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FOR CULTURAL PURPOSES ONLY

Sarah Wood has made a film that investigates the cultural importance of cinema for visual provocateurs Animate TV

Text by [Amah-Rose McKnight-Abrams](#) | Published 18 December 2009

What would it feel like to
never see an image of the
place that you came from?

For Cultural Purposes Only by Sarah Wood was commissioned by Animate Projects as part of Animate TV's autumn series of films. The film employs footage from the lost Palestinian film archive, which was destroyed in the siege of Beirut in 1982, alongside illustrations by Woodrow Phoenix. The [programme](#) also includes work by three other filmmakers – Cordelia Swann's collage of mobile phone footage with a commentary by Jo Brand is both funny and illuminating, plus there are two great animations, the weird *Tad's Nest* by Petra Freeman and *Unicycle Film* by Thomas Hicks. The films are viewable online from December 21 on the [Animate TV site](#). Here, you can view an exclusive clip from Sarah Wood's film and gain an invaluable insight into this fascinating and unique creation.

Dazed Digital: Why 'For Cultural Purposes Only'?

Sarah Wood: 'For cultural purposes only, no commercial value' is the phrase that is written on customs forms when films prints are sent internationally. The declaration is intended to speed a film's journey through the customs process. Some time ago, I came across an article that the filmmaker Annemarie Jacir had written about her experience of curating a festival of Palestinian film in New York. In the article she talked about the practicalities of curating, and the difficulties of physically getting material across the world to screen in the US. Films sent from Palestine were simply going missing in transit. One film lost in the post might seem like a mistake but after a little detective work she realised films that she was certain had been sent from Palestine weren't making it through Israeli customs. She realised that what singled the missing films out was their customs declaration. Instead of being something that facilitated movement, the simple statement 'for cultural purposes only' was being read and used as a means of gauging the content of the package and preventing their movement out of the country. I was very struck by this story, not only for the inhibition of the movement of art but also the added layer of meaning that the phrase had gathered. One of the striking things about the conflict between Israel and Palestine is the use of language by both sides to blur understanding and control the narrative of the conflict. I'm thinking, for instance, of the use by Israeli officialdom of 'targeted killing' to mean an assassination, or the use of 'martyr' by Palestinians to describe the same event. Both are euphemisms, both are used to control the effect of the act. Seeing the phrases 'for cultural purposes only' reinterpreted in this conflict made me question how hard it would be to create any art in the context of this double-think.

DD: How did you find the archive material used in the film?

Sarah Wood: The Palestinian Film Archive was a homegrown attempt at capturing the diversity of Palestinian experience rather than the self-sameness of much Western footage. The archive was lost in 1982 and only a few films from that period of intrepid filmmaking survive.

The film material that I do include in the film came after a lot of searching and researching enabled by the generosity of individuals. Annemarie Jacir had screened some of the work in New York and kindly put me in touch with Mustafa Abu Ali and Khadijeh Habashneh. Khadijeh agreed I could use an extract from her film *Children Nevertheless* after she spoke about making it in interview. I also got in touch with Kais Al-Zubaidi. He has written an invaluable comprehensive filmography of

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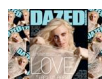
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Palestinian film and is a wonderful filmmaker in his own right. Again after we started a dialogue, he generously agreed to allow an extract from his film to be used. In the absence of an archive, finding the surviving film material all depended on individuals and on dialogue.

DD: How did you get the idea of the format?

Sarah Wood: The idea for the form of the film came from a challenge a friend and I had set Woodrow Phoenix – to draw a cartoon strip from a storyline we made, as we made it up. We did it in a frivolous way to test his irrefutable cartooning prowess but there was something very compelling about watching the way he mapped the page as his synapses processed information, translated our words into images. It was an action, which was very filmic. When I came across the story of the archive I remembered what we'd done and thought how interesting it would be to see how much of someone's memory Woodrow could draw as he heard the narrative. The experiment in this context had much greater resonance. Woodrow is British. He's never visited Palestine so using his illustration already pointed up the tendency for cartoonish versions of Arab experience to dominate in Western visual imagery. It also gently parodied so much contemporary documentary filmmaking that uses recreation as a shorthand to illustrate ideas. Re-enactment is so ubiquitous that as viewers we rarely question its authenticity or relevance. In my film, watching the process of someone interpreting what they're hearing highlights what re-enactment really is: subjective and in the end, simply illustrative.

DD: What gave you the idea of using the footage in the way you did?

Sarah Wood: Contrasting the drawings with the vulnerability of human memory hopefully leads the viewer to want corroboration. Where footage does survive, we use it to weigh against the drawings to try and highlight the inadequacy of reinterpretation. By the end of the film the viewer has been withheld from imagery for long enough, ideally he or she should feel the frustration of the film's absence and the fragility of the image when it appears. The film's survival is now part of its significance.

DD: What do you think we can learn from these fragments of the past?

Sarah Wood: I think we learn that history repeats itself and that nothing is fixed. I often work with archive footage and my impetus is to reinterpret what is given from the past. If you look at an image of the past you tend to see people as seemingly fixed in time. I work to show how time is never fixed, it is always about forward movement and it always connects the past with the present and the future.

For Cultural Purposes Only



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