

guardian.co.uk

Lost picture show: the Palestinian Film Archive

The Palestinian Film Archive was born in 1976 – and destroyed just six years later. Sarah Wood went in search of the missing artists and their work

Sarah Wood

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 21 October 2009 22.30 BST



Pioneers ... Mustafa Abu Ali and Khadijeh Habashneh at the Carthage film festival in Tunisia in 1980 Photograph: Public Domain

I am an artist who works with found footage, making films from other people's films – an act of reclamation and reinterpretation. In the west, this footage is ubiquitous. It wouldn't be hard for me, for instance, to find an image of the place I come from to show to a stranger; I just have to know where to look.

So imagine what it would be like if every image of 1960s London, or of pre-war France, or Soviet Russia, vanished overnight. Imagine there was no footage of your home town. In an age dominated by the moving image, how would that vanishing act make you feel?

Last year, I came across the story of the Palestinian Film Archive. Established in 1976, this was an archive of political cinema, documenting the Palestinian people's struggle and resistance movements, as well as images of their everyday lives – homegrown film of a country and people more usually represented by western news footage. The aim of the film-makers who had established it – and in the 1970s, film-makers really did work collectively – was to make "a people's cinema". For a nation unused to film, with no infrastructure to show it, and where everyday survival seemed more vital than watching images of that survival, it was an ambitious project. But after six years, the archive was lost in the 1982 siege of Beirut.

Abu Ali had returned to the Middle East and started making films after the 1967 war, most famously *They Do Not Exist* (1974), a film which humanised the political controversy. This is one of the very few films to have survived.

Abu Ali died in July this year. His films were significant not just for their content; his was a cinema which reinvented the form. He had collaborated with Jean-Luc Godard, criticised western cinema for its orientalism, and created a vital, urgent body of work (including *No to a Peaceful Solution*, and *Scenes from the Occupation in Gaza*). His films navigated a course between what he described as a populist heroic tradition (freedom fighters represented as "supermen, Tarzans and Zorros") and a cinema of ideas (which he feared was "too esoteric for the people to understand"). He reimagined cinema for a country whose film tradition had been, until the 1960s, one of loss and omission.

His masterpiece *They Do Not Exist* mixes drama (acted by non-actors) with documentary footage; the film's use of music and silence is finely balanced. There is a layering of narratives: the intimacy of a little girl writing a letter on a sunlit table; the power of fighter planes taking off to a Bach soundtrack; a man remembering the little girl. Scenes from the destruction of a refugee camp are followed by footage of the press conference afterwards. The film shows us how no one image or narrative can fully convey the politics of war.

They Do Not Exist leaves its audience to fill in the gaps. With so few Palestinian films and film-makers surviving, the documentary I was researching followed a similar route, becoming a memory game.

I did manage to make contact with the original archivist – a wonderful film-maker in her own right, Khadijeh Habashneh. Describing the archive, she reminded me how important it was that these films had ever existed, even if they were now mainly lost. I realised it wasn't enough to feel nostalgic; it was important to piece together as much as I could, even if Abu Ali's and Habashneh's work now had to stand for a whole host of other film-makers.

This summer, Palestine's first multiplex, Cinema City, opened in the city of Nablus, returning commercial Hollywood and Egyptian cinema to the West Bank in a flurry of PR-generated excitement. As the Supermen, Tarzans and Zorros retake their place on the Palestinian screen, it's timely to remember this "people's cinema", at once human and homegrown.

Ads by Google

Documentary Transcription

Documentary audio or video tape transcribed at low prices.

www.productiontranscripts.com

Cheshire Cat Inn

Luxury bed and breakfast Inn Walking distance to downtown

www.cheshirecat.com

Videos at HISTORY™

Be Transported From the Sofa Into The Thick of the Action at HISTORY™

History.co.uk

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010