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## Sarah Wood

The director of For Cultural Purposes Only discusses trudging through the lost archives of Palestinian cinema.

**Interview by Priscilla Eyles**

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**Sarah Wood's [For Cultural Purposes Only](#)**, part of Channel 4's Animate TV project, looks at some of the politically significant films that were lost from the Palestinian archives during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982. Through the filmmaker's vivid memories and the drawings of artist Woodrow Phoenix, the film attempts to bring back these lost chronicles. Wood talks to LWLies about the importance of film for a country's culture, the passion inherent in films made under dangerous conditions and the problems with film distribution.

### **LWLies: What interested you in this project?**

Wood: I often work with archive footage. I'm used to being able to find images of whatever I want to create my films. When I heard the story of the lost Palestinian film archive I was very compelled. I'd always previously worked with archive film because of its superfluity. Thinking about what a lack of imagery would mean, was very salutary.

### **How did you get involved with the artists and what prompted the decision to use them?**

It was very important to me that this project was collaborative. Even though I took the responsibility for shaping the film I wanted the final edit to represent several points of view. Questions about the Middle East are so often represented in a binary way and because the film was part-commissioned for TV I felt it was very important, given the small space of air time it was to inhabit, that it represented a plurality of voice. In the end, all who contributed to the film are artists in their own right. I hope this gives the film an energy which, along with the structure, acts to encourage a creative, active response in the viewer.

### **Had you come across Palestinian film before, was you already aware of it? Did you learn a lot more doing the project?**

Yes. I learnt a lot more about Palestinian cinema from making the film. It's ironic that we talk about 'world cinema' in the UK as though we have access to everything. We forget how narrow film distribution is and how closely cultural connections to other parts of the world follow old colonial patterns. To make the decision to track down film led me to work I'd never seen before. Three films stand out for me: Annemarie Jacir's *Like Twenty Impossible*s, Michel Khleifi's *Fertile Memory* and Mustafa Abu Ali's *They Do Not Exist*. My world was much smaller before I saw these films.

### **How did there come to be such a loss in the archive? Do you think there were not enough safeguards?**

Film is a very vulnerable medium. Physically it has to be preserved at a particular temperature or it will be damaged. It is also a very expensive medium. Even to make film prints and to screen film requires a huge investment. What's more, when I was first told the story of the lost archive it was suggested that the films themselves were a target, that it served a political purpose to capture them or destroy them. When the Israelis besieged Beirut, choices had to be made about saving human life or film. In a war situation I don't think there can be enough safeguards.

### **Do you think a general ignorance about Palestinian films can be in part attributed to the loss of so many films, for example there's not so many to do retrospectives of or write books about?**

There are great books about Palestinian cinema and wonderful film festivals and curators who work to screen work across the world. The vulnerable thing about Palestinian film is that it always comes to a Western audience filtered through political expectation and hampered by real creative constraints. We have to think how film is distributed in the world to understand why we don't see more film from the Middle East on Western screens.

### **How did you pick the films that were featured in the short?**

The films in the short were films that people wanted to remember. People chose key moments from films that they'd made or seen which had left a strong impression on them as a viewer.

**What were some of the lost films you found out about that you really would've liked to see or felt the loss of most?**

That's too hard to choose! I would definitely like to have seen Mustafa Abu Ali's other films.

**Do you think the loss of all those films has deeply affected today's Palestinian filmmakers? And affected the film industry in any way?**

The films in the archive were born of the politics of the sixties. Across the world the work of that generation of filmmakers is now rather out of fashion. If you play a Jean Luc Godard film in a cinema now, for instance, you are much more likely to play Breathless than Ici et Ailleurs. Commercialism has beaten politics.

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