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Off Frame aka Revolution until Victory

Mohanad Yaqubi

2016, color & black/white, 63 min., Arabic, English. **Producer** Sami Said, Mohanad Yaqubi, Delphine Landes. **Production companies** Idioms Film (Ramallah, Palestine), Monkey Bay Productions (Marseille, France). **Screenplay** Reem Shilleh. **Director of photography** Sara Sea. **Sound design** Carl Svensson. **Editor** David Osit. **Production manager** Sami Said. **With** Mustafa Abu Ali, Sulafa Jadallah, Hani Jawaharieh, Yaser Arafat, Jean-Luc Godard, Salah Ta'amari.

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"... and for those who suffer from invisibility, the camera would be their weapon." (Elias Sanbar)

Off Frame aka Revolution until Victory traces the fragments of a revolution, combining images from a dream for freedom, using films from the Palestinian struggle cinema, a term used for films produced in relation to the Palestinian revolution between 1968 and 1982. For the outside world, these films represented a model of a people engaged in political struggle, explaining why they are fighting and against whom. But for Palestinians these films marked the transformation of their identity: from refugee to freedom fighter.

The Palestinian revolution collaborated with filmmakers, actors, and activists from Syria, Italy, UK, Lebanon, France, Germany, Argentina, and many others, and made partnerships with institutions in Berlin, Moscow, Baghdad, and Cuba. Despite their prolific output, very few of their works remain. The film brings together moments from a selection of these militant films into one timeline. The only coherent relation between all the shots, clips, and sequences is that they all straddle the borders between fiction and propaganda, dream and reality, in order to represent a narrative of a people in struggle.

It all started when during one of the courses I was attending for my graduate studies in film, in London, the lecturer asked me if I was familiar with Palestinian revolutionary cinema, and if I knew any of the filmmakers associated with that movement in the 1960s and 1970s. At first I was confused, but when she began to recount the story of the Palestine Film Unit (PFU) – within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) – the filmmaker Mustafa Abu Ali who was one of the founders, the aesthetics of the Film Unit, the influence of the May 1968 insurgency in France, the collaborations with international solidarity movements and anti-colonial liberation struggles, I was smitten. There I was, an aspiring Palestinian filmmaker who had traveled West to learn the craft and film history, discovering my own history, a legacy I was absolutely unaware of. I was compelled to conduct further research, as any graduate student would, and my first destination was the library. I wanted to start from the basics.

I remember distinctly not knowing which keywords to use to initiate the research. I knew of two films, Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Ici et ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere)* and Mustafa Abu Ali's *They Do Not Exist*. I watched them as many times as I could to understand how they might relate to one other, and collected as much information as I could about the historical moment in which they were produced. To say the least, both films are remarkably accomplished, in terms of their political conceit and film language. Godard and Miéville's film is structured around five images and fabricated from the remnants of a film that Godard set out to make with the Dziga Vertov Group, titled *Revolution Until Victory: Methods of Work and Methods of Thinking in the Palestinian Revolution*, which was never completed. Abu Ali's film is poetic, its structure is closer to a symphony in five movements or acts, and blurs the boundaries between fiction and documentary. As with Godard and Miéville's film, it uses different visual elements that include film footage, still photographs, graphics, and animation. Also the montage and editing styles of both films betrays the influence of Soviet cinema. I was particularly moved by one sequence in Abu Ali's *They Do Not Exist* where an Israeli jet is dropping bombs against the music of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra*. It reminded me of the helicopter attack scene in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* that used Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. Abu Ali's film was made five years prior to Coppola's epic, and I came to believe that Coppola was inspired from Abu Ali's work.

After watching these two films repeatedly, my collaborator Reem Shilleh and myself decided to dive into the world of militant cinema during that chapter of the Palestinian struggle. This is how we uncovered the traces and remains of the Palestine Film Unit and its other founding members, Hani Joharieh and Sulafa Jadallah. Mustafa Abu Ali and Hani Joharieh studied filmmaking in London between 1964 and 1967, while Sulafa Jadallah graduated from Cairo's renowned Higher Institute of Cinema as a director of photography, becoming the first ever Arab female cinematographer. Gradually, a network of filmmakers and film production began to surface, with its laboratories, cameras, narratives, festivals, distribution networks, and financial structures. We learned that more than five hundred films were produced in collaboration with the Palestinian revolution. The PFU played a pioneering role in building bridges with the international militant film scene, and that the collaborations included films produced and directed by other film units affiliated

with the different Palestinian political factions. Moreover, there were financing resources and support structures for making the films on the Palestinian revolution other than the PLO.

The relevance of resurrecting these militant and "revolutionary" films became ever more urgent with the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon. As the Arab world was transforming and these insurgencies broadcast live worldwide on television and social media, we became more certain of the pioneering virtue of the PFU that was established in 1968. Obviously, my passive engagement with the uprisings as a spectator was frustrating, but the magnitude of those events and the events of the past pushed me to focus on making the film as a reference to an alternative, militant, and progressive filmmaking practice, that might stand for a model or reference to contemporary and future generations of filmmakers.

In 2012, I had the opportunity to watch one of the films produced by the PFU in a stellar, restored version in a cinema, on a large screen. This event convinced me that I ought to work with the archival films in the best form contemporary technology could offer, and that I had to recreate the soundscape. The journey around the world to secure high quality scans of these films (made in the 1960s and 1970s) proved a stupendous challenge. The institutional amnesia regarding that chapter in film history is simply astonishing. Most of these films are stored in archives across the world, but under different titles and formats. This amnesia and neglect does not pertain strictly to films related to the Palestinian struggle, but to a huge portion of film heritage. I wonder how many of the young people in America know about the Weather Underground and the films that have been produced in relation to such events and movements? So many treasures lie dormant on shelves gathering dust, forgotten witnesses of a recent history of struggle against the political power that rules the world until today.

Discerning the approach, rhythm, and flow of the film was a long process. Making work-in-progress presentations on the legacy of the forgotten archive, screening edited sequences, giving talks and interviews was extremely useful. The more I had to explain the motivation and intention behind the research, the more the film's flow became clearer in my head. There were great opportunities for rewriting the film based on interactions with international audiences, and I was greatly relieved when I realized that I did not have to make a conventional "militant film with a message." It was crucial to foreground cinematic form and aesthetics, and thus stitch a narrative from the "archival" images and sounds based on the PFU's own film aesthetics rather than focus on their narrative. This is how I came to the question at the heart of my research, what is in the frame and what is outside it, what is *off frame*.

The passion and craftsmanship of militant cinema defies conventional precepts of film production that prevail until today. Militant cinema still embodies a relevant alternative model of production that points to a fundamental question: why do we make films? In the case of Palestinians, 1948 was not only their year of Nakba, or Catastrophe, but it was also the year when they started to become invisible to the eyes of the world. The world, or rather Israel and the West, went on behaving as if we did not

exist. We were absent from public consciousness, media, and the press. From the outset, our struggle for survival would clearly be linked to our visibility, with being seen and recognized. To borrow the words of Palestinian writer and historian Elias Sanbar: "For people who suffer from invisibility, the camera would be their weapon."

In conclusion, I could not draw hope from our contemporary reality as I did when looking at the representation of a revolution that has not quite ended. When I watch the images that these filmmakers captured and montaged, and I listen to their own words of hope and desire for a better future, knowing that what they understood as the future is the present I live in today, is very hard. They made profoundly subversive films, and I can only aspire to seeing that their defiance, courage, urgency, and inventiveness remain alive and compel our consciousness today.

Mohanad Yaqubi, September 2016

Mohanad Yaqubi, born in 1981 in Kuwait, is a filmmaker and producer and teaches Film Studies at the International Art Academy in Palestine. He is one of the founders of the Ramallah-based production outfit Idioms Film and the research and curatorial collective Subversive Film, which focuses on militant film practices. He has directed and produced several short films, both fiction and documentary, which have been shown in international festivals.

Films

2004: *Fix* (9 min.), *Carnaval* (26 min.). 2005: *Insomnia* (10 min.). 2006: *June, 2006* (28 min.). 2007: *Around* (3 min.), *Rico in the Night* (8 min.). 2008: *Rollescape* (9 min.). 2010: *EXIT* (10 min.). 2013: *Al-Jisser* (24 min.). 2014: *No Exit* (11 min.). 2016: *On that Day* (4 min.), *Off Frame aka Revolution until Victory*.