Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution, by Nadia Yaqub. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. 280 pages. $95.00 cloth, $34.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY KAREEM ESTEFAN

Before the features of Hany Abu-Assad, Annemarie Jacir, and Elia Suleiman won international acclaim, Palestinian cinema emerged as a collective effort to document an unfolding popular struggle and to nourish Palestinians with images of themselves as active subjects fighting for liberation. Returning to these images with Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution, Nadia Yaqub recuperates little-seen Palestinian documentaries from the revolutionary 1968–82 period, contextualizing them in relation to prior and subsequent depictions of Palestinians, enduring questions about representation and visibility, and regional and global cinemas of decolonization. Her carefully researched book draws from writings by and interviews with key filmmakers to tell a grounded, intimate story about the vexed politics of image-making within a revolution, while linking Palestinian cinema to the Global South. For Yaqub, “the nature and possibility of political filmmaking” (p. 2) is epitomized by Palestinian filmmakers’ representation of a vulnerable community risking their lives for national liberation, together with the transnational solidarity they cultivated from a position of statelessness.

Examining the intertwined aesthetic and political aims of Palestinian revolutionary cinema, Yaqub analyzes the narrative, editing, and sound techniques in films by Mustafa Abu Ali, Kassem Hawal, Kais Al-Zubaidi, Nabihah Lutfi, and others. However, as befits a movement-oriented study, Yaqub devotes more attention to questions of community, pedagogy, institutions, and distribution than to the interpretation of particular films. She achieves a broad social and cultural history narrating Palestinian efforts to represent and publicize their collective identity and struggle, from 1948 to the present.

Yaqub’s first chapter provides a thorough prehistory of Palestinian cinema through photographs and films produced by foreign aid agencies, as well as Palestinian visual art and literature that
harbored seeds of the revolutionary cinema to come. Her nuanced critique of the “humanitarian gaze” behind images fabricated by relief organizations (p. 17), paired with her analysis of early Palestinian attempts to process the Nakba, is an invaluable contribution. In chapter 2, she traces the emergence and evolution of a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) organ, the Palestine Film Unit (PFU)—later the Palestinian Cinema Institute (PCI)—in relation to unfolding events such as Black September and the Lebanese civil war. Titled “Toward a Palestinian Third Cinema,” the chapter makes original and innovative connections to the Latin American revolutionary film movement of that name as it argues that Palestinian filmmakers sought to “play an integral transformative role, culturally and politically, within” (p. 50) the liberation struggle, not simply to depict it.

A major challenge for the filmmakers was that “cinema was never a priority” for the PLO leadership that funded them (p. 65). Yaqub emphasizes that PFU/PCI members faced unique challenges as filmmakers within a political organization, and without a state, during an unfolding revolution, citing tensions with Fatah leaders over aesthetics, budget, and ideology. In this light, her substantial discussions of Palestinian cinema’s relationship to Syrian public-sector cinema (chapter 3) and to international film circuits supporting Palestine and Third World solidarity (chapter 4) offer important insights into the necessary entanglements of a movement that sought to achieve global impact from a precarious position. The commitment and resourcefulness of Palestinian filmmakers emerges poignantly in Yaqub’s account of numerous cultural initiatives, including mobile cinema units, training in photography for wounded fedayeen, and most consequentially, a PCI film archive (pp. 126–29).

The archive of films at the heart of Yaqub’s study, like so many documents of Palestinian life that have been lost, looted, or destroyed, was never seen again. Lost after Israel’s 1982 invasion of Beirut, it has been partially reconstructed by activists, filmmakers, and scholars by retrieving copies of films sent to international film festivals or left behind in homes. Yaqub’s final two chapters center on the “afterlives” of Palestinian revolutionary cinema. Chapter 5 examines the memorialization of Tal al-Za’atar’s 1977 siege via photographs circulated in Facebook groups, and posits the destroyed camp as a site from which to understand Palestinian women’s care work and the ascendance of sumud as a social value. Chapter 6 surveys the recent trend to reanimate images from the Palestinian revolution, arguing it reveals a desire to revive the commitments of the liberation struggle in the post-Oslo era. Despite its insights, the chapter’s ambitious scope precludes adequately grounding and theorizing important questions regarding contemporary filmmakers’ stances on violence, and on “violent and victimizing image[s]”—initially the subject of her book (p. 14).

Yaqub persuasively argues that PFU/PCI filmmakers made a lasting contribution to the visibility of Palestinians and their collective struggle, while avoiding forms of hypervisibility that associated Palestinians with either spectacular violence or pitiful victimhood. However, as Yaqub acknowledges, recent cultural studies texts on Palestine/Israel and other sites of oppression have aligned the quest for visibility with a depoliticizing humanitarianism or voyeurism (n3, pp. 228–29). A more robust discussion of these issues, which are critical at a time of globally proliferating images of state violence, would have been welcome.

If certain theoretical questions are not discussed in depth, Palestinian Cinema nonetheless offers an extraordinarily well-researched, thorough, and nuanced historical account of a period of cultural
production that is important to revisit today. Yaqub’s approach has the great merit of examining Palestinian revolutionary cinema in its social context and on its own terms. At the same time, it admirably sets Palestinian filmmakers’ goals in relation to militant cinemas addressing similar questions around the world. Thereby, her book addresses cinema of revolutionary times, exploring what it can tell us about filmmaking in the days of revolution past and to come, here and elsewhere.

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