

Decolonizing the Archive in Israel/Palestine:

The Case of the Palestinian Film Unit (PFU) Archive in Beirut before and after 1982

The Palestinian Film Unit Archive in Beirut: Origins

In September of 1972, a group of young Beirut-based Palestinian filmmakers sat down with journalists from the five-year-old political cinema journal *Cineaste* to discuss their work and its role in the ongoing Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Setting themselves apart from the prevailing commercial filmmaking paradigm worldwide—including that in the current Arabic-language cinema—these men and women made it clear that they saw themselves as both filmmakers and archivists at the same time, with a conviction that the two roles were linked at the core level.

This small but determined group had recently founded an organization called the Palestinian Cinema Association, or the Palestinian Film Unit (PFU).¹ The PFU had already fashioned for themselves a six-point manifesto tying united their aesthetic, political and methodological approaches to self-consciously crafting a cinematic Palestinian canon. The fifth plank of the manifesto reads: “[To c]reate a film archive which will gather film and still photograph material on the struggle of the Palestinian people in order to retrace its stages.”² Elsewhere the

¹ This is a translation from the Arabic; both terms appear in the academic literature referring to the same institution.

² Hennebelle et al, 32.

filmmakers again reiterate “[the] high priority that must be given to archive work.”³ At least one core member went as far as to receive professional archival training.⁴ The filmmakers made sure to credit the Beirut-based Center for Palestinian Research as essential partners on multiple levels: “[First], by offering a meeting place, then by insisting on the importance of archive work, on the necessity of storing the maximum number of images on the evolution of the struggle.⁵ While the group soberly noted the systemic challenges confronting them—saliently noting that building a Palestinian film archive was “very difficult” when funds are extremely low and most of the extant Palestinian filmic material remained inaccessible bureaucratically and geographically, held in European and Israeli institutions⁶—production and preservation were nonetheless of a piece from the very start: twin pillars of a revolutionary political project. In producing Palestinian films while simultaneously constructing a Palestinian film archive, national memory could be put to work to fashion a new narrative for the future, with the films’ viewers as active agents instead of passive spectators. The films would both inculcate national and class consciousness in the Palestinian people *and* serve as propaganda for a world audience. “We want,” these filmmaker-archivists explained, “a popular cinema in which the people find themselves in the process of making history.”⁷

Within a decade, the archive would be lost.

³ Ibid, 33.

⁴ Alawadhi 2013, 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 35.

Background: Israeli and Palestinian Archives since 1948

Historians as well as librarians and archivists have written increasingly in recent years about structural problems in colonized archives in general and those located in Israel/Palestine in particular. Persistent ethical issues pervade the archival process on both administrative and user ends. These include: materials of dubious provenance gleaned as war booty, violation of respect des fonds, discriminatory barriers to equal access, and bias in cataloging and indexing terminology. These each take many forms and appear in myriad contexts. While –for instance—user studies of library patrons in contemporary Israel/Palestine is beyond the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless instructive to note the larger context of information and state power since 1948.

Obviously, national libraries and archives everywhere are always in some sense joined at the hip with the military apparatus of their respective governments and power structures, but this linkage has been cast in particularly stark relief in Israel/Palestine from the start. In 1948, as librarian Blair Kuntz notes in “A Report on the Librarians and Archivists to Palestine Delegation,” the Hagana (predecessor to the current Israel Defense Forces) was “followed by teams of librarians from the National Hebrew Library at Hebrew University who collected books, manuscripts and newspapers” from Palestinians fleeing sites of military conflict.⁸ The nascent Israeli government confiscated an estimated 30,000 books in Jerusalem alone, as well as an estimated 40,000 from Haifa, Jaffa, and Nazareth; these books were accessioned into the general circulating collection of Hebrew University.⁹ Because of the balkanization of Palestinian

⁸ Kuntz, 154.

⁹ Ibid.

community since 1948, what was an issue of provenance is also an issue of everyday access, “an important part of historical cultural heritage that is not accessible to Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza or in the refugee Diaspora.”¹⁰

The Israeli historian and curator Rona Sela has written extensively on the fate of 1948-era materials of Palestinian provenance held in Israeli archives, with a focus on both moving and still images. Sela shows that even for Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, access cannot be taken for granted. Most materials captured in 1948 remain under lock and key, a policy enshrined in an explicit Archives Law. Even those holdings that have been ostensibly declassified remain fully or partially inaccessible in practice.¹¹ Those who wish to examine declassified materials must first attain the official status of “accredited researcher,” a title Sela argues is granted in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner.¹² In addition to her discussion of barriers to access, Sela also takes note of systematic violation of respect des fonds for materials of Palestinian provenance, as well as pejorative terminology employed in controlled vocabularies for describing images of Palestinian individuals and groups.¹³ The colonial nature of libraries and archives in Israel/Palestine, Sela argues, is ubiquitous.

The Fate of the PFU Archive

As Hend F. Alawadhi illustrates in his article “Traces of a Revolution: In Search of the Palestinian Film Archive,” the PFU film archive in Beirut is linked to what historians of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sela 2018, 206-207.

¹² Ibid, 210.

¹³ Ibid, 211-212.

Palestinian cinema call the era of the “Cinema of Palestinian Revolution,” a period lasting from 1967 to 1982.¹⁴ June 1967, of course, brought the military conflict that culminated in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while June 1982 brought the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Beirut, as noted above, had been the epicenter of the inchoate Palestinian film movement from its inception, and those present at the onset of the invasion knew immediately that the archive now faced an existential threat.

At the time of the invasion, the PFU archive held upwards of 1,000 cans of film.¹⁵ As Alawadhi has noted elsewhere, these films – likely all consisting of actuality content—documented a broad swath of contemporary Palestinian life, including footage of military conflict, interviews with political figures and intellectuals, and snapshots of quotidian life for Palestinians both in refugee camps and in the wider diaspora.¹⁶ The oldest films in the collection dated back to the pre-1948 era, and the most recent were frequently produced by the archivists themselves.¹⁷

The academic literature on the PFU archive gets slightly murky when it comes to what exactly happened to the films following the Israeli invasion. The murkiness, in fact, dates back to 1982. Alawadhi puts forth several popular “theories” about the archive’s fate, but he seemingly fails to put much stock in any particular one.¹⁸

Sela, however, contends throughout her work that at least some – but probably, she apparently presumes, all—of the contents that survived are currently among the film-based

¹⁴ Alawadhi 2018, 59.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alawadhi 2013, 21.

¹⁷ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸ Alawadhi 2018, 63.

holdings of Palestinian provenance in the IDF archive. In addition to the Beirut films, Sela notes that the IDF archive currently also holds foreign-produced films, many from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).¹⁹ Of these seized films, only a few dozen have been released to the public, and with respect des fonds not honored, it is unclear which film comes from which source.²⁰ Sometimes the vocabulary used by Israeli archives in cataloging the film holdings from is totally nonsensical. The IDF Archive, for example, classifies several films as having come from the “PLO Archive,” but no such institution has ever existed.²¹

Alawadhi, on the other hand, outlines an array of potential geographic locations, some more likely and some less, but does not indicate that the IDF archive is one of them. Finding some cause for hope in very recent events, noting both the apparent discovery of some PFU film material in Jordan by Matt Epler in 2009, and in Rome in 2011—the latter, in fact, successfully scanned and archived by Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut, where they now reside.²²

Toward decolonized archives in Israel/Palestine

Competing narratives of national and cultural memory frequently lead to controversy and conflict around the globe, but memory—as noted by the founders of the PFU archive—has a unique role in Palestinian national consciousness, with profound implications for both the intangible, imaginary archive in the Derridean sense and for actual brick-and-mortar archives.

¹⁹ Sela 2018, 205.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sela 2018, 210.

²² Alawadhi 2018, 63.

As Beverly Butler notes in “‘Othering’ the archive—from exile to inclusion and heritage dignity: the case of Palestinian archival memory”: “The definition of archival memory has been extended in the contemporary Palestinian context not only to include repositories for paper documentary evidence”—or, by extension, evidence of the audiovisual variety— “but to go beyond this and embrace a ‘heritage’ paradigm.” This can then lead to “a consideration of museum, heritage sites and cultural performances as an essentialized part of a ‘just’ archival domain.”²³

In other words, if archives—and, by extension, museums and libraries— have been and are sites of injustice, they can also be sites of resistance. While Butler calls for an overhaul of how archivists currently operate, in favor of “a more humane therapeutics” that might address “the psychic, metaphysical and existential need for refuge, asylum and home,”²⁴ others have taken the approach of turning what remains of the Palestinian archival experiment into art— in one notable instance, a meta-documentary about the search for the PFU archive that chronicles its own failure to achieve its stated goal.²⁵

Many in the field advocating for archives as sites of resistance view the challenge as a matter of returning context to decontextualized cultural artifacts, thereby subverting the Western gaze and reinstating Palestinians as agents in deciding the fate of their own cultural heritage, rather than mere subjects.²⁶ Toward that end, a look at contemporary archival institutions in postcolonial countries might suggest an idea of what decolonized archival spaces might look

²³ Butler, 63.

²⁴ Ibid, 68.

²⁵ One film discussed at length by Alawadhi 2018 is Azza El-Hassan’s *Kings and Extras: Digging for a Palestinian Image* (2004).

²⁶ Sela 2018, 216-217.

like in Israel/Palestine. Research abounds on this topic, but much of it is as cautionary as it is encouraging. If archives continue to operate from a colonialist paradigm even in countries such as Australia or Canada, where, in Trish Luker's phrasing, "processes of reconciliation have been established"²⁷ the prognosis for Israel/Palestine might seem all the more unremittingly bleak. Nonetheless, in some sense, the current embrace of the archive as a site of resistance and decolonization brings us full circle, to the PFU's prescient understanding that it is always wise to begin to consider the afterlife of cultural heritage right at the moment of its production.

²⁷ Luker, 108.

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