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Reflexões sobre mulheres palestianas e cinema

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## Introduction

Shahd Wadi and Júlia Garraio

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# Introduction

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The camera is like a magic lantern that we embrace to make our dreams come true. It is the tool we use to reclaim our existence, memory, and humanity.

Mai Masri (Palestinian movie maker), 2008

- 1 In 2011 we organized a cinema and debate cycle entitled ‘Palestinian Women and Cinema’ in Lisbon and Coimbra, Portugal. We wanted to bring to the public a cinematography that is practically unknown, but mostly we were interested in promoting a discussion about cinema, feminism and Palestine.
- 2 This initiative made us realize the extent to which cinema is able not only to project a home for Palestinians living in exile, but also to be a space where “the other” meets with Palestinian memory, history, identity, and, above all, Palestinian resistance and struggle for existence. Through a broad variety of aesthetic approaches and different political positions, the screened films addressed and reflected on the double resistance of Palestinian women, not only against the colonial and patriarchal Israeli occupation, but also against oppression within their own society. While Western media tends to portray Palestinian women through simplistic and redundant forms of representation, Palestinian women’s cinematic lenses and words have become their own tools to tell and to resist images imposed on them. In other words, cinema has become a political story-telling device to narrate personal and collective stories of resistance.
- 3 For us, holding the cycle in Portugal was even more imperative because there has been very little access to this cinematography. So far only a very small number of Palestinian films have had commercial distribution in Portugal<sup>1</sup> Most of these films do not address feminist issues and none of them are directed by women<sup>2</sup>
- 4 The cycle was hence a brief moment when the public from Coimbra and Lisbon had access to films about Palestine not previously screened in Portugal. Among them there were films by Palestinian female directors, like Annemarie Jacir’s *Salt of this Sea* (2008) and Buthina Canaan Khoury’s documentaries *Women in Struggle* (2004) and *Maria’s Grotto*

(2007). Films based on screenplays by Palestinian women were also screened: Eran Riklis' *Lemon Tree* (2008; screenplay by Suha Arraf) and Hany Abu-Assad's *Rana's Wedding* (2002; screenplay by Liana Badr and Ihab Lamey). The director of one of the films selected, Juliano Mer-Khamis, was murdered while we were preparing the cycle.<sup>3</sup> His documentary *Arna's Children* (2003) is about a woman who was a settler in 1948<sup>4</sup> and who later embraced the Palestinian cause becoming, in a way, Palestinian. Therefore all the films that were screened in the cycle have something in common: they say Palestine through the body and the experiences of women.

- 5 These films triggered debates about issues related to the Palestinian people, especially Palestinian to women, that tend to be ignored by the media coverage of the Israeli occupation of Palestine: the memory of *Nakba*,<sup>5</sup> the separation wall, the situation of refugees,<sup>6</sup> the brutality of the Israeli military occupation and oppression, the seizure and colonization of Palestinian land, the sieges and blockages that prevent freedom of movement, the situation of Palestinians citizens of Israel,<sup>7</sup> women's participation in the armed struggle, female political prisoners and their experiences of torture. The guests for the debates were journalists who had visited the region, activists, academics, artists, and politicians.<sup>8</sup>
- 6 The richness of the debates made us consider organizing a publication. Following the idea behind the cycle, this volume of *e-cadernos ces* intends to be a Palestinian feminist screen that projects reflections on Palestinian women and cinema. We believe that the terms "Palestine", "women", and "cinema" are always in construction and open to different interpretations. We therefore invited contributions related to Palestinian women and cinema, including reflections on film portrayals of Palestinian women, critiques on films directed by Palestinian women or, more broadly, about the place and the impact of Palestinian women on cinema. This volume of *e-cadernos ces* was hence intended as an open space for sharing stories, narratives, essays, interviews, film analyses, or other reflections on Palestinian women and cinema.
- 7 We assembled a group of six studies by scholars from several origins and who have very different approaches. Colleen Jankovic's, Shahd Wadi's and Teresa Cunha's articles discuss cinema directed by Palestinian women and are also about Palestinian women. Colleen Jankovic examines the representations of home in several films to address the notions of belonging, nation, privacy and family in a context of dispossession and occupation. By analyzing the films *Salt of this Sea* (2008) and *Amreeka* (2009), Shahd Wadi also tries to redefine the concept of borders in Palestinian exile through the body in the cinematic experience of Palestinian women. Teresa Cunha adopts a post-colonial feminist approach to read, watch and listen to *Maria's Grotto* (2007), a documentary about "honor crimes" in which women "interrupt the unbearable noise" of a patriarchal culture in the context of occupation.
- 8 The other three contributions are about cinematographic representations of Palestinian women in films by male directors. Fabrice Schurmans analyzes the female protagonist of *Divine Intervention* (2002) as an allegory of the Palestinian struggle. Schurmans uses a post-colonial approach to examine the cinematographic representation of a context that he describes as colonial. Leah Soroko's and Júlia Garraio's texts about the Israeli films *Lemon Tree* (2008) and *Strangers* (2007) may look bizarre in a volume whose organizers support the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel.<sup>9</sup> The fact that a Palestinian woman with Israeli citizenship wrote the script for *Lemon Tree* "complicates" the film's identity; while *Strangers* is an Israeli cultural product with no Palestinian participation at

all. In addition, the latter is paradigmatic of orientalist discourses about Arab women as victims of their own culture, an image adopted in accordance with Israeli propaganda. In Europe, in general, as in Portugal, the image of Palestinian people is usually produced by the “other”, often in agreement with the voice of the occupier. Our decision was due to the conviction of the need to discuss these films from a critical point of view, an option which supports the goals of BDS and resists the images imposed on Palestinian women.

- 9 When we organized the cycle, the austerity measures that have been so devastating for cultural activities in Portugal were already felt. The event would not have been possible without the help of several institutions that provided us with logistic support, including the Center for Social Studies in Coimbra, Cine-club Fila K, the Center for Feminist Intervention and Culture - UMAR, as well as the generosity of directors and some entities that had the copyrights and, in some cases, renounced their fees or changed only symbolic amounts. We may also count in the help of the Centro de Documentación: Cine Palestino (Madrid), which promptly provided us with film copies.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Zein Qattan offered a generous support to the cycle. We express our deep gratitude to all these people and institutions.
- 10 We believe in a feminist Palestinian cause that also takes place in cinema screens. For us, the cycle, as well as this volume of *e-cadernos ces*, “Reflections on Palestinian Women and Cinema”, is, above all, a political act. It is a challenge to see and read these women through their own gaze. Basically, it is an invitation to use with us and with them the magic lantern called Palestinian cinema.

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## NOTES

1. Such as: *Divine Intervention* (2002) and *The Time that Remains* (2009), by Elia Suleiman, and *Paradise Now* (2005) and *Omar* (2013), by Hany Abu-Assad. Other titles were screened only in cinema festivals and alternative circuits.

2. *Miral* (2010), by North-American director Julian Schnabel with a screenplay by Palestinian writer Rula Jebreal, is the only film with a Palestinian woman as a protagonist that was commercially distributed in Portugal.

3. The director was murdered by a masked man in front of the Theater for Freedom, which he had co-founded. His father was Palestinian and his mother was Israeli, and he defined himself as “100% Palestinian and 100% Jew”.
  4. She was a member of Palmach, the Zionist militia that participated in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948. For more information see: Pappe (2011).
  5. *Nakba* is an Arab word that means “catastrophe”. It is used to refer the Palestinian exodus in the context of the destruction of more than 530 Palestinian towns and villages and the expulsion of more than two thirds of Palestinians from their land. The Israeli forces took control of 774 towns and villages. Many families were forced to leave their homes. The atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli forces included more than 70 massacres and circa 15,000 deaths. *Nakba* day corresponds to the date when Israel declared its foundation as a state. In Palestinian culture this word is connected foremost to sadness, loss, betrayal, and tragedy. About *Nakba*, see, for instance: Sa’di & Abu-Lughod, (2007); Pappe, (2011).
  6. The report by the *Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics* (UNRWA – The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, 2012, Statistics), available at: <http://www.unrwa.org/>, shows that 1.4 million people lived in historic Palestine in 1948. Circa 800,000 were expelled from their homeland. By 2012, 5.1 million refugees were registered in UNRWA – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. This is only an approximation that does not represent the real number of refugees, since it does not consider the non-registered refugees (families that are not considered suitable to receive support from UNRWA, or families that became refugees after 1948). Concerning the situation of Palestinian refugees, see, for instance: Schulz (2003).
  7. Palestinians who live inside Israel suffer from racially discriminatory policies that treat any person from Palestinian origin as a “second class citizen”. Despite having Israeli citizenship, they are systematically discriminated and they do not have the same civil and legal rights.
  8. We thank our guests: Adriana Bebiano, professor and coordinator of the PhD program in Feminist Studies; Elsa Sertório, director, author and activist in Palestinian issues; Frederica Jordão, anthropologist; José Manuel Pureza, professor and former MP who was particularly active regarding the Palestinian cause; Manuela Góis, feminist activist; Mihaela Mihai, researcher in political science; Olímpia Pinto, feminist activist; Patrícia Fonseca, journalist who traveled several times to Palestine and has been writing regularly about its people; Teresa Cunha, researcher engaged in feminist issues.
  9. This global campaign began in 2005 with the aim of isolating Israel and was inspired by the campaign against apartheid in South Africa (for more information see: <http://www.bdsmovement.net>).
  10. The Centro de Documentation Cine Palestino in Madrid (<http://cinepalestino.com/>) is a unique initiative in the context of the Iberian Peninsula. It organizes Palestinian Film Festivals, publications, translations, online information and it holds an archive of Palestinian cinema/film.
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