Nadia Yaqub. *Palestinian cinema in the days of revolution,* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, ISBN 978-1-4773-1596-5, 2018, 266 pages.

Nadia Yaqub's book provides rich insights into the emergence and development of Palestinian cinema. It highlights the role played by Palestinian films in supporting the Palestinian struggle for statehood. Yaqub, an expert in Arabic language and culture, and chair of the Department of Asian Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, provides a detailed account of films produced during the 1960s and 1970s, placing them in their historical context. She thus provides readers with background information on Palestinian politics, history, and culture at a pivotal juncture of the Palestinian struggle for emancipation and freedom.

Palestinian films have not remained disconnected for the larger debates on the role of cinema in promoting decolonization and national liberation in global South societies. Flooded with Western film, global South societies have "experienced a process of deculturation whereby their indigenous cultures were destroyed" (p. 123). For a third world cinema movement cinema became a means to express a particular national culture and political ideology. Similarly, film festivals became sites that contested imperial and neocolonial policies (p. 135). They allowed filmmakers from global South societies to connect with each other, share resources and expertise, collaborate on projects, and build circuits through which their films would be circulated and screened. The book's six chapters offer a methodical introduction into the journey of Palestinian filmmaking as part of this process.

Chapter One provides an account of Palestinian representation during the post-Nakba period between 1948 and 1968, both in photographic and filmic works, as well as in literature and plastic art works. Yaqub explains that this body of work was the main source that filmmakers working on Palestine and Palestinians used extensively. She notes that during this initial 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" (p. 6). During this period, films and photographs about Palestinians were produced mainly by foreign journalists, and later by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East (UNRWA) to appeal for donations and charitable contributions. As a result, Palestinians were represented in footages as living in tent camps, crowded around aid trucks, learning in open air-schools, being taken care of in orphanages, while children are clothed in rags, and suffering from inadequate medical resources (p.21). However, Palestinian writers and artists of the post Nakba period were trying to understand what happened to the residents of Palestine and what this dispossession meant psychologically, socially, and politically. Over time, they developed a specific Palestinian perspective that eventually became the basis for a national movement in art and literature. Yaqub discusses in detail some of the works of emerging artists and writers during the 1950s, such as the works of Samirah 'Azzam and Ghassan Kanafani, which served as source materials for Palestinian films later on (pp. 28-29).

While the representation of Palestinians during the period 1948-1968 emerged over the backdrop of a humanitarian gaze, a shift in focus took place in Palestinian films produced in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. A movement for the "Palestinian-ization" of UNRWA produced films and photographs emerged (pp. 22-25), such as in the film *Aftermath* (1967), directed by Samir Hissen. In this film, Palestinians get a voice through interviews conducted with refugees. They share their experiences and perspectives in their spoken language, Arabic. In the following chapters Yaqub elaborates on the development of filmmaking about Palestine and the Palestinians within the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), within the wider context of an emerging alternative Arab cinema movement that extended from Third Cinema to Third World Cinema, and beyond (p. 7).

In Chapter Two, Yaqub focuses more specifically on the emergence of PLO-sponsored cinema as a revolutionary project. She reviews the creation of specialized production platforms, starting with the 1968 creation of the Palestinian Film Unit (PFU), later renamed the Palestinian Cinema Institute (PCI), in Amman (Jordan), and the subsequent formation of the Palestinian Cinema Group (PCG) in 1972. Yaqub notes that

PFU films produced during the late 1960s and early 1970s consolidated a Palestinian approach to cinema concurrently with an emerging Palestinian revolutionary movement. Films sought "not just to reflect or mediate the movement, but also to play an integral transformative role, culturally and politically, within it" (pp.48-49). While these films were concerned with visibility and voice, the filmmakers supported the Palestinian revolution by creating and disseminating films grounded in local Palestinian experiences within their struggle, rather than on acts of propaganda. As Yaqub notes, filmmakers engaged "questions surrounding the relationship of truth to the circulation of photographic or filmic image, the relationships with near and distance audiences, and the representations of events and landscape, action, and states of being was always informed by that fundamental goal" (p. 51). The films of Mustafa Abu Ali, a founding member of the PFU, PCI's first director, and a prominent filmmaker, focus on what it means to be committed to a collective struggle and the difficulty and necessity of that belonging for a filmmaker. Such questions were not addressed by non-Palestinian filmmakers who did work on Palestine and Palestinians till then (p. 52).

With the rise of alternative cinema in the early 1970s, especially in Latin America, a publicly funded alternative cinema movement emerged in the Arab world as well, with "Palestine" as a key theme. This body of work complements PLO-sponsored films. Yaqub explains that:

> Palestine and the Palestinian revolution were not just a Palestinian issue to be addressed by or on behalf of Palestinians living under occupation or in exile. Rather, the revolution was widely understood as a key component of the project of decolonization in the Arab world; creating Palestinian films was one way to act on one's ideological commitment to that project (p. 86).

Public sector cinema, which began in Syria in 1963, reached its peak in creating alternative cinema with the first International Festival for Young Filmmakers being held in Damascus in 1972 (p. 89). The Festival was considered a tool for the modernization and the strengthening of national culture by controlling the distribution of films to limit the ideological influence and

economic power of Hollywood and Egyptian commercial cinema. The festival had other goals, such as creating an educated film-viewing public through the active support of film clubs and cinematheques; educating filmmakers, either by funding their study abroad or by creating film schools at home; financing films that served national interests; and creating related national television industries (pp. 87-88). It seems to me, that filmmakers were walking along a tightrope, promoting new forms of cinema, grounded in local and regional contexts of politics, while maintaining the spirit of the Palestinian cause.

In Chapter Three, Yaqub introduces and discusses some of the short Palestinian documentaries, experimental and narrative works produced by the Syrian public sector cinema. She describes the contributions of these films to the creation of a vibrant, and socially and politically relevant cinema. In a passage worth citing, she notes:

> Palestinian films produced within Syrian public sector cinema demonstrate the drive of young Arab filmmakers to create a vibrant, innovative, and socially and politically relevant cinema. Their works creatively engaged archival material (UNRWA images, news footage, and radio broadcasts). They experimented with both intimacy and ironic distance in their treatment of Palestinian themes. Connecting with recent history and contemporary recent Palestinian literature, these filmmakers collaborated extensively with young artists and musicians in their experimental works. They addressed a number of the pressing issues facing the Arab world at that time, including the role that local tradition and class consciousness should play in constructing modern Arab and Palestinian societies. In terms of film form, they made sophisticated use of elaborate sound tracks, camerawork, collage, and montage (p.116).

Yaqub analyses three documentary works in greater detail to illustrate her argument regarding the films produced by the Syrian public sector. The first is Kais al-Zubaidi's *Far from the Homeland* (1969), which was "the first nonfiction work that allies itself with the political position of the resistance movement and also the first that attempts to express a perspective from inside the camps" (p. 90). The two other works are *Testimony*

of Palestinian Children during Wartime (1972), and *We Are Fine* (1970), which:

> are constructed of images and sound captured from the real world rather than acted for the camera. However, rhetorically, their aim is not to inform viewers. They don't trace a history of the conflict or offer statistics about the refugees and their living conditions. Rather, the films invite reflection and emotional investment in the Palestinian cause (p. 93).

The Syrian public cinema included the production of highly experimental films too. Yaqub analyzes three experimental films more particularly: *The Hand* (1971); *The Visit* (1970); and *One Hundred Faces for a Single Day* (1972). She notes that the latter was "the most ambitious and complex experimental Palestinian film produced within the Syrian public sector cinema" (p. 97). *One Hundred Faces for a Single Day* (1972), by the Lebanese filmmaker Christian Ghazi, is a non-narrative film structured visually and sonically by collage. It focuses on issues of "contradictions within Arab societies, the relationship of artists and intellectuals to revolution, and questions of speech and action (p. 97). As for films in the Narrative category, Yaqub analyses *The Dupes* (1972), a film based on Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Men in the Sun*, as well as *Kafr Kassem* (1974). These two films critique Arab politics, governments, and society, and "address themes of economic exploitation, political responsibility, and the failure of Arab masculine honor" (p. 106).

Syrian public sector productions on Palestine should be placed within and understood in relation to the wider geopolitics in which Syria was involved. This nexus meant that Syrian public sector filmmakers faced many uphill battles in completing and screening films that touched on Palestine and the Palestinians. Experiential films faced greater challenges in their form and narrativity because they had to appeal to wide audiences. This prevented filmmakers from producing quality political films. Furthermore, films offering an internal critique of Arab societies and political regimes were severely limited in terms of circulation. State censorship and changes in government agendas and administration exacerbated their predicament. In addition, limited funding affected the filmmakers' work and their living conditions (pp. 116-118).

In Chapter Four, Yaqub discusses the establishment of the third world cinema movement, its effects on the development of national cinemas in general, and the institutionalization and nourishment of Palestinian national cinema in particular. One of the most significant achievements was the establishment of the Palestinian film archives and the establishment of the of PCI and its institutions, services, and professional journal. Furthermore, the establishment of circuits and film festivals allowed Palestinian productions to gain visibility and reach diverse audiences. It also helped filmmakers establish and consolidate solidarity networks, build professional networks with other filmmakers, and take part in collaborative projects with global South countries while exploring new techniques and genres. Palestinian films began to be programmed and regularly screened as part of international film festivals. Some filmmakers were recognized with awards for their work. Filmmakers who are not Palestinians were encouraged to deploy cinematic language that are most effective in addressing their native audiences (p. 144). Different types of Palestinian films were developed in this context and transnational collaborations were established. For instance, Kassem Hawal's award winning film, *Our Small Houses* (1974), evolved into a commentary on Israeli militarism and its effects on Palestinians and Israelis alike (pp. 144-146). Kai al-Zubaidi's *Home of Barbed Wire* (1980), a collaborative work with German cinematographers, focused on Israeli settlements and Palestinian experiences with the Israeli military occupation in the West Bank.

Ghalib Sha'th's *Land Day* (1978), a collaboration with a German film crew, narrated the events of March 30, 1976, which became known as Land Day, commemorated annually. The chapter also grants particular attention to Monica Maurer and Samir Nijm's documentary films, *Children of Palestine* (1978), *The Palestinian Red Crescent Society* (1979), and *Why?* (1982). These films record life in refugee camps in a full range of social services, and the support provided by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israeli infringements on children's rights in the occupied Palestinian territories (pp. 152-155).

Finally, a special section in this chapter discusses Kassam Hawal's feature-length fictional film *Return to Haifa* (1982) - which was adapted from Ghassan Kanafani's novel by the same name – and which inscribes itself within alternative

cinema in the Arab world (p. 158). It highlights how cinema can engage experiences of exile and dispossession. Almost all film participants, and Hawal too, donated of their time and labour to create the film. Shot in refugee camps in Lebanon, it saw the participation of camp residents, as well as those of nearby villages, actively participating in its creation. For many, this film re-enacted aspects of the 1948 Nakba and offered visual representation of Palestinians' experience of leaving their homeland (pp. 157-160).

During the siege and fall of Tall al-Za'tar refugee camp, during the Lebanese civil war in 1976, a new chapter of struggles and sacrifice in Palestinian history began. Films during the 1980s documented and commemorated these Palestinian struggles through survivors' testimonies, as no journalists or photographers were allowed into the camp during the siege. Instead, narratives of the siege first emerged in oral histories, local newspapers, published interviews with survivors, and from the telegrams sent between camp leaders and the Palestinian leadership (p.167). Images that symbolize the suffering or revolutionary spirit are now being used to commemorate known community members and offer an intimate connection to the events, activities, and places depicted in the images (p. 191).

Chapter Five examines in detail how memories of the revolution are being sustained and transmitted. The chapter focuses on the use of photographs, footage, and films created during the siege and fall of Tall al-Za'tar refugee camp. *Tall el Zaatar* (1977) and *Because Roots Will Not Die* (1977) were innovative in their cinematic focus, and more sensitive to women's perspectives within a revolutionary movement. According to Yaqub, "the importance of women's traditional work to the survival of camp residents became starkly clear" (p.169). The Tall al-Za'tar films will not necessarily improve the political or economic rights for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Notwithstanding, they do provide a bridge connecting Palestinian activists from different eras and walks of life. They are also treasured by survivors and descendants of the siege (p. 191).

Yaqub analyzes posts from two Facebook groups whose members survived Tall al-Za'tar's massacres. The posts show the vulnerability of a marginalized community subject to

repeated violence, while trying to keep the memory alive by naming individuals, events, and places. The posts also expose the physical/material vulnerability of the survivors' archives, both personal and institutional. Images posted on are not always of good quality, suggesting they were.

Nowadays, the younger generation of Palestinian filmmakers are distant from the rise of the Palestinian struggle and its revolutionary spirit. Most of them may not have been born when the PLO left Beirut in 1982. Those who lived in Israel were not exposed to works by PLO filmmakers as any PLO activity and/or engagement was prohibited in Israel. As Yaqub explains, the works of Palestinian filmmakers living within Israel have been largely divorced from wider Arab contexts and were not informed by the politics of PLO or by third world cinema. For the most part, films produced by Palestinian filmmakers in Israel are addressed to different audiences of human rights advocates as well as to audiences of independent cinema (pp. 197-198).

Finally, in Chapter Six, Yaqub discusses how emerging Palestinian filmmakers from the 1980s onward relate to the post-PLO films which began with Mohammad Malas's project *The Dream* (1987) (p. 195). Projects of the new era seek to understand and make sense of what it means to be Palestinian (p. 196). Later works focus on the afterlife of the revolution. Individual sacrifices are explored rather than collective belonging. Filmmakers question the violence associated with the Palestinian revolution of the 1960s and its effects on the people who were directly affected by that violence, such as children of martyrs and the revolution's surviving fighters, rather than holding on to the romance of revolution. In other narratives, Palestinians are being represented as the victims rather than agents. Such films question the effects of an association between violence and Palestinian visibility in their works. (pp. 202-209). A special section of this chapter is dedicated to the Palestinian archives and the attempts to rediscover and recover lost film archives (pp. 198-202). Artists, filmmakers, and others are starting to repurpose the use of older materials by manipulating, uncovering, extracting, or creating new understandings of older images (p. 202).

In this book, Yaqub introduces a body of cinematography that is rarely known outside the circles of "certain groups"

of Palestinians and their solidarity networks. The book consolidates a new body of literature on Palestinian cinema intended for English-speaking audiences. While positioning herself as an outsider, Nadia Yaqub offers original analyses of the films she discusses in her book. Yaqub is careful not to judge the films by their artistic qualities or by their political effectiveness. She shows a robust understanding of Palestinian history, revolution, and struggles through the analysis of films.

Personal reflections

Reading the book and reflecting on its contents, I could not help but think through the text under four different hats.

First, having lived in Israel, I was not familiar with the revolutionary spirit of the Palestinian struggle with the PLO. My parents and those close to me experienced the 1948 Nakba first hand. They witnessed the massacres, displacements, and the resulting fears and anxieties. I grew up hearing very little about the suffering that went on during the 1950s and 1960s, as people were trying to get over the trauma of 1948. In those days, the only connection of Palestinians in Israel with the Arab world was through the Friday night films screened on the Israeli Arabic television channel. The film of the week was always an Egyptian film, Hollywood style. I had never heard before about "Palestinian Films" and definitely not "PLO cinema" until later in my adult life. The films presented and discussed by Yaqub have indeed enriched my own knowledge of a range of media that have emerged over the backdrop of the Palestinian struggle. The book also provides assurance that, despite instabilities and political predicaments, Palestinian cinema is alive and thriving. It represents an important medium of resistance in confronting the Israeli occupation and in supporting the Palestinian struggle for freedom and emancipation. I experienced Yaqub's *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* as an intensive adult learning crash course on Palestinian history and its representation. It also pushed me to think how filmmakers can contribute to preserve this history through artistic and audiovisual means. Not least, the book connected me emotionally, historically, and intellectually with other Palestinians, particularly women represented in films, who had experienced the Palestinian predicament from 1948 in its various forms.

Secondly, as an educator who worked as a teacher in the Arab education system in Israel for over 15 years, I find that Yaqub's book brings a much-needed critical perspective to the hegemonic pedagogical narratives prevalent in history and civic education taught in the Arab school system inside Israel. The films Yaqub discusses offer valuable resources that can help mitigate the effects of a much-sanitized state curriculum imposed on Palestinian schools in Israel. That said, I can imagine the great difficulties that would emerge in relation to allowing access to these films to Palestinians living inside Israel. Notwithstanding, the book can easily be used by educators and social activists in Palestinian society to decolonize the prevailing orientalist perspectives that shape the stereotypical representation of Palestinians on the screen. The book can also be used by film festival organizers to build community engagement with Palestinian issues and inform their programming.

Thirdly, as a professional archivist working in Canada, I am constantly thinking about what needs to be done for the long-term preservation of documentary and recorded history. The book sensitized me to the need of establishing a Palestinian Film Archives that would help understand how Palestinians have been actively involved in creating spaces for their authentic representation in public media. As an Archivist, I am way too familiar with the challenges of representation within an archival holding; what gets into the archives versus what gets ignored. Archives hold power in terms of allowing or disallowing the preservation of the memory of people. In that regard, I appreciated the contextual information provided by Yaqub in relation to the creation and development of the Palestinian Film Archives which started in Amman under PLO auspices. I also appreciated the difficulties that face various groups who collect, maintain, and preserve this amazing collection of Palestinian documentary heritage and the ongoing attempts to recover the film archives which, according to Rona Sela's documentary, *Looted and Hidden*: *Palestinian Archives in Israel* (2017), were captured by the Israeli military as the PLO was leaving Beirut in 1982.

Fourthly, as a Librarian, I'm always looking for authoritative resources that are informative, original, reliable, and well researched. I found Yaqub's *Palestinian Cinema in*

the Days of Revolution, a book that meets these requirements. The book addresses interdisciplinary topics that can be of benefit to researchers in various fields. The book's valuable resources further include a comprehensive back-of-book index, and a filmography that lists "all films made within Palestinian organizations or with support from a Palestinian organization between 1968 and 1982, the Palestinian films by solidarity filmmakers mentioned in chapter four, and all films mentioned in the book" (p. 220). The text is further supplemented with informative and explanatory notes that serve as a guide to readers – whether they are familiar with Palestinian history or not. While the list of films is organized by director, the book would have benefitted from a compilation of films by title.

On a final note, I cannot end my reflection without relating Nadia Yaqub's *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* to other works on Palestinian cinema. Specifically, the work of Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi (2008) *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma, and Memory*, and the work of Hamid Dabashi (2006), *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*; as well as recent work by Greg Burris (2019), *The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination*. These works provide a taste of a burgeoning literature on Palestinian cinema. In that sense, the four books, taken together, emerge as important building blocks of long overdue literature that considers Palestinians, not as terrorists and pathologized people, but as active agents in the articulation of their cinematic representation and reflections on their situated histories. Such an engagement opens up new vistas for political action and social transformation as Palestinians engage new modes of articulating their national struggle.

I highly recommend this book for libraries, especially research and public libraries, to include in their collections.

Suher Zaher-Mazawi,
professional educator, librarian, and archivist.

References

Burris, G. (2019). *The Palestinian idea: Film, media, and the radical imagination*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.

Dabashi, H. (2006). *Dreams of a nation: On Palestinian cinema*. London & New York: Verso.

Gertz, N, and Khleifi, G. (2008). *Palestinian cinema: Landscape, trauma and memory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sela, R. (2017). *Looted and hidden*: *Palestinian archives in Israel*. Documentary film. Israel.