major activity of current solidarity activism. Writing in 2011, John Collins describes Palestine as “hard-wired . . . into the circuits of the struggle for global justice” (Collins 2011, 18). The visibility of the Palestinian cause that has been maintained by the ongoing work of filmmakers and the curators and activists who organize screenings has helped to sustain that hardwiring.

However, arising out of very different political circumstances, these later works rendered Palestinians visible within the framework of a very different narrative. Beginning after the 1967 war and reaching a peak with the outbreak of the first intifada in the mid-1980s, a nonviolent resistance movement developed in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The advocacy for militancy came to be increasingly confined to Islamist groups, particularly after the Aqsa Intifada, and films that were created and circulated outside that framework focused on Palestinian nonviolent strategies to address challenges related to Israel and its occupation, social issues within Palestinian communities, and human interest stories. The deployment of violence, if it was considered at all, was problematized both in terms of ethics and efficacy or firmly relegated to the past.

Nonetheless, the agential subjectivities created through years of organized resistance, both violent and nonviolent, in the 1970s and 1980s and propagated through films and other cultural texts is sustained in these later works. Filmmakers since Oslo have continued to celebrate, interrogate, and critique the heroism, martyrdom, and steadfastness that emerged as the central pillars of Palestinian national identity during the revolution (Khalili 2007). These films take many forms. As the political, economic, and security conditions of almost all Palestinian communities have continued to deteriorate over time, filmmakers have reconfigured resistance not as a collective political act but as individual work-arounds such that normal life can continue. Increasingly, characters in Palestinian films resist not just Israeli violence and occupation, but also corruption, ineptitude, and injustice from the Palestinian Authority or exploitative and alienating economic conditions. Relatedly, political stasis and lack of a clear vision for the future has given rise to “roadblock movies,” films that are often situated at the Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks that began to proliferate after the Oslo Accords (Gertz and Khleifi 2005, Dickenson 2010). Such works not only describe physical conditions on the ground, but also reflect larger political anxieties. Other films consider earlier periods of activism (the 1948 war, the leftist politics of an earlier generation of Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the failed militancy of the Aqsa Intifada) through an ironic lens,
focusing on the distance that separates these earlier eras and the possibilities they offered for action from the present. Like their counterparts from the 1970s, filmmakers working on Palestine and the Palestinians today are driven to produce emergency films when Palestinian communities face devastating violence. Unlike the earlier “event films” created by PLO filmmakers that folded such experiences into the movement for national liberation, these newer films often appeal to spectators and the international community to act on behalf of the Palestinians, rather than with them. The most conspicuous of such recent works have been made in response to Israeli attacks on Gaza, but they also encompass films about the violence of occupation in the West Bank and the experiences of Palestinians in exile, whose statelessness continues to render them vulnerable to violence and dispossession. These films document events and conditions, offering testimony on behalf of their Palestinian subjects with regard to atrocities and untenable conditions. By hailing the international community, such works create witnesses of distant spectators to atrocity and the violation of basic human rights (Torchin 2012). As in earlier films made within the revolution, Palestinians are represented in these works as heroes, martyrs, and steadfast victims, but the degree to which they can address their own needs is limited to emergency relief (for example, recovering civilians from rubble, caring for the wounded in hospitals, carving out shelters from destroyed homes). They are offered no platform to articulate a vision for the future toward which they can constructively mobilize.

Since the early 2000s, a growing number of filmmakers have returned to the PLO project of the 1970s and its films as part of a larger search for an understanding of present conditions and possibilities for the future. Their engagements with this earlier material have varied considerably, from attempts to reinvigorate the present with the spirit of collective resistance of the revolution to trenchant critiques of the PLO and its constitutive organizations for their impractical aims and the collateral damage they inflicted through their focus on armed struggle. In chapter six, I examine this rich and varied body of work.

**Reading and Writing Practices for Marginal and Engaged Films**

Many of the films analyzed in this book are marginal texts—short works made with meager resources. Their circulation during the 1970s outside of film festivals was driven by political rather than artistic or theoretical interests. Writing about such works in conjunction with better-known and well-studied works (e.g., the Dziga Vertov Group’s *Here and Elsewhere* [*Ici et Ailleurs*]), as I do in
chapter two, or within the context of film movements (such as third cinema) whose widely disseminated and discussed canonical texts emerge from different film traditions, poses particular challenges. On the one hand, one must guard against inflating the role that the Palestinian works have played within transnational conversations and developments in filmmaking. On the other hand, it is easy to allow the celebrity of better-known works and the questions highlighted by their authors to determine how one thinks and writes about these films. The rich scholarly conversation that already exists about these well-known works can be seductive, drawing in researchers writing about marginal texts in ways that can reinforce the marginal status of those works.

In the chapters that follow, I have tried to offer a Palestinian-centered perspective on the films and their contexts such that they emerge not merely as examples of the theories that others have articulated, but in conversation (albeit a lopsided one) with those theories. Filmmakers working on Palestine in the 1970s were certainly influenced by, for example, Godard, third and third world cinema movements, the early masters of Soviet filmmaking, Italian neorealism, political film movements in Europe of the 1960s and early 1970s, and contemporary currents in socialist cinema, in addition to local politics and conditions. However, theirs were not simply applications to the Arab world of ideas and aesthetics developed elsewhere. Rather, they debated, adopted, and adapted what others had developed to serve their local circumstances. Tracing lineages of influence from outside the Palestinian context that took place within this process of developing a Palestinian cinema teaches us something about Palestinian filmmaking and its effects. However, such an approach teaches us more about already well-known filmmakers, texts, movements, and theories and further cements their prominence. A Palestinian-centered approach attempts to circumvent this problem such that the films, people, and movements under study are not overshadowed.

Such an approach begins with close readings of the films to understand what, specifically, they say and what they potentially would have accomplished rhetorically at the time they were created and as they have circulated. Writing from outside the political project to which these films were attached requires a generous, perhaps even humble viewing practice, one that assumes that filmmakers operate in good faith and sincerity and respects their political engagements. Such a position requires a focus on the relationship between films and their contexts and close attention to their rhetorical strategies: how filmmakers choose to express a particular perspective and engage with their audiences. It does not include an evaluation of the texts (are the films of “good” or “bad” quality?) or of their political project (was that project, in whole or in part, effective?).
It also avoids suspicious reading practices that uncritically privilege the ironic distance of the scholar over the engaged practice of the filmmaker (Felski 2011). This is not to say that a scholar writing from a distance cannot uncover or clarify questions or positions that filmmakers or critics working from within a movement may have struggled to articulate. My treatment of the films of Tall al-Zaʿtar in chapter five are a case in point. Created under conditions that severely tested the Palestinian revolution, in terms of both the extremity of the violence that accompanied the siege and fall of the camp and the direction the PLO was taking (that is, toward greater involvement in the Lebanese civil war), these texts can reasonably be expected to contest the official practice of folding vulnerability to violence into the logic of armed struggle that the Palestinian revolution required. I have attempted to uncover some of these contestations in my readings of these works. However, such reading practices must be balanced by a recognition of what is lost by distance—in particular, the embodied knowledge that emerges from personal experience that can never be fully communicated through texts (Sontag 2004). An awareness of the validity of that incommunicable knowledge requires that one attend to the danger of obscuring or undermining urgent messages that are made directly on the surface of a film.

The filmmakers discussed in this book devoted themselves to their work not for themselves but for a better world, and they made significant sacrifices to do so. Khadijeh Habashneh gave up her Jordanian citizenship when she followed the PLO to Lebanon in 1971. When the PLO left Beirut in 1982, she and Mustafa Abu Ali waited six months in Damascus before they could reenter Jordan, and they subsequently lived in Amman as stateless residents (Abu Ali 2008, Habashneh 2017, personal communication). Kassem Hawal was homeless when he met novelist Ghassan Kanafani in Beirut in 1970, having fled Iraq after his imprisonment there for political writings. When he began working for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), he slept in a storage room on stacks of *al-Hadaf*, the official PFLP publication. Hawal was attracted to Beirut because it felt as if a revolution was taking place there that would liberate the region from fear, hunger, and illness (Hawal 2017, personal communication). He writes of pleasurable evenings of good food and music with friends in Beirut in the 1970s, and at film festivals around the world, but he did not spend twelve years making films for the PFLP for the parties.

In fact, it is difficult to overestimate the commitment of these filmmakers. At times, they slept with their cameras in order to be ready at any minute to go out and film a new atrocity. Some months, they were paid their modest salaries, but if the organization to which they were attached was short of funds, they would do without. When filmmakers scattered after the departure of
the PLO to Tunis in 1982, a number suffered symptoms that suggest post-traumatic stress disorder (Habashneh 2017, personal communication; Hawal 2017, personal communication; Madanat 2011). Habashneh, who has worked for years to rebuild the PLO film archive that disappeared after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, is eager to see the films restored, digitized, and freely distributed as widely as possible. “People died to make these films,” she says (Habashneh 2017, personal communication). This commitment by the filmmakers makes an ethical claim on scholars who study the materials today. It requires us to put aside irony and attempt to come as close as possible to their stance as they made the films, to empathize with their difficulties, and to begin our work by reading their films and writings primarily in the ways they intended.

**Positioning**

This book was researched and written from an outsider perspective. I was educated in and have worked mostly at American institutions despite having lived for many years in the Arab world. My own family history brushes up against that of the Palestinian revolution, but it does not intersect with it. Although my father was born in Mandate Palestine, he had become an American citizen by the time I was born, and while I spent much of my childhood in Beirut, I was part of a mostly expatriate community connected to the American University of Beirut.

However, proximity also colors my outsider perspective. While my personal experiences with the violent history that informs many PLO films—the Jordanian and Lebanese civil wars, Israeli airstrikes, student demonstrations, the mounting violence in Lebanon during the early 1970s—was quite limited, these events were part of conversations taking place around me during my childhood in Beirut, as were many names and places mentioned in filmmakers’ writings. I don’t think I ever saw any of the PLO films when they first circulated, but when I encountered them in the 2010s, some of their images were startlingly familiar. Researching and writing about this film movement is then, in a small way, an effort to better understand a time and place (1970s Beirut) that I lived in but did not fully know.

However, that is not how this project began. As I conducted research into contemporary Palestinian cinema, focusing on how filmmakers today grapple with the problem of the violent and victimizing image, I began to discover films from the 1970s. Kais al-Zubaidi’s 2006 filmography of more than one hundred years of cinema about Palestine comes with a DVD of six films—five of which were made during the PLO period. Josef Gugler asked me to write about Tewfiq Saleh’s 1972 film *The Dupes* for his edited volume, *Film in the*
Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence. Old films began to appear at Palestinian film festivals. At a 2010 screening of Marco Pasquini’s Gaza Hospital, I was introduced to Monica Maurer’s work. Films were (and still are!) popping up on the Internet: I discovered Nabihah Lutfi’s work in late 2013 on the Mukhayyam al-Sumud al-Usturi Tall al-Za’tar Facebook group page. In 2014, the Palestine Film Foundation organized and mounted a month of programing devoted to Palestinian films of the 1970s. “The World Is With Us,” curated by Nick Denes, included thirty-one films, an exhibit, artist interventions, symposia, and a concert. It became evident that I could not understand the Palestinian experience with violent and victimizing images without returning to the PLO period and the artists, writers, and filmmakers who were the first to grapple with that problematic. This book, then, although focused on works created decades ago, is very much informed by what is happening in Palestinian cinema in the present.

**Terminology**

Finally, a word must be said about my use of the terms “Palestinian film” and “Palestinian cinema.” Films are informed ideologically, culturally, and aesthetically by a wide range of factors, including funding sources, distribution circuits, shooting locations, and the background and perspective of the filmmakers. As the following chapters make clear, filmmakers from a range of nationalities and backgrounds worked on the films that were made under the auspices of the PLO, and the PLO was, by no means, the only organization through which films with a Palestinian perspective were made. I have chosen to refer to all these works as “Palestinian films,” using the term broadly for works that are fundamentally sympathetic to the aspirations of the Palestinian people and broadly aligned with the perspective of the Palestinian revolution itself. This usage is imprecise, but preferable to engaging in verbal gymnastics that seek to artificially disentangle overlapping networks of film practices.
Introduction

1. The one exception is the militant films made by René Vautier and his Algerian trainees between 1957 and 1962. However, the relationship between this movement and the National Liberation Front in Algeria differed significantly from the one that existed between Palestinian filmmakers of the 1970s and the PLO.

2. Hannah Arendt articulates this in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she discusses the necessity of the right to have rights. Those rights consist of the right to speech and action within the collective, without which any other right cannot exist. It is also articulated in the right to a nationality in Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

3. Such works have also aroused considerable anxiety not only because they lack a politically agential framework for Palestinians, but also because of their potentially depoliticizing effects. Already in 1972, John Berger argued that troubling photographs (war photographs and what he termed “photographs of agony”) often mask larger political questions (Berger, [1972] 1980, 44). In *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag noted the power inherent in the act of photographing and raised the question of voyeurism, arguing that taking and viewing photographs distances people from the world and actively discourages engagement. “To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged . . . to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune” (Sontag 1977, 12). More recently, and writing specifically about Israel/Palestine, Gil Hochberg raises the specter of atrocity voyeurism and image fatigue. Arguing against the efficacy of witnessing that the traditional documentary film enacts, she notes that “the very visibility of others’ suffering remains nothing but a spectacle, providing at best a momentary source of ethical speculation and, at worst, a source of voyeuristic pleasure” (Hochberg 2015, 120). Hochberg also discusses the dangers of visibility, and, in particular, visibility to surveillance, and the power that can accrue to certain types of invisibility. However, the productive invisibility (strategies of opacity in the works of the Otolith Group and Basma Alsharif, for instance) of the oppressed that Hochberg juxtaposes against the failed witnessing of the documentary image rely in part on the hypervisibility of the emergency claims that has already been established through documentary film and photography. Neither the Otolith Group’s *Nervus Rerum* (2008) nor Alsharif’s *We Began by Measuring Distance* (2009) are fully legible to spectators who are not familiar with the Palestinian history with Israel’s spectacular violence.

Moreover, skepticism regarding (or outright rejection of) the efficacy of witnessing images does not account for the importance of testimony—both showing and telling—for victims of violence or trauma. See, for instance, Caruth (1996) and the essays in Saltzmann and Rosenberg (2006) and Guerin and Hallas (2007). Such rejection also fails to account for the relationality of witnessing, both at the concrete and local level, of the individual whose understanding of her own experiences is shaped in part by the affirmation she receives from a witness who describes it to others, and, at a more abstract level, of the relationality that such images create with distant spectators (Guerin and Hallas 2007, 10). The archival or juridical importance of such documentary material must also be considered. Thus, another strand of
recent writings make a case for the value of the visibility created by documentary films and photographs for their subjects. Sharon Sliwinski (2011) argues that the mass distribution of images of disaster, beginning with the lithographs of the 1880 Lisbon earthquake and photographs of atrocities from the Belgian Congo, have played a fundamental role in the construction of the concept of human rights. By analyzing documentary film related to genocides of the twentieth century and their deployment by activists, Leshu Torchin (2012) argues that such material can transform distant spectators into witnessing publics, thereby drawing them into action. Ariella Azoulay (2008) also makes the case for the ability of photographs to render the emergency claims of photographed subjects visible to spectators, and by doing so to construct a relationship of solidarity that bypasses the sovereign power and encourages an ethics of caring for each other. Ulrich Baer (2005) makes a similar argument from a different theoretical perspective, arguing that the traumatic character of photography itself imposes a responsibility on viewers to act as witnesses to the spectral traces of atrocity.

The fraught quality of the debate regarding the efficacy of witnessing films and photographs of distant suffering results in large part from their representation of subjects as depoliticized victims. Their speech, if they are allowed to speak, may be limited to testimony regarding their injuries and appeals for redress as acts of charity. These qualities are not necessarily flaws in the films and photographs themselves, but often emerge from the nature of the events and conditions they depict and the political contexts within which such events occur.

4. See Sayigh (1997) for a detailed description of the PLO structure, areas of strength and weakness, and accomplishments and failures.

Chapter One: Emerging from a Humanitarian Gaze

1. Many Palestinians did attempt to return to their lands in what became the state of Israel, either temporarily or permanently. Exact numbers are not available, but thousands were shot dead attempting to return (Khalili 2007, 44).

2. The “works” in the UNRWA acronym originally referred to development programs, primarily in agriculture, designed to modernize rural areas as well as to provide salutary employment to refugees. This development model was abandoned in the late 1950s and replaced by vocational training designed to serve the labor market of Gulf countries (Bocco 2009, 246–247).

3. My discussion of early UNRWA photographs is based largely on these two sources. The online UNRWA photo and film archive (unrwa.org/photo-and-film-archive) may be more comprehensive, but as a project initiated in the 2000s, the archive reflects current labeling practices rather than those of the 1950s and 1960s. The online archive is also the product of a different political environment, which affects how photographs are presented.

4. Allowances must be made for the conventions of the era. A photobook by Thomas Billhardt and Peter Jacobs, edited by the PLO in 1979, is similarly stingy with information about images. Specific refugee camps are named, but individuals are not, and a number of pages consist of portraits of unidentified Palestinian “types.”

5. However, see Allan (2013, 14–15) for a description of the continued fraught nature of the relationship of Palestinians in Lebanon to UNRWA today.
