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Knights of Cinema

The Story of the Palestine Film Unit

Khadijeh Habashneh

Translated by Nadine Fattaleh

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Palgrave Studies in Arab Cinema

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Fig. 1 Sulafa Jadallah, the first woman Arab cinematographer, at Al-Karameh, 1968

This book is dedicated to...
Sulafa Jadallah,
the first Knight and the first Arab woman cinematographer,
her fellow Knights of the Revolutionary Cinema,
Hani Jawbarieh and Mustafa Abu Ali,
the heroic Martyrs and Cinematographers,
Ibrahim Nasser (Mutee') and Abdelhafeth Al-Asmar (Omar),
and all the Pioneers of the Palestinian Cinema.
Khadijeh Habashneh

FOREWORD

WHY THIS BOOK?

A book with a simple title, one that seems festive and provocative, arrives at a time when the provocative celebration is absent, *Knights of Cinema—Story of the Palestine Film Unit*, researched and written by Khadijeh Habashneh.

Its subject, however, pertains to an unquestionably serious matter defined by two objectives: a moral commitment to memorialize the struggle of young filmmakers from Palestine, Jordan, and other Arab countries, who gave their lives to their art and believed in its provocative—enlightening—message; and the preservation of cinematic memory. Some of these filmmakers were martyred, others were wounded and their lives disrupted, and a third group sacrificed their own dreams for a cause that went beyond individual considerations: the question of Palestine. This commitment participated in preserving a Palestinian cinematic memory that grew into a revolutionary context, faced multiple challenges, and lived long after 1982, *after* the Palestinian resistance left Beirut.

If, prior to leaving Beirut, the challenges of the birth of this cinema approached martyrdom, the loss of the archive after departure required an even more arduous effort to find and re-animate [or restore] it, even if it was incomplete.

This exhaustive effort, which took almost a decade, is what Khadijeh Habashneh, revealing great modesty, has called “writing and research.” In rescuing the “documented memory,” this text has preserved the struggle, suffering, and steadfastness of the Palestinians for more than two decades,

depicting the misery of the camps, the fire of fedayeen operations and Israeli raids, and major tragic events such as the siege and fall of Tal Al-Za'atar in the summer of 1976.

With patience and persistent research, Habashneh has presented a cultural work of tremendous integrity and commitment. She has done this without seeking personal benefit, and without any institutional support.

Her book opens with two acknowledgments that are highly significant and demonstrate her conviction: First, "This year 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the first Revolutionary Palestinian film to announce the image of the Palestinian people and their revolution to liberate their land." This acknowledgment turns the birth of the revolutionary cinema into the birth of the Palestinian revolution, linking a "new cinema" with a new struggle. This reveals the nature of Habashneh's book, with its unassuming title, as political-historical research, which reflects the transition of Palestinians from one state to another; it examines the uniqueness of the "revolutionary cinema," which is directed at a new audience, and distinct from the traditional cinema, whether Hollywood or Arab cinema. The second acknowledgment refers to the loyalty of the living to the dead, those who died for a just and universal human cause: "This year also marks the tenth anniversary of the absence of one of the founders of this cinema and the last of its knights, the Palestinian director Mustafa Abu Ali...." To counter the threat of oblivion, Habashneh chose to address the forgotten, and to recall and recount the bright era led and participated in by the late director.

This book was intended to recall a distinguished film fighter who lived and was devoted to his cause, sometimes facing rigid bureaucratic attitudes and cultural disbelief that a film could be a combative tool adopted by all the revolutionary movements in the world. His suffering was intensified by the difficulty of beginnings, because unlike the non-refugee revolutionary movements that developed their cinematic art after their victories, Mustafa Abu Ali started from a Palestinian condition where "there was no cinema and no stability." He was obsessed with the idea of establishing and securing the materials and technical effort *necessary to build 'what does not exist'* which was a commonly held idea among Palestinian revolutionaries at that time.

Perhaps the obstinate connection between the beginning of the armed revolution and the beginning of the revolutionary film is what made Mustafa summon all his strength and mentor a generation of young people who learned the principles of cinema work while practicing it. For this

he assembled Arab and Palestinian efforts, which culminated in meeting committed artists from all over the world. Although it was and still is abbreviated in the simple term “documentary film,” the efforts of Mustafa Abu Ali and his companions were epic: the photographers were fighters first, and their relationship with photography was very limited until they were trained; their cameras were surrounded by dust and bullets. They often fell on the battlefield, like the martyr Hani Jawhariyyeh,¹ who left a secure job and chose to film mountain battles very far from safety.

While Habashneh states in the subtitle of her book, “The first film unit to accompany a national liberation movement from the beginning,” the real subject of her book is the rendering of the lives of Palestinian film pioneers in their revolutionary dreams and sacrifices. As a veteran revolutionary, she recorded what she had experienced with the pioneers of the Palestine Film Unit, adding to that many testimonies, whether mentioned in a silent written form, or the oral accounts of people who are still alive. She wanted to restore the Palestinian cinematic truth, after it had been forgotten.

Habashneh traced the effects of a subject she had lived and experienced and went from the status of the witness artist to the historian, who sees, inquires, examines, and travels to build a cinematic document worthy of cinematic fighters. Through her efforts she has archived and restored what was once archived and lost. She searched for it in more than one human reference and city, and it is coincidental that the film archive she and her husband had kept in a safe place in Beirut ended up in the Israeli intelligence records, hence the importance of what the knights of Palestinian cinema had accomplished.

Habashneh has made a long effort to preserve the Palestinian film archive, to resurrect it and bring it back to life. In this she is expressing her loyalty to its creators and recognizing its national importance, as the archive classifies the following: humanitarian documents, the people of the camps, the efforts of the cinema pioneers, documents about many battles not least the Battle of Al-Karamah, and artistic documents that witnessed the difficulties of the making of the Palestinian revolutionary cinema.

As an author, she has taken memory as her solid reference, recognizing that those with no memory are without history, and that memory is a living existence that needs to be activated, cared for, and structured. Her

¹ Although the spelling of “Jawhariyyeh” as is done here is common, the rest of this book observes the spelling used by the family of Hani Jawharieh.

long quest to recover the films is an example of memory activation, and her book aims to celebrate what should not be forgotten. In both cases, she has recounted a series of experiences including her own, parts from Mustafa Abu Ali's life history and his cinematic visions, film manifestos and festivals, and the experiences of anonymous peers who fought through their militant films. She has mentioned their names, highlighted their lives, and illuminated their stories and sad tales.

Through the content of this book, Habashneh has sought authenticity by using unembellished language. She has prioritized a clear and factual writing style which does justice to the fedayeen in the field of cinema, rather than concerning herself with verbal sophistication. This gives a lesson about the loyalty of the living to the dead. It keeps its sincerity in spite of all the frequent battles of the Palestinians and explores the credibility of the artist.

Finally, this book is a testament to the urgency of memory for identity, history, and, in the case of the Palestinian struggle, morality. It is worth reading.

August 30, 2019
Amman, Jordan

Faisal Darraj

Faisal Darraj is an award-winning author, philosopher, and literary critic based in Amman, Jordan, born in Palestine. His contributions to contemporary literary and cultural discourse in the Arab world are formidable, including his book *Theory of the Novel and the Arabic Novel*, and translations of European and French philosophy into Arabic.

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At the end of extensive work on this English edition of the book *Knights of Cinema*, I would like first to thank the researcher, film critic, and historian Pablo Robledo (a cross-country skier), who generously gave me the right to use important quotations from his book *Montoneros y Palestina*.

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I would also like to acknowledge the following friends and colleagues: professor of photography Samir Faraj, novelist Rashad Abu Shawar, film critic Qais Al Zubaidi, researcher and author Nazih Abu Nidal, and journalist and photographer Ramzi Rasi, for their testimonies on the pioneering role of the Palestine Film Unit in the revolutionary cinema.

I am immensely grateful to all my colleagues for their precious time, information, and memories, and for granting the right to use them in my book: Janette Fattaleh, Amneh Naser, Elias Sanbar, Salah Abu Hannoud, Mahmoud Majd, Adil Al-Kesbeh, Tawfeq Musa Khalil, Mahmoud Nofal, Khalil Sa'adeh, and Yousef Al Shayeb. I also thank my colleagues, Omar Al-Rashidi and Shafer Al-Soumi, for the revision of some details from their experience, and to colleague Yousef Qutob who shared many pictures from the photography archive of the PFU/PCI.

Finally, I could not have written this without the help from family members of the pioneers of the revolutionary cinema, and those of the writers and journalists who documented this movement. For granting

their permission to use quotations from their interviews or their relatives' writings and interviews, I thank the following: Abdelraheem Jadallah, Sulafa's brother; Husam Riyad Jawharieh, Hani's nephew; Dama'a, Rasmi, and Fatmeh Abu Ali, Mustafa's siblings; Majida Al-Hourani, Tayseer Al-Najjar's widow; and Sahar and Shahira Abu Ghanimeh, sister and daughter of Hassan Abu Ghanimeh.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khadijeh Habashneh, also known as Khadijeh Abu Ali, is a researcher, filmmaker, and political and women's rights activist. She holds a master's degree in psychology and began her career as a clinical psychologist in a psychiatric clinic in Jordan, where she worked from 1968 until 1971. One of the founding members of the core of the General Union of Palestinian Women, which was one of the most active bodies of the PLO during the 1970s, Khadijeh was also a founding member of the Palestinian Cinema Institution (PCI) which formed in 1974 and was responsible for creating and maintaining the PCI's archive and the cinematheque from 1974 to 1982. Her film *Children Without Childhood* (1979) was recently restored, but the other film, *Women of My Country*, disappeared during the IDF siege of Beirut in 1982. She has represented Palestinian women and the Palestinian cause at numerous regional and international conferences and forums from 1975 until 2005 and is a founding member of several social and cultural organizations and institutes working on women's issues and human rights, such as the Center for Women Studies in Jordan for which she served as Vice President from 1989 to 1992. She has coordinated national campaigns for enhancing women's participation in elections in Jordan (1996) and Palestine (2002–2005) and is a board member of the UNESCO-designated Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation

Center (PWRDC), which is dedicated to developing documentation and research on the condition and status of Palestinian women and girls and gender issues.

Khadijeh has also served as a lecturer in psychology and gender issues at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem from 2002 to 2004 and has published several studies on women's issues, in addition to literary writings and articles.

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INTRODUCTION

This book narrates the story of a group of exceptional and pioneering filmmakers. It is a story of the first cinema unit to work hand in hand with the armed Palestinian national liberation movement since its inception.

I find myself writing this story with multiple and diverse narrative voices, perhaps because of my aversion to the traditional documentary style of writing. It is perhaps also that I am close to the founders, and I demand accuracy and integrity in documenting a large part of the journey of the Palestine Film Unit (PFU) after five decades have passed since its inception, by making use of the oral history method. A large portion of this book is narrated through the voices of members of the unit who are still alive, or their close friends and relatives who lived the early days of the PFU and its development. I have also relied on segments of what members of the PFU have written or said in interviews, and some writings by their contemporaries, in addition to my personal experiences. The research and interviews for this book extended over many years, between June 2014 and July 2019, because of my inability to dedicate myself full time to the work, and because my interlocutors are located in different countries.

In the second half of the 1960s, three of the earliest graduates of the cinema institutes in Cairo and London met and decided to join the fedayee movement, or the Palestinian National Movement (Fatah), after its inception following the defeat of the Arab armies in the June 5, 1967, war. They established a film unit in 1968, which produced its first film in 1969.

This book was originally published in Arabic in 2019, for the fiftieth anniversary of the first Palestinian revolutionary film. The English

translation is true to the original with some additional information and clarifications here and there, in the hopes of reaching a wider audience about an extraordinary film movement that announced to the world the image of the Palestinian people and their struggle to liberate their homeland from Zionist occupation. This image had been rendered invisible in international news through the Zionist hegemony over capital and global media networks. The year 2019 also marked the tenth anniversary of the passing of one of the founders and knights of the Palestine Film Unit, the director Mustafa Abu Ali, who died on July 30, 2009.

The PFU launched Palestinian cinema through the participation of a number of progressive filmmakers from Palestine, the Arab states, and the world. It shaped a global militant cinema movement around the Palestinian cause. I return to document the journey of the PFU after its history has been neglected and its leading role has been marginalized. I also write in response to inaccuracies and false pretenses put forward by narcissistic filmmakers or journalists and critics who advance a stereotypical understanding of the particular context of the PFU.

This revolutionary cinema unit, and its founders, the artists, and courageous knights of cinema, must be celebrated for its martyrs on the battlefield, and its filmmakers who have sacrificed many of their personal dreams in service of the cause of their people under occupation and in exile. The PFU members innovated a unique militant cinematic language and created an international phenomenon out of the Palestinian cause in the 1970s. They deserve on this occasion to be remembered and celebrated in recognition of their leadership and sacrifice, and for safeguarding the memory of their experiences for the coming generations.

Khadijeh Habashneh