




La revue *Aleph. langues, médias et sociétés* est approuvée par ERIHPLUS. Elle est classée à la catégorie B.

Cinema of Palestine as a Pillar of Resistance and Preservation of Cultural Identity

السينما الفلسطينية كركن من أركان المقاومة والحفاظ على الهوية الثقافية

Le cinéma palestinien comme pilier de la résistance et de la préservation de l'identité culturelle

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	Soumission	Publication numérique	Publication Asjp
	10-03-2024	29-04-2024	01-12-2024

Éditeur : Edile (Edition et diffusion de l'écrit scientifique)

Dépôt légal : 6109-2014

Edition numérique : <https://aleph.edinum.org>

Date de publication : 29 avril 2024

ISSN : 2437-1076

(Edition ASJP) : <https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/226>

Date de publication : 01 décembre 2024

Pagination : 23-33

Référence électronique

Rahima Mezghiche, « Cinema of Palestine as a Pillar of Resistance and Preservation of Cultural Identity », *Aleph* [En ligne], Vol 11 (5) | 2024, mis en ligne le 29 avril 2024, consulté le 13 octobre 2024. URL : <https://aleph.edinum.org/11425>

Référence papier

Rahima Mezghiche, « Cinema of Palestine as a Pillar of Resistance and Preservation of Cultural Identity », *Aleph*, Vol 11 (5) | 2024, 23-33.

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RAHIMA MEZGHICHE

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Introduction

In the grand tapestry of human experience, cinema emerges as a bottomless vessel, holding together narratives that transcend time, influencing political ideologies, shaping societal norms, and preserving the rich mosaic of our collective cultural heritage. Since the late 19th century, cinema has evolved into a global language that transcends borders, offering a unique means of expression and communication. Politically, it has served as a mirror reflecting the socio-political landscapes of different eras, capturing the zeitgeist of revolutions, wars, and societal shifts.

Through cinematic masterpieces such as “Fail Safe” and “The Battle of Algiers”, the medium of film has served as a powerful tool for critiquing political ideologies, challenging authority, and instigating meaningful conversations about the ramifications of power. While Fail Safe can be described as a stripped-down, dialogue-driven, close-quartered cold war thriller, The Battle of Algiers most certainly is a neorealism-influenced documentary. Both of these films not only entertain but also act as a living record and mirror reflecting the times, where the uncinematic becomes cinematic, succeeding in breaking societal barriers, and fostering empathy across different demographics.

In the social sphere, cinema plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse, with celebrated films like “To Kill a Mockingbird” and “12 Years a Slave” playing pivotal roles in influencing collective perspectives on racism and social justice. One being an adaptation of a novel and the other from a memoir, these stories became more universally poignant through the frames of motion picture. Their cinematic narratives contribute significantly to the ongoing dialogue surrounding their respective critical issues.

Culturally, cinema acts as a vessel of human stories, preserving and transmitting cultural heritage across generations. Renowned directors like Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, and Jean-Luc Godard have enriched global

cinema by infusing their works with cultural and political nuances. From discussions on family, revolution, and the human condition, their art added immeasurable depth, sensibility, and diversity to the cinematic landscape.

Another striking example of a film that has made a profound impact on changing perspectives and influencing political views is “Schindler’s List” (1993), directed by Steven Spielberg. This cinematic masterpiece, based on the true story of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who saved the lives of over a thousand Polish Jews during the Holocaust, has left an indelible mark on global consciousness.

“Schindler’s List” brought the horrors of the Holocaust to a wide audience and sparked vital conversations about individual responsibility in the face of injustice. The film prompted a collective reexamination of the atrocities committed during World War II and initiated discussions about the significance of tolerance, empathy, and resistance in the face of discrimination and genocide. Beyond the screen, the impact of “Schindler’s List” transcended into increased awareness and activism surrounding Holocaust remembrance and the rallying against the oppression of the Jewish people.

These samples are a few of the many projects that, in essence, prove that cinema is not merely a form of entertainment but a blend between creativity, aesthetics, and perspectives as an outlet that seeks to engage with the complexities of our shared history. In such fashion, the cinema of Palestine emerges in itself as a resistance movement and a weapon for its people, creatives, and audience. This paper explores how Palestinian cinema was able to give its people a voice throughout history and propel their cause, cementing their ancestral memory deep into the collective consciousness of the world. The following section revisits the history of the Palestinian film industry in parallel to the events of colonization and apartheid exercised by Israel and how cinema emerged and developed as a political reaction to that

1. The History and Timeline

1.1 The Inception

Contrary to what one might think, the emergence of the Palestinian film industry began to take shape in the 1930s and 1940s, with the rise of individual filmmakers and the production of short films, initially not as a reactionary movement but as a promising first period detached from its successive ones. The first Palestinian film is generally believed to be a documentary on King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia and his visit in 1935 to Palestine, made by Ibrahim Hassan Sirhan, based in Jaffa. Sirhan followed the King around Palestine, and the final cut was a silent documentary movie that was presented at the

Nabi Rubin festivals. Following this, Sirhan joined Jamal al-Asphar in his first collaborative project, a 45-minute film called “Realized Dreams,” centering on the lives of Palestinian orphans, providing necessary visibility for them. In 1945, Sirhan established the first significant Palestinian production studio named ‘Studio Palestine’ with fellow filmmaker and student Ahmad Hilmi al-Kilani, funding and producing several feature-length films directed and shot by a small network of filmmakers. The films themselves were eventually lost in 1948 when Sirhan had to flee Jaffa after the town was bombed.

1.2 The Epoch of Silence

The 1948 Palestinian expulsion and flight (known in Arabic as the Nakba, the catastrophe) had a devastating effect on Palestinian society, including its nascent film industry. Entering its second period, known as The Epoch of Silence, attesting to the impediment of collective Palestinian filmmaking; cinematic endeavors in the country requiring infrastructure, professional crews, and finance nearly ceased for two decades. Individual Palestinians participated in the film production of neighboring countries. Many filmmakers sought creative refuge in the back-then-flourishing Egyptian industry, integrating into the production of several Egyptian films. But these films, as expository as they tried to be of the Palestinian struggle, failed nevertheless in providing an authentic Palestinian lens and instead mostly channeled and represented Gaza as a desolate land where young Egyptian men went to resolve personal crises, commercially rendering the Gaza Strip as a plot device for treating Egyptian nationalist concerns.

1.3 Cinema in Exile

After 1967, and the event collectively known to the Palestinians as the Naksa, Palestinian cinema was thrust into a third period labeled by film theorists as Cinema in Exile, becoming fully sponsored by the PLO, funded by Fatah and other Palestinian organizations like PFLP. More than 60 films were made in this period, and the intended focus was on documentaries; exiled and dispersed filmmakers employed a cinema vérité style to document the struggles, resilience, and resistance of individuals and communities in an attempt to regain cultural agency and autonomy.

1.4 The Return Home

Otherwise, very few drama films were made about Gaza until the 1980s, signaling a new and fourth era, contemporary cinema. By the end of the 1990s, the First Intifada and the Oslo Accords had generated several documentaries about Palestinian resistance, the possibilities for peace and coexistence, and social conditions within the Gaza Strip. The first fictional

feature films set in the Gaza Strip were also created in the 1990s. It was at this time that the second Gazan filmmaker, Abdelsalam Shehada, who, like many other Palestinian filmmakers of his generation, came to filmmaking from journalism, began his career. Shehada's early documentaries focused on social issues such as child labor, women's rights, and folk medicine, and later on, took a more self-reflexive practice that included meditations on filming violence. Several developments contributed to an increase in the making of films and videos in and about the Gaza Strip after the turn of the new millennium, including continued technological developments, the outbreak of the Second Intifada and the international attention it brought to the region, and the growing number of local Palestinian filmmakers, in part thanks to the establishment of film training programs in Palestine. The Palestinian film institute and industry as a whole became tied to the significant purpose of preserving the collective identity, confronting and exposing the indescribable trauma of its people, and sharing the homogeneous ideology of a dispersed demographic and their ancestral memories.

2. Illustrations of Palestinian Resistance

Cinema is not merely a mere instrument of representation, but rather, as Jean-Luc Godard remarks at the end of his "Histoire(s) du cinéma", a "form that thinks". It is a time-crystallizing engine and a spiritual mechanism (Godard, J. L. 1988-1998). On the other hand, according to French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, cinema confronts the audience with an exposition of the world, in which the latter is "[...] absolutely identical with the movement of images" (Kerslake, C. 2005). Godard's frequently cited statement, however, is a good juxtaposition to that; the French New Wave filmmaker makes the distinction that it is not a matter of "making political films, but rather making films politically". In the context of the cinema of Palestine, it can be argued that it does both.

2.1. Making Political Films

This can be attributed to the second and third periods of the Cinema of Palestine where, as was considered appropriate for the climate of the time, filmmakers adhered to and accepted the limited, socially determined rules of clear exposition, using an accepted cinematic grammar and vocabulary to "convince". Their work's purpose was clear: filling the gaps in history and archiving audio-visual proof of Palestine's existence and crisis. What ensues from this is a plethora of raw, either barely or subversively edited footage of the land, the camps, and the people; this archival footage, combined with

interviews with historians, and firsthand accounts from Palestinians of all walks of life, offers a comprehensive historical perspective and amplifies the human rights focus that helps propel the cause and reach a wider international demographic.

Many examples of this exist; however, let's take a look at two:

- Starting with Geoff Dunlop's 50-minute documentary 'The Shadow of the West' starring and narrated by Edward Said, Palestinian literary critic, political activist, and one of the founders of postcolonial studies. The documentary offers a historization of the plight of the Palestinians and the ideology of Zionism in relation to colonialism and orientalism by analyzing and explicating the mechanisms by which these two operate. At the time of writing the script and preparing the material, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon was taking place, a relentless attack which ended in a total victory in 1967. Said wrote a film intended for a western audience, introducing a bold and objective narrative and a focus on the perspective of the "other", disentangling the racist homogeneity imposed on the Arab World as well as showing colonial violence and connecting it with more abstract and theoretical discourse. In addition, a very poignant sequence of Said conversing with displaced elderly Palestinian women about their homeland, what a true revolutionary is, and hope, anchors the documentary in the "show and tell" essence of documentaries and political films.
- Another example is 'Scenes of the Occupation from Gaza', a rare film by the legendary filmmaker Mustafa Abu Ali, one of the founders of the Palestine Film Unit, the first filmic arm of the Palestinian revolution. Shot by a French news team, the footage was edited by Mustafa in Lebanon to produce one of the earliest films on the occupied territory in Gaza. 'Scenes of the Occupation from Gaza' employs narration and experimental editing techniques to produce a cinematically and politically subversive film. Watching 'Scenes from the Occupation in Gaza' now can be distinctly different from watching it in 1973. The experience of viewing the film almost half a century later can certainly carry a peculiar impact, as one observes individuals who may no longer exist, yet whose movements, body language, and defiant gazes linger on the screen. Despite the film's worn visual quality and imperfect audio-track, it serves as a poignant representation of the bygone era of occupation—an artifact that

serves as a reminder of a time when there was a collective belief in the transformative power of images. While the damaged film serves as a simultaneous reminder of an unsuccessful revolution, such a reminder should not be a conclusive narrative.

- “Preserved meticulously within the radical possibilities of found footage, revolutionary cinema echoes in the subsequent projects of filmmakers such as Alsharif” (Alkassim, Samirah. 2023) This continuity emphasizes the enduring capacity of people to not only craft, chronicle, and advance their own visual narratives but also to shape the language of cinema itself. Scenes from the Occupation in Gaza accomplished this decades earlier, offering a metaphor for the Palestinian experience, located in a history that is unvanishing but transcending representation. Documentaries such as this one show how the cinematic language of resistance is not only forward-looking but introspective; it presents a brand of response to erasure and brutality where reality and the movement of the images are precisely identical.

2.2. Making Films Politically

Making films politically refers to the process of creating movies with a deliberate focus on political themes, messages, or commentary but as subtext and underlying message rather than an obvious aim of a film. It entails using the medium of film to explore, question, critique, or advocate for political ideas within a story or plot that gives the illusion of being far removed from the political position itself.

In a society desensitized to reality and violence due to constant exposure through various media, including news coverage, movies, video games, and online content, individuals may experience a diminished emotional response over time. The physical and emotional distance created by indirect exposure, such as through screens, contributes to this desensitization, fostering the illusion of being removed from the political context itself. Palestinian filmmakers recognized this phenomenon in the 1980s, leveraging their ties to a complex world of culture and language to advance their resistance through fictional narratives. By interweaving the cause with different genres, worlds, and stories, Palestine takes its place in the backdrops of these creative outlets. Fictional narratives, with their compelling characters and stories, connect viewers emotionally, evoking empathy and a deeper understanding of the impact of violence and war—an emotional resonance sought by any auteur.

Symbolism, metaphorical exploration, and storytelling indirectly explore complex and sensitive topics, allowing creators to convey nuanced messages that might be challenging to express directly. This approach fosters a more thoughtful and reflective engagement with the subject matter. It's fictional narratives that allow creators to craft compelling characters and stories that elicit strong emotional responses from the audience. By connecting viewers or readers to the fictional characters, creators can evoke empathy and a deeper emotional understanding of the impact of violence and war. An emotional resonance all auteurs want to achieve with their films.

Metaphors, on the other hand, enable the exploration of abstract concepts by drawing parallels with concrete, relatable elements. This technique provides a bridge between the unfamiliar and the familiar, enabling audiences to grasp and internalize complex themes more readily. Through metaphorical storytelling, filmmakers can transcend the limitations of direct discourse, encouraging viewers to reflect on the intended message without feeling overwhelmed or confronted. Moreover, the beauty of symbolism and metaphor lies in their universality. They possess the ability to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, resonating with diverse audiences on a profound, emotional level, allowing creators to convey messages that have a global impact, fostering a shared understanding of complex issues that transcends geographical and cultural limitations. To their core, these literary and artistic tools fuel creators in navigating the intricacies of complex and sensitive topics with finesse. Through this indirect approach, filmmakers can provoke thoughtful reflection, evoke emotional responses, and ultimately contribute to a deeper, more resonant engagement with the complexities of the human experience.

In Elia Suleiman's film *It Must Be Heaven*, symbolism is skillfully employed to subtly and poignantly convey the filmmaker's perspective on the Palestinian cause. Suleiman, who often uses humor and visual storytelling to address complex socio-political issues, utilizes symbolic elements to navigate the challenges faced by Palestinians. Throughout the film, Suleiman's own character serves as a silent observer, embodying the resilience and quiet strength of the Palestinian people. The recurring presence of a lone olive tree, deeply rooted yet persistently thriving amidst adversity, becomes a potent symbol of Palestinian endurance and attachment to the land. By juxtaposing scenes in different global settings, Suleiman draws parallels between the universal struggles for identity and belonging, subtly underscoring the

shared human experience while implicitly advocating for the recognition of Palestinian rights.

The Palestinian film *The Tale of Three Jewels* (1995) is another rich example that contains a lot of symbolism of oppression and struggle. Like many other films set in Palestine, *Tale of the Three Jewels* uses people to portray the country's struggle. The film specifically focuses on the main character, twelve-year old Youssef, and his loss of innocence. Most of the time, Youssef is seen playing and living in a fantasy world. However, his life is far from being a dream world. He is exposed to never-ending violence.

Symbolism is used to show how Palestinians are non-compliant with the oppression they endure. One of the most distinct and prevalent examples of this is the use of birds throughout the film. The birds, especially the doves, represent the Palestinian people, their desire for freedom, and how they are continuously pulled back into oppression. The symbolism of the birds is clearly very prevalent. The caged birds create an added tension because of the subconscious association the viewer could make with the entrapment of the birds and the oppression of the Palestinian people. In many ways, Youssef, the film's main character, was like his birds. He lived within Israeli imposed gates, behind checkpoints, and in a poor Palestinian refugee camp in the Gaza strip. Youssef's real world was far from his enchanted world, and his struggle represented Palestine's struggle.

Conclusion

The Cinema of Palestine emerged as a powerful and nuanced form of resistance against colonialism, providing a unique lens through which the Palestinian narrative is articulated and preserved. Whether creating movement directly identical to reality or putting said movement as a backdrop, Palestinian auteurs utilize their craft to transcend political boundaries, employing symbolism, metaphor, evocative storytelling, or harsh realism to convey the complex realities of life under occupation. Through their lens, the personal becomes political, and the ordinary becomes extraordinary, as the cinema of Palestine serves not only as a tool for cultural expression but also as a medium for global audiences to engage empathetically with the Palestinian struggle. The ability of Palestinian filmmakers to capture the multifaceted dimensions of their existence, from the daily challenges to the enduring spirit of resilience, contributes to a broader discourse on human rights and justice. The cinema of Palestine is a weapon that aids its people's

resistance in expose, in archiving and in standing against the test of time, one frame at a time.

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Abstract

From paintings by artists such as Sleiman Mansour and Nabil Anani, verses of poetry by writers like Mahmoud Darwish and Samih Al-Qasim, to melodies of voices like Marcel Khalife and Fairouz, Palestinian resistance has been able to firmly defy oblivion and persist in the face of erasure ever since the 'Nakba' of 1948. But painting, poetry, and music, ultimately rendered esoteric by cultural and language barriers, need a more ubiquitous and universal vessel to propel their cause into worldwide scale and exposure: visual storytelling. 'Le Septième Art' or cinema, the globally unifying language of sight and sound, is known to be not only a tool of entertainment but also a means of political manifestation. Being so, this paper delves into the pivotal role of the 'Cinema of Falasteen' as a tool of resistance and safeguarding of cultural identity in the face of political and cultural suppression. Through an analysis of key Palestinian films and documentaries—both in content and form—this study aims to examine how Palestinian filmmakers have utilized cinematic expression to

challenge dominant narratives and propaganda, confronting the complexities of occupation and displacement by creating a balanced relationship between politics and aesthetics. Most notably, this research seeks to highlight the power of cinema as a form of creative activism and survival of the Palestinian people against the retelling of history.

Keywords

Palestinian Cinema, Resistance, Cultural Identity, Cultural Heritage, Creative Activism

مستخلص

من خلال لوحات فنانيين مثل سليمان منصور ونبيل أناني، وأبيات شعر من كتاب مثل محمود درويش وسميح القاسم، إلى لحن أصوات مثل مارسيل خليفة وفيروز، تمكنت المقاومة الفلسطينية من تحدّي النسيان بقوة والمضي قدماً في مواجهة الاستمرار في الاختفاء منذ «النكبة» في عام 1948. لكن، تحتاج الرسم والشعر والموسيقى، التي أصبحت في النهاية باهتة بسبب الحواجز الثقافية واللغوية، إلى وسيلة أكثر انتشاراً وعالمية لدفع قضيتها إلى مستوى عالمي وتعزيز عرضها؛ وهذه الوسيلة هي السرد السينمائي. «الفن السابع» أو السينما، لغة الصوت والصورة العالمية الموحدة، لا تُعرف كأداة للترفيه فقط ولكن كوسيلة للتظاهر السياسي أيضاً. وبهذا، تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية الدور الحيوي لـ «سينما فلسطين» كأداة للمقاومة وللحفاظ على الهوية الثقافية في وجه التضيق السياسي والثقافي. من خلال تحليل أفلام ووثائقيات فلسطينية رئيسية - سواء من حيث المضمون أو الشكل - تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص كيف استخدم السينمائيون الفلسطينيون التعبير السينمائي لتحدي الرأي العام والدعاية، مواجهين تعقيدات الاحتلال والتشريد من خلال إقامة علاقة متوازنة بين السياسة والفن. وبشكل بارز، يسعى هذا البحث إلى إبراز قوة السينما كشكل من أشكال النشاط الإبداعي وكوسيلة لبقاء الشعب الفلسطيني قويا ضد محو هويته وتغيير تاريخه.

كلمات مفتاحية

كلمات مفتاحية: سينما فلسطينية، المقاومة، الهوية الثقافية، التراث الثقافي، النشاط الإبداعي

Résumé

Des peintures d'artistes tels que Sleiman Mansour et Nabil Anani, des vers de poètes tels que Mahmoud Darwich et Samih El-Qasim, aux mélodies de voix comme Marcel Khalife et Fairouz, la résistance palestinienne a su défier fermement l'oubli et persister face à l'effacement depuis la « Nakba » de 1948. Cependant, la peinture, la poésie et la musique, finalement rendues ésotériques en raison de barrières culturelles et linguistiques, ont besoin d'un vecteur omniprésent et universel pour propulser leur cause à l'échelle mondiale et accroître leur exposition ; le récit visuel. Le Septième Art ou cinéma, le langage unificateur de l'image et du son, est connu non seulement comme un

outil de divertissement, mais aussi comme un moyen de manifestation politique. À ce titre, cet article explore le rôle crucial du « Cinéma de Falasteen » en tant qu'outil de résistance et de préservation de l'identité culturelle face à la répression politique et sociale. À travers une analyse de films et documentaires palestiniens clés - tant sur le fond que sur la forme - cette étude vise à examiner comment les cinéastes palestiniens ont utilisé le cinéma pour remettre en question les récits dominants et la propagande, en affrontant les complexités de l'occupation et du déplacement en créant une relation équilibrée entre la politique et l'esthétique. Plus particulièrement, cette recherche cherche à mettre en lumière le pouvoir du cinéma en tant que forme d'activisme créatif et moyen de survie du peuple palestinien face à la réécriture de l'histoire.

Mots-clés

Cinéma Palestinien, Résistance, Identité Culturelle, Patrimoine Culturel, Activisme Créatif