Projection: Three Cinemas in Ramallah & Al-Bireh

Inass Yassin

Cover photo: Cinema Waleed welcoming King Hussein in 1965. *Source: Ramallah Public Library*.

Commuting from Nablus to work in Ramallah in the late 1990s, I had never noticed the abandoned Al-Walid Cinema next to the central bus station on Al-Nahda Street. But several years later, when I passed the cinema, I noticed that its entrance was strangely clear from its usual clutter; I could see posters and ticket windows, and the gate was half open for the first time.

The young man who was locking the gate told me: "They want to demolish the building." "They," were the new owners of the building, the Al-Bakri stores, and "they" planned to erect a new shopping centre instead; a very common scenario in the post-Oslo Ramallah of Abraaj (*towers)* and shopping complexes.

Going to the cinema was not part of my adolescence; we were raised in Saudi Arabia, where cinemas didn't existed and the official T.V programmes were strictly censored, offering children only cartoons. But we did have the chance to enjoy the video cassettes that my father ordered for himself, as this

was his only way to watch uncensored movies. When my parents were married and lived in Cairo from the late 60s to the early 70s, going to the cinema was their main entertainment, which they missed in Saudi Arabia. From that video experience, I have vivid memories of John Travolta and Fiona Hughes in the 1983 movie "Staying Alive" which have been imprinted on my mind; my four siblings and myself devoted ourselves to learning the dance, but our success was limited. This was not our only pastime. At that time we were living in the second holiest Muslim city; Madinah Munawwarah and going to Al-Masjid Al-Nabawi and praying there was also one of our joys. Among these cassettes was another movie a film of romance and Arab music which was inscribed on my early consciousness, the Egyptian musical, "Abi Fauk Ash-Shajarah" (1969) featuring Abdul Halim Hafiz, Merfat Amin and Nadia Lutfi.

   In May 2008, I managed to enter Al-Walid Cinema for the first time; the caretaker hesitantly, let me in. Only two film posters remained on the walls of the abandoned house: "Abi Fawk Ash-Shajarah" from 1969 and " Al-Khataya" produced in 1962, both starring Abdul Halim Hafiz, and Nadia Lutfi. A poster of Jamal Abdul Nasser towered over them, a remnant of a lost era. Historian Saleh Abdul Jawad recalls:

> "I used to go to Al-Walid most often when I was young, as it was renowned for Arab films, and I remember two films especially; all the school girls were so excited to go to Al-Walid to watch Haleem and Nadia Lutfi in Abi Fawk Al-Shajarah and Al-Khataya."

After my visit, I was curious and began to explore cinema in Palestinian culture in Ramallah and Al-Bireh as a starting point for research. Reflecting on narratives by cinema goers, I wanted to know, how cinema culture emerged, was experienced and was transformed between the late 40s, when the first cinema opened, up until the present moment. By the late 1950s and until the early 1980s, three cinemas, Dunia, Al-Walid and Al-Jamil, operated in the small area of Ramallah and Al-Bireh, producing a cinema culture.

Dunia: The World Before and After the Nakba

Dunia, meaning 'world', was the first cinema in Ramallah, initiated by the Massayef Ramallah Company in 1944[1] and opened its doors before the Nakba in 1948. Raja Sam'aan, one of the owners, described the scene:

> "When the cinema was built, it was on the side of the town and surrounded by a stone fence, and we had to put up a wire fence to protect the cinema from the hyenas."

As Dunia was the only cinema in Ramallah in the late 1940s, audiences from Ramallah, Al-Bireh, Jerusalem, and surrounding villages – and other locales in

Dunia cinema 1947. *Source: Raja Sama'n*.

Palestine – were coming by buses or by their donkeys. The cinema seemed to have suspended its shows during the war of 1948; screenings were resumed about six months later.

In 1951, permission was issued by the new Jordanian authorities for Al-Walid Cinema, as a second cinema on Al-Nahda street in Al-Bireh. The owner was Sa'd Rafati who changed the name from Al-Rafati Cinema to Al-Walid Cinema and opened the cinema in 1955. The third cinema, Al-Jamil, was built in 1952 by Jamal Jubran with the Fraitekh family as his partner which operated up until the mid 1980s. With the opening of the three cinemas, cinema culture emerged in Ramallah and Al-Bireh as the main form of social and cultural activity and entertainment. Many people who experienced that period observe that the 50s and 60s was the golden age of the cinema; the lights started to dim after the 1967 war, not only because of the Israeli occupation and the six months subsequent closure, but also because of the competition with the video and television; the low point was in the 1980s when cinemas shut their doors at the end of the decade when the first Intifada erupted.

The Last Picture Show at Walid

After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, Al-Walid Cinema was re-opened in 1996 but closed again in 1998 for economic reasons, operating with irregular screenings until the second Intifada. In 2000 it was invaded and partially destroyed by the Israeli military, since then the building is used as a storage place for the street sellers. Nonetheless, a last, late picture show in the first year of the intifada – ironically recalling both the golden era of Egyptian cinema and of Arab nationalism during the Suez crisis – is recalled by pianist Nadia Abboushi:

> "I remember the last show I went to at Al-Walid; it was the screening of the Jamal Abdul Nasser film, as the cinema thought this would be a successful film in a time of the Intifada. Many people and school groups came to the show, this is the last memory of Al-Walid probably in 2000 or 2001."

A taxi driver in his late 20s noted that he almost never had been to a cinema, but the only film he went to watch in his life, was "Nasser 56 (1996)" at Al-Walid cinema in 2001.

Most recently, the Al-Walid building was sold to Al-Bakri Stores. The owner began to dismantle the building in May 2008 in order to build a shopping centre[2]. But the owners of the small shops along the Al-Quds side of the building had protected rent contracts and refused to leave. As result of that, the owner decided to keep the external structure of building, but take apart the inside to use for new shops. The external walls thus still stand, crowned with Al-Walid Cinema's original neon sign, written in Arabic.

Looking into some of the video footage I took of Al-Walid in 2008-2009, I could see layers of history: the Jamal Abdul Nasser poster, Arab film posters from the 1960s, Indian film posters, "Ayyam Asadat's" poster, the iconic poster of Faris Audeh from the first months of the second intifada, a small boy facing an Israeli tank with a stone, a poster of a champion wrestler, drawings of tools - hammers, knives and screwdrivers covering the wall of the projection room, a traced drawing of the 35 film reel that had been filled with the script "No God but Allah", a poster of Yasser Arafat almost unnoticed which had fallen upside down on the ground , the green flag of Hamas resting on part of the cut-off building, and at the same time the whole building was behind a metal barrier and shrouded with green fabric. All these images evoke different stages of social change and cinema culture.

Action at Al-Jamil

Al-Jamil Cinema was built in 1952, and was considered the most popular cinema –presumably the cheapest- where everybody from different classes could go to the cinema. Whether Al-Jamil's pricing policy had anything to do with its location near Qadoura refugee camp is an open to question. Despite the fact that all three cinemas screened Egyptian films, Hollywood, Bollywood, Turkish, and karate films, film-goers

of the period agree that each cinema had its own character: American film featured at Dunia, Arab films at Al-Walid and action films at Al-Jamil. This distribution indicates the distinctions of social class in the three cinemas which occupied less than a one-mile radius.

The three cinemas formed a short-lived union in 1956 to coordinate ticket prices and film programs, which probably failed due to the competition among them. However, they continued to coordinate informally. Usually, each film would be projected for one week, and when the "Coming Attraction" was about to commence, a car with a loudspeaker would drive through town and announce the film. Since the beginning of the 1960s, one ticket for two films was offered; this was common practice among the three cinemas.

Posters at al-Waleed Cinema, picture taken in 2008 by the author.

Before 1967 the Arab films were brought from Cairo and Amman, while American films came from Beirut where they were translated in Arabic, such as the Biblical epic, "The Robe" (1953) and "Gone with the Wind' (1939 but re-released in 1961). Not all the films had Arabic subtitles, and these were always shown in Dunia whose audience was partially English speaking. After 1967, films were brought from Tel Aviv and because of the limited entry of goods and movement of people into the West Bank, fewer movies were brought from Amman. The content of films began to change in the 1970s, gradually, karate, wrestling, Indian and even X-rated films were featured.

On the other hand, films on video cassette started to compete with the cinema, and income from films dwindled. The machines in the cinema also needed continual repair which was costly, and made more expensive by Israeli taxes. Moreover, the Israeli Army stirred fear among cinema audiences by entering with machine guns. Gradually, evening programs were cancelled because of military-imposed curfews or as people feared to encounter the Israeli army on darkened city streets. Raja Sam'an of Cinema Dunia recalls:

> "Once the Israeli military governor came to Dunia, and I asked him to put his machine gun in the offices if he want to attend the film. When he understood that I wasn't kidding him, he threatened me saying I was not going to spend the night in Ramallah [meaning a possible night in prison], the same night I escaped to Jordan in the Silvana [3] truck"

Advertisement that appeared in *Falastin* Newspaper on November 30, 1947. *Source: Falastin Archive at The Peace Library at Givat Haviva*.

Facing constant economic loss, the Massayef Company closed Dunia Cinema in 1984. In 1997 the company decided to demolish the building, after the building had turned into a desolate and dangerous place frequented by rats and drug dealers, which in turn evoked complaints from neighbors. Raja Sa'man explains the troubles he faced:

"Before the first Intifada, I tried to arrange screenings and I spent my own money to make advertisement to save the place, but it never work, and during the first intifada the gates were broken more than 50 times either by *Shabab* or by Israeli soldiers, while all I could do was watch from my office."

After the 1997 demolition, the Dunia site became a parking lot for four years; currently a high-rise shopping mall is under construction there. Similarly, Al-Walid and Al-Jamil closed in the first intifada, although their economic decline began long before 1987.

Despite that fact that cinemas were initiated in the 1950s for investment reasons, they became the core of the social and cultural life in the city, accompanied by other social and cultural events in Ramallah, like the entertainment nights at Hotel Audeh and the Ramallah festival. Cinemas, however, were the most popular as it was affordable for many.

The ambience of cinema was enhanced by the Arab stars who accepted Sideek Asa'd's invitation to visit Ramallah when their films were screened in the city. Asa'd was the agent for film distribution for many cinemas in the region before 1967 and invited many Arab stars like Mohamad Fawzi, Madiha Yousri, Na'ima A'kef and Taheyya Karyoka who performed before 1967 in the Al-Hambra Hotel garden, one of the Massayef investment projects where many stars also stayed.

All these factors created an atmosphere where people were passionate about cinema; some people would visit one cinema then go to another, spending the whole day trying to catch all the programs. For others, going to the cinema was a family occasion that every one enjoyed. Nadia Abboushi recalled the friendly atmosphere:

"I remember Walid Al-Rafati wearing a nice suit, welcoming the visitors warmly into Al-Walid Cinema."

The habit of cinema going produced intimate memories for many who recall characters like Abu Tawfik who was the controller of Al-Walid in the 60s. Abu Tawfik,
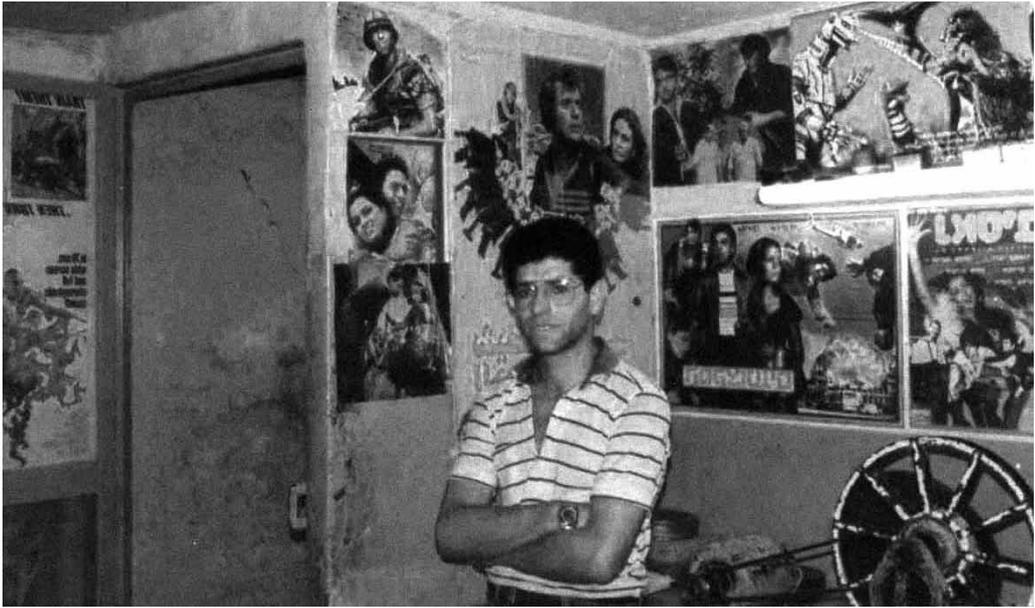
Jalal Atshan Dunia projectionist 1982. *Source: Jalal Atshan*.

originally from Jaffa, was a short fat man who wore a beret in summer and winter. As a youth, Saleh Abdul Jawad found him a bit frightening:

> "In the 1960s the ticket was seven piasters, I was able to buy the ticket but my friend couldn't so we always tried to find a way to smuggle him in, mostly during the last half hour of the film when Abu Tawfik, who was scary for us at that age, left his post."

Saleh continues:

> "Although I went often to Al-Walid, as it was more *Beirehish*. I also remember some American films at Dunia with Ava Gardner, Audrey Hepburn and Clark Gable, as well as James Bond films. These were not shown at Al-Walid, they all were Dunia's. I don't remember that much from Al-Jamil screenings which I think were more popular but I didn't miss any film in Dunia or Al-Walid."

Artist Valdimir Tamari wrote of his cinema memories from Tokyo, where he now resides:

> "I have the most memories of Cinema Dunia, including an embarrassing one when, as a mere boy, I held up a line at the toilet because I was wearing not one but two pairs of khaki shorts by mistake and could not open the buttons! The building itself was grand in white stone with its vertical lines.

The moment you enter there is an ante-room with the ticket window to the left, the entrance to the cinema proper was straight ahead. To the left of the door was a display window for the coming attraction and to its right one for the poster of the present showing. There was a small room to the right I think for buying soft drinks, and the pop-corn machine faced the street."

Despite Dunia's fame for Hollywood films, there were some Arab films that were a hit at Dunia, like Al-Karnak, in 1975, a film starring Sou'ad Hosni and Nour Elsharif, with a story that critiqued the Egyptian revolution and Jamal Abdul Nasser. As this film gained popularity, extended screenings were arranged for colleges and visitors from many Palestinian cities.

Although the cinemas did not feature documentaries, there was historical films such as "Gamila Buhrayd "(1958), an early Yousif Shaheen film, starring Majeda Ahmad Mazhar and Rushdi Abaza - that roused nationalist sentiments as Algeria had not yet gained independence.

Another film: "Decameron," (1971) directed by Pasolini, was screened at Al-Walid in the 1970s, finding viewers for its audacious scenes of nudity and scatological humour (as well as its brilliant execution) despite the audience unfamiliarity with such explicit treatment of its subject matter. Erotica was not screened (or indeed found in other media until the early 70s, when erotic magazines also started to find their way to the shops of Ramallah).

Three members of the Atshan family, who ran the projection room until the cinema closed in 1984, shared their memories. Abdullah, the father, initially worked at Al-Jamil Cinema through the mid-1960s when he moved to Dunia and kept working there until he died in 1975. Jamal, the eldest son took his father's place and worked until 1979, and Jalal, the youngest, began to help his brother when he was 13 and took full charge up until 1984 when the cinema was closed. He remarked:

"The projection room was my private space, I worked and studied for nine years there. I had two RCA projectors, each would run a 20-minute reel so I needed to switch between them. Once I projected the wrong reel and Salah Qabeel, an Egyptian actor, who had died in earlier scene came to live again, but no one was upset."

Jalal continues:

"When films are very long, and this is very common of Indian films, we had to cut some unnecessary scenes, to save some time since I had to show two films between 3 and 7pm. I also had big slide projector where we projected slide advertisements and I remember that the *Sous* seller brought us his photo and asked us to market him for the cinema audience and we did it for 30 seconds before the film began for free."

On Stage and in the Audience:
from Ahmed Shuqari to Body Building

From the rich collective memories, we find that the narrow stage of Dunia featured many events besides films, Jazz concerts were performed in the late 1960s on that stage, in addition to local theatrical work and Arab groups like Reda group and dancer Farida Fahmi who performed in 1962. Sports had its moment as well and the West Bank Body Building Competition was held there in the 70s.

As the cinema house was the only public space for entertainment, it was also used, occasionally, for political gatherings or speeches, and later in times of clashes with the Israeli military, people used to run and hide in the cinema buildings after the demonstrations. Vladimir Tamari recalls an earlier political event:

> "What I do remember for a fact is that Ahmad Al-Shuqairi, who founded the PLO, made a great and dangerous speech there (dangerous for its time) in the early sixties urging the Palestinians to self-determination and liberation. I have a strong impression of that gathering, but whether I was actually there or merely heard about it I am not now sure."

Until 1967 and the Israeli occupation, a film would only commence after the Jordanian anthem was played, with photos of King Hussein projected on the screen. The audience was required to stand and the controller's role was to make sure that all complied. The sisters Hala and Dumia Sakakini and the inveterate cinema-goer Madame Esther Jallad[4] were the only ones who stayed seated.

The internal spaces (and hierarchies) are also recalled in memories: Dunia had one hall on the first level, and one balcony in the second level, called the "Louj" which was occupied by families on its left side and the right side was for the well-mannered men, while the main hall was more rough and full of young men who placed their legs on the back of seats and were prone to cursing and talking back to the controller who followed the disruptive boys with his torch.

But the most privileged seats were called "penwar" in the front balcony, these seats, supposedly, were more comfortable and encircled with a little barrier making them like private boxes. During intermissions, there was a small cafeteria to buy drinks and snacks, and seeds sellers would go among seats calling and selling seeds, pistachio nuts, and jelly. Vladimir Tamari recalls the sounds of *bizer*:

> "After the newsreel shorts and perhaps a cartoon and a preview of the next movie, the film proper started. With its the incessant crackling of *bizer* pumpkin and other seeds started, increasing in tempo as the excitement of the movie built up. *Ktktktktktktkt* in the silence of a love scene. *Ktktktktktktktkt* during a chase scene. And *ktktktktkt* all the rest of the time. After the movie there were piles of seed skins on the floor besides each seat."

Vera Tamari, Vladimir's sister, adds:

> "We used to go as a family to the evening show. In winter there were two stoves each stood at the top of the flight of stairs. We waited in the patio until my father bought us the tickets from the small ticket window. We knew every one in the reception. Every time a film ended, Madame Jallad, who was an older stylish lady expelled from Jaffa - applauded from her seat in "Penwar" saying: "Très jolie, très jolie". She never missed a show at Dunia.

Going to the cinema in the 1950s and early 1960s was in harmony with the surrounding social world. Audiences were divided among the cinemas, according to the films, language, stars and the ticket price. Pornography was not presented in any form, yet there was no social restrictions on content of films with romantic or near erotic scenes, and everyone was able to join; old people, families, friends groups, couples, kids, they all went to the cinemas. For example, "Abi Fawk Ashajarah", was extremely popular in the late 60s and no one opposed this film that is full of kissing. The kiss count in this film was the content of popular chat. When the film was mentioned to Abu Sultan who operated Al-Jamil and Al-Walid Cinemas in the 80s, he immediately recalled the fifty-nine kisses. It was eminently popular; a friend of my parents watched the film in cinemas nineteen times. No criticism was voiced against this film of youthful energy and rebelliousness during a holiday on the beach, replete with romantic songs and dance performances. Like other Egyptian musical films, the songs, styles and stars spread regionally and were imitated. Sameh Abboushi notes:

> "After watching a film, we used to imitate the stars and to wear arm bands and put our watches on our right hand."

Nadia Abboushi added:

> "I felt myself Shadia every time I watched her in a film, and I tried to walk and talk the way she did."

Investment in cinema was successful for all three houses in the pre-1967 period. Weekends and feast days were the most crowded times. Despite the losses and tragedies of the Nakba, a post-1948 thriving cinema business in Ramallah and Al-Bireh managed to attract people from different classes, indeed, it may have served as a culture space for thousands of new inhabitants as they attempted to re-make their lives after expulsion from their homes. Raja Sam'an describes the festive atmosphere during the Adha holiday:

> "Dunia has one hall with 500 seats, in the Adha feast, 700 visitors entered the show, although they had to stay standing. Some times we scheduled on the

weekends for visitors coming from outside the Ramallah area, as Ramallah audience have the chance during the week to watch the film."

But the attitude toward cinema began to change after 1967 when the screening programs struggled to adjust to new conditions. There were many factors, that added up to business troubles. First, the limited ability to bring films from abroad, which helped Tel Aviv agents to be the sole distributors, this resulted in the presence of international films which were not translated to Arabic but rather into Hebrew so the people couldn't understand the movie. Second, the lack of security after the Israeli occupation; people preferred watching television at home rather taking the risk of going out in the late evenings. Ultimately, TV and video predominated over the cinema as a business and entertainment choice for the audience and as a result, audience numbers decreased and cinemas had to buy less costly films to survive. Cinemas started to feature more Indian, karate, wrestling, and pornography films. Therefore 1967 was turning point of cinema culture. Saleh Abdul Jawad describes an uneasy encounter with an older neighbour at an erotic film, which stands in contrast with the familial atmosphere of earlier cinema going:

> "It was the late 1960s, we went to see one of those erotic films and I was so embarrassed that I went with my friend secretly, and we tried to hide ourselves so that nobody would catch us, but we found our middle-aged neighbour and he turned to us asking what we were doing there, and my friend was courageous enough to ask him what are you doing, you're a married man. Then the neighbour replied, "I just came to learn about the morals of West."

These changes in film programming affected people who were passionate about going to the cinema in the past to stay away. A small audience went to watch karate or pornography films until the mid 1980s, but some displayed no respect for the cinema as a public space. Raja Sam'an reports:

> "In the early 1980s people start to hit the seats with their legs until they destroyed the chairs if they didn't like the film."

As a result of these change, a new idea has emerged in the public mentality, which considered going to cinema, especially for families, as inappropriate behavior. This opposition to cinema as a result of content screened in the post 1967 period continues to some extent in the current times.

Disappearance - Reappearance

In the first intifada, the cinemas closed and they disappeared from cultural life. There was no functioning cinema house until the late 1990s, but there were some initiatives for screenings organized by cultural centers like the cinema club founded by the Popular Art Centre in 1994 with regular screening programs and 40 seats. Another attempt to run the cinema space was made by poet Abd Latif Aqil in the 1990s, who established Al-Siraj theatre at the Al-Jamil building. After he passed away, the building was rented to George Ibrahim in the late 1990s. The internal Al-Jamil cinema was demolished and rebuilt as Al-Qassaba Theater and Cinematheque with two screens, screening three films per day at present. Al-Qassaba could be considered a project of renewal for cinema culture. It was founded as a NGO with responsibility towards the community to revive cinema culture and to generate income. It produces and hosts festivals and shows international, Arab and Palestinian films that address critical issues in art, life and politics, yet theses don't attract audiences, while Egyptian comedy films seem to be the most popular and relatively profitable.

To understand the factors behind the abandoned cinemas in Ramallah and Al-Bireh, research needs to continue. It is important to explore the dynamics of contemporary film festivals in Ramallah is the trouble in finding an audience due to the films' complexity or does insufficient advertising plays a role in weakening the attraction of the cinema? Economic condition can also be cited as a reason and certainly social change is a major factor affecting the numbers of cinema goers. If cinematic projects are founded now either for the sake of business or for cultural enrichment, it is still difficult to know how either would achieve the goal.

The reasons why cinema is no longer popular now in Ramallah and Al-Bireh and Palestinian society at large - although it was an important part of cultural life in the 1950s and 1960s are many. Perhaps the search for an answer to the question should start with:

Can a changing Palestinian society identify common social values that would refigure cinema going as a social experience and public space?

Inass Yassin is a visual artist whose work deals with the notion of transformation within Palestinian modernity. This text is part of her research for an art project "Projection, 2009-2010".

Endnotes

1   In the early years, the project was shared property among different families, in 1995 Massayef bought the last shared portion from the Harb family and it became Massayef property.

2   This has become the tradition in the last 15 years in Ramallah where many old buildings were replaced with new shopping centers within investment projects. Dunia Cinema, Al-Bardouni Restaurant, Nao'um Restaurant, and more are just few examples for this trend.

3   Silvana Sweets Co. was established in 1949, located in the West bank town of Ramallah.

4   See Raja Shehadeh, "In Memory of Esther: Cinema Dunia." Electronic Intifada, 10 March 2008, republished from Arte East.