REVIEW ESSAYS

The Adjacent Art of Documentary: A Palestinian Film Festival

LILA ABU-LUGHOD
Guest Editor

Film festivals, whether in Cannes, Venice, New York, or Ougadougou, are cultural events of social and political significance. They are occasions for the valuation and evaluation of films. They allow filmmakers to meet, fanning rivalries and creating solidarities. Besides their artistic and social functions, they can, in cases like indigenous peoples' or human rights film festivals, enable cultural activists to disseminate messages about loss or injustice and to put before international audiences political claims (Ginsburg et al. 2002). The entanglement of politics and aesthetics is a strong feature of a vibrant Palestinian cinema whose existence suddenly became widely known when Elia Suleiman won the jury prize at Cannes in 2002 for his film *Divine Intervention.* A Palestinian film festival was mounted in January 2003 by Columbia University's Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures Department to mark and celebrate what Professor Hamid Dabashi, expert on Middle Eastern film, described as "the emergence of one of the most exciting national cinemas in recent memory" (in press), on the level of Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, German New Cinema, and recent Iranian cinema in its distinctive contributions to global cinematic language. Called "Dreams of a Nation," organized by Dabashi and other Columbia faculty and curated by Annemarie Jacir, a Palestinian filmmaker, the festival included more than 30 feature films and documentaries. The challenges of curating the festival were formidable: Palestinian filmmakers are scattered around the globe; some films had to be hand carried to New York by their directors while others were obtained with great difficulty because of the Israeli closure of the West Bank and Gaza that kept post offices nonfunctional and filmmakers trapped at home. (For a complete program and the first database on Palestinian film, see www.dreamsofanation.org.)

Dabashi's effort to promote scholarly reflection on what he called one of the most significant cinematic events in recent history met with immediate opposition, a sign of the impossibility of separating art and politics in the case of Palestine. The first hostile phone calls came from Hillel, the university's Jewish student organization, with the Conservative Club subsequently mobilizing an e-mail and phone campaign to the office of the university president. The dramatic festival poster, which showed historic Palestine with doves flying out of it, was considered hateful by members of one pro-Israeli organization. Criticism by the rabbi of Columbia/Barnard Hillel in *Jewish Week* was followed immediately by a wave of defamatory, obscene, and threatening calls to the organizers. Campus security and the New York police had to be involved when there were death threats. It seemed that the second aim of the festival, "to restore dignity to a people much maligned and injured in recent history by way of acknowledging their art, recognizing their humanity, affirming them in their celebration of life" (as Dabashi explained in an e-mail dated February 28, 2003, to the university secretary who had asked for clarification) made this film festival a target for Zionist groups in the United States, already well organized

The late Edward Said addressing the opening night audience at "Dreams of a Nation: A Palestinian Film Festival," Columbia University, January 24, 2003. (Courtesy of Kristi-Lynn Cassaro)

to counter mounting criticism of the Israeli government's violent policies. In the past year, violations of Palestinians' human rights had become widely discussed via divestment campaigns taking off across U.S. campuses (including Columbia and Barnard) and open letters and petitions by major Jewish intellectuals, American and European, opposed to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Despite the hostility, the festival went ahead smoothly and attracted overflow audiences. The festival represented the range of Palestinian filmmaking, from highly professional feature films like Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* and Michel Khleifi's classic *Tale of Three Jewels* to short videos by news cameramen trapped in their offices when the Israeli military occupied Ramallah and laid siege to Arafat's compound in 2002. Audiences were taken from the high cinematic art, often rich with allegory, of experienced filmmakers to experimental video projects by children in refugee camps; from subtle documentaries exploring the life experiences of Palestinian men, women, and children in their imbrication with Israel to the darkly zany films of someone like Hany Abu-Assad, who mischievously described his work as 100 percent fiction and 100 percent documentary.

The small selection of recent documentaries reviewed in this issue, because of their interest for anthropologists, gives a sense of the ways documentary film, like ethnography, can creatively and thoughtfully record, witness, humanize, and persuade. This selection also enables us to reflect on key issues in the present of Palestinian history: the silencing of atrocity, the compromises of the everyday, the gendering of national belonging, the symbolic manipulation of children, the remembrance of past traumas and difficult presents, alongside desperate dreams for the future.

These are not timeless ethnographic films. Their Palestinian subjects are too caught up in political conflict for that. Yet neither are these films just journalism. Like contemporary ethnography, which Liisa Malkki (1997), George Marcus (2003), Sherry Ortner (1999), and Paul Rabinow (2003) have been arguing, is anxiously "adjacent" to other modes of knowing, such as good journalism, documentary film is analytical and slow, taking time to record what is not obvious and weaving together, through visual and aural means, much more than can be described. And if anthropologists are anxious about being "belated," as Marcus argues, these documentaries' connection to the timeliness of journalism is also only indirect: either because the grave conditions seem to change so little or because the films alert us to worlds that we then notice more in the news. For many, this probably happened with Leila Sansour's brilliant *Jeremy Hardy vs. the Israeli Army* (not reviewed here). Set in Bethlehem, in turns comic and terrifying, it is about the unarmed Europeans and North Americans of the International Solidarity Movement who attempt, through their presence as witnesses, to protect Palestinian civilians. It premiered at the festival on January 25. The news on March 16 that Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old American, was bulldozed to death by the Israeli military while she was trying to prevent a punitive house demolition in Gaza, was made more horrifying by our having come to know, through the documentary, some of the peace workers who had been there before her. As the films reviewed here make clear, Palestinian film is inescapably caught up with politics and the news while its groundwork (and artistry) is the humanity of its subjects.

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