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## Towards a decentered history of Palestinian revolutionary cinema ? Case study of the film *Tall El Zaatar* in the audiovisual archives of the Italian Communist Party.

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**ABSTRACT :** [The film *Tall El Zaatar* (1977, Abu Ali, Pino, Chamoun, Palestine/Italy), a co-production between the Palestinian Cinema Institute and the Italian Communist Party's (PCI) audiovisual company, has been considered lost for three decades and finally rediscovered in 2011. Beyond the dramatic stories surrounding this film, *Tall El Zaatar* reveals the importance of considering the transnational dimension of Palestinian militant cinema.

In this article about *Tall El Zaatar*, I will approach the history of the Palestinian revolutionary cinema through the traces left within the archives of an institution with which the Palestinian filmmakers collaborated. On the basis of a set of interviews and documents consulted in the Audiovisual Archives of the Labour and Democratic Movement (AAMOD) in Rome, I will show what the historian can learn from the archival fragments resulting from the exchanges of Palestinian filmmakers with European institutions in general and Italian in particular.]

**MOTS-CLÉS :** [revolutionary cinema, Palestine, Tel al-Zaatar, Italian Communist Party, Unitefilm, cultural transfers, transnational history, archival images, cultural activism].

[The movie *Tall El Zaatar*<sup>1</sup> (1977, Abu Ali, Pino, Chamoun, Palestine/Italy) has been depicted with a focus on the outstanding story of how the film came to be made and subsequently lost: about two hundred reels shot by the Palestinian Cinema Institute<sup>2</sup> filmmakers affiliated with the Palestinian revolution, set against the backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War, then smuggled from a Lebanese port to Rome through Cyprus seas and successfully cut into a movie, before being forgotten during three decades and finally rediscovered in 2011<sup>3</sup>. This film was in fact the result of a relationship built throughout the 1970s between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the audiovisual production company of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Unitefilm. Most of the shots showed in the movie were taken during the summer of 1976 to document and raise awareness about the siege and

1 The Italian version of the film is available online. <http://patrimonio.aamod.it/aamod-web/film/detail/IL8600001589/22/tall-el-zaatar-1.html?startPage=0&idFondo=&multiSearch=true> [Consulted on 07/30/2021]

2 Founded in 1967 under the name "Palestine Film Unit", this organization was initially affiliated to Fatah, considered like the main Palestinian faction, and was in charge of the audiovisual propaganda of the Palestine Liberation Organization. It was dissolved in 1982 after the Israeli siege of Beirut and its film archives were lost.

3 BUALI, Sheyma. « A Militant Cinema: Mohanad Yaqubi in Conversation with Sheyma Buali », *Ibraaz*, May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012. <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/16> [Consulted on 07/30/2021]

massacre of the Tel al-Zaatar camp in Beirut<sup>4</sup>. Even though no cameras were allowed into the camps, the directors managed to recount the events and describe the daily life under blockade through the testimonies of many witnesses interviewed in the immediate aftermath after the siege ended and the massacre occurred.

This article relies on a research conducted in the audiovisual archive of the PCI, the *Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico* (AAMOD) in Rome and on semi-structured interviews conducted with five European filmmakers who have taken part in the PCI – PLO relationship. I will demonstrate that a Palestinian-Italian collaboration on a material as sensitive as *Tall El Zaatar*'s reels was made possible by the establishment of an institutional relationship throughout the 1970s. I will then analyze the processes through which the film material was brought from the status of pictorial testimony to a restored archive, still able to produce new meanings about the Palestinian revolution. The previous analyses will finally allow me to advocate the production of a Palestinian revolutionary cinema history that draws on the archives of their institutional partners abroad.

Through the example of *Tall El Zaatar*, I argue that looking into foreign organizations' archives is necessary in order to draw a more accurate picture of the Palestinian Cinema Institution. Seeking new sources will open alternative fields of research as most of the literature related to this period in the history of Palestinian Cinema has to deal with the lack of archives<sup>5</sup>. Likewise, the plunder of the archives of the PLO during the Israeli 1982 siege of Beirut has received scholarly attention<sup>6</sup>. Scholars have also addressed the loss of the film archives in relation to the concept of trauma, defined as a repressed memory<sup>7</sup>. But even though there is no existing official archive containing the paper and visual documents of the Palestinian Cinema Institute, I support the idea that through the partnerships Palestinian filmmakers formed throughout the world there is a sum of documents available and already filed in several organizations yet to be taken into account and studied. Focusing one's interest on places of transfer and circulation such as film festivals, internationalist organizations and solidarity associations may then ask for new appraisals of the Institute's work. The variety of viewpoints from different archives may let researchers produce a decentered history of the Palestinian revolution cinema, that is to say a history taking into

4 Tel al-Zaatar was a refugee camp housing about 20,000 Palestinians in East Beirut. In the summer of 1976, it was surrounded and besieged by Lebanese Christian militias, and taken on 12 August. It resulted in the deaths of nearly 2,500 people among the camp's inhabitants and defenders, and more than 500 casualties among the assailants. During the evacuation of the camp, over 1,000 Palestinians were summarily executed. See LAURENS Henry, *La question de Palestine*, Paris, Fayard, 2011. p.576.

5 See FOUREST Laure, "Un cinéma palestinien «en mal d'archive»", *Ateliers d'anthropologie. Revue éditée par le Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative*, 36, 2012. See also ALAWADHI Hend, « On What Was, and What Remains: Palestinian Cinema and the Film Archive », *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication & Film*, 1-1, 8 August 2013, p. 17-26. See also the film *Kings and Extras* (Azza Al-Hassan, 2004, Palestine/Germany)

6 SELA Rona, « Seized in Beirut: The Plundered Archives of the Palestinian Cinema Institution and Cultural Arts Section », *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 12-1, 2017, p. 83-114.

7 GERTZ Nurith & KHEIFI George, *Palestinian cinema: landscape, trauma and memory*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Univ. Press, coll.« Traditions in world cinema », 2008. p.3-30.

consideration and putting in perspective the distinctive cultural references<sup>8</sup> of the Palestinian's partner organizations.

### The partnership.

Unitelefilm was founded in 1963 as the production company for PCI's audiovisual propaganda. They soon diversified their activity into making newsreels, producing commercial films, and collaborating with socialist countries. But distribution was one of their more important priorities. They benefited from the local networks of the PCI (which had massively equipped its local sections with 8mm projectors)<sup>9</sup>, to show to a mass audience not only the party's films, but also productions imported from socialist countries, Third World nations struggling against imperialist rule, and various social movements around the world. The first encounter of Unitelefilm with the Palestinian struggle occurred when young leftist filmmakers, mostly recent graduates from the *Centro Sperimentale de Cinematografia*, asked for their help for the postproduction of a film they had shot in Jordan during five weeks featuring the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP). Their work responded to a growing interest for the Palestinian guerrilla in the Italian "revolutionary left" since 1968<sup>10</sup>. Even though the PCI was not so keen on promoting the PDFLP, given their political relation with the Fatah<sup>11</sup>, Unitelefilm allowed them to end their film and make copies without enforcing any political control over its message<sup>12</sup>. This was the first film made in Italy about the Palestinian struggle. *La lunga marcia del ritorno* (Adilardi, Sornaga, Schellino, 1969, Italy) aimed at introducing the Palestinian revolution to the Italian left, with an emphasis on the notion of armed struggle and Marxist ideology. In the filmmakers objective to provide more information about the Palestinian context, they simultaneously published an article describing the different groups belonging to the revolution and an interview with a PDFLP spokesperson<sup>13</sup>. The film was shown in Northern Italy militant circles and in local festivals.

With *Al Fatah-Palestina* (Luigi Perelli, 1970, Italy), a project initiated shortly thereafter by the foreign affairs bureau of the PCI with help from Fatah agents<sup>14</sup>, the relationship between Unitelefilm and the Palestinian Cinema Institution became official. In a letter addressed to Luigi Perelli in 1973, Mustafa Abu Ali, who introduced himself as the secretary of the

8 ESPAGNE Michel, « La notion de transfert culturel », *Revue Sciences/Lettres*, 1, 19 avril 2012, <http://journals.openedition.org/rsl/219>. [Consulted on 07/30/2021]

9 TAVIANI Ermanno, *Propaganda, cinema e politica. 1945-1975*, Rome, Archivio Audiovisivo Del Movimento Operaio e Democratico, 2008. p.37-38.

10 FALCIOLA Luca, « Transnational Relationships between the Italian Revolutionary Left and Palestinian Militants during the Cold War », *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 22-4, December 2020, p.31-70.

11 The first contacts between the PCI and the Fatah took place in 1969. The PDFLP, a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist political organization, was created in 1968. Although both the PDFLP and Fatah were affiliated to the PLO, there were ideological differences between them.

12 Interview with Ugo Adilardi and Monica Maurer on September, 15<sup>th</sup> 2020.

13 SORNAGA, Paolo & ADILARDI Ugo. "La guerriglia in Palestina e il F.D.P.L.P" in *Quaderni Piacentini*, anno VIII (n.39), November 1969, pp. 146-154.

14 Interview with Luigi Perelli on October, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020.

Palestinian Cinema Group, praised the success of the Arabic version of the film, which he considered a Palestinian film, and proposed further collaboration.

We would like to take this opportunity and suggest to build up a mutual cooperation between Unitel Film & the Palestinian Cinema Group at R.C., which we imagine can start in mutual distribution of the production of both sides on the basis of sharing 50% of the profit. This cooperation can go further, of course, in the future to co-production or any other way.<sup>15</sup>

The film was written by the journalist Romano Ledda in collaboration with Wael Zwaiter, a representative of Fatah and PLO in Rome. It was shot under the auspices of Abu Omar (Hanna Mikhail), a sociologist who was also Fatah's go-to person for foreign journalists in Jordan, including the refugee camps, the military bases, and even the *fedayeen*<sup>16</sup> outposts. Moreover, an interview with Yasser Arafat was organized to provide the leader's opinion on the recent developments of the struggle. The film deals with the idea of "rebirth of a nation"<sup>17</sup> and lays stress on the structure of the PLO institutions as the concrete manifestation of the national revival. It has been widely shown for several years in Italy thanks to the PCI's networks and to numerous screenings on the occasion of the festival of *l'Unità* throughout the country<sup>18</sup>. It was translated in German, English and Arabic and has been well received at Arab festivals of cinema. Mustafa Abu Ali's letter probably summarizes the reception of the film in Arab film circles and among Palestinian activists:

We consider *Al Fatah-Palestina* a Palestinian film, so we borrowed a copy from the Fatah offices in Beirut to take it with us to Tunisia, to the fourth Carthage festival, and show it with the Palestinian films. Samir Farid, the greatest film critic in the Arab world wrote about your film in *Al-Taliaa*: "... it is the most important film that has been made on the Palestinians."

All of this meant that when the filmmakers of the Palestinian Cinema Institution needed assistance to produce *Tall el Zaatar*, they already had a working relationship with Unitefilm. In 1976, the studio that provided the processing work in laboratory to the Palestinian filmmakers was inaccessible, which increased the difficulty of setting the whole production of the PLO films in Beirut<sup>19</sup>. They reached an agreement with the PCI to process the material in Rome, but after some issues with the Italian customs, they had to travel with their reels to Paris in the autumn of 1976<sup>20</sup>. Unitefilm then appointed Unicité, the

15 Letter from Mustafa Abu Ali to Luigi Perelli on May, 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1973, AAMOD, Archivio Unitefilm (1963 - 1997), *Al Fatah - Palestina*.

16 *Fedayeen*, plural of *fedai'i*, meaning "the one who sacrifices for something or someone", designates the militants of Palestinian organizations, especially those who took arms for the liberation of Palestine.

17 "Traccia di lavoro" AAMOD, Archivio Unitefilm (1963 - 1997), *Al Fatah - Palestina*.

18 The festival of *l'Unità* was an annual event named after the official newspaper of the PCI, *l'Unità*. It consisted of several separate events scattered in all the localities where the party had a section.

19 Interview with Monica Maurer on June, 18<sup>th</sup> 2020.

20 ABU ALI Mustafa. "Captions, About filming during the Lebanese War." *Palestinian Picture Magazine*, November 1978, p.15-19; cited and translated in ALARDA TAHA Lubna, *On Cinema and Revolutions: Triconti-*

production company of the French Communist Party (PCF), to take care of processing of the Palestinian material<sup>21</sup>. The operation took several months and was delayed, which was a cause of concern for the Palestinian filmmakers, anxious that a part of their materials might be lost or even unlawfully appropriated by their French partner, whom they apparently did not completely trust<sup>22</sup>. Unitefilm finally acted as the intermediary to settle this misunderstanding<sup>23</sup>. On July 4<sup>th</sup> 1977, the accord on the co-production of *Tall El Zaatar*, a “documentary published in Italian language and whose duration is expected to be about 90 minutes” was signed between Mustafa Abu Ali of the Palestinian Cinema Institution and Dario Natoli of Unitefilm. The agreement has settled the roles of each party regarding the joint direction of the movie, taking into account the Italian audience:

The political content of the film will be proposed by the Palestinian Cinema Institution, as the PLO's film sector, to Unitefilm, as the PCI's film company, for discussion in order to arrive together at the best definition in relation to the needs of political use in Italy and in other countries<sup>24</sup>.

It also acknowledged the joint ownership of the negatives, left in Italy under the responsibility of Unitefilm, but available for both parties to make copies of the film. Regarding the footage that was not used for *Tall El Zaatar*, it was to be conserved in the archives of Unitefilm in Rome, “until such time as the Palestinian Cinema Institution requests a different preservation of the same material”, which never occurred. This material could be used by both parties with the idea that profit should be shared. Finally, the agreement provided instructions on the distribution: stipulating both an Arabic and an Italian sound mix of the same film<sup>25</sup> ; the Palestinian Cinema Institution was responsible for the film’s distribution in the Arab countries, in Africa and in Asia, while Unitefilm took care of Europe (including the USSR). The commercial use of the film was to be distributed on the basis of the share spent on the total costs of the film, 26% for Unitefilm and 74% for the Palestinian Cinema Institution. Along these lines, this agreement formalized a partnership built towards a common political interest in publicizing the Palestinian perspective on the events in Beirut for European and Arab audiences.

*mental Militancy and the Cinema of the Palestinian Revolution*. Thesis, Queen’s University, 2021. <https://gspace.library.queensu.ca/handle/1974/28939>. [Consulted on 07/30/2021]

21 Bill from Unicité to Unitefilm, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1976. AAMOD, Archivio Unitefilm (1963 – 1997), Francia. Unicité and Unitefilm occasionally collaborated on film and archival projects. Interview with Jacques Bidou, former director of Unicité, the audiovisual company of the French Communist Party, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

22 Letter from Mustafa Abu Ali to Dario Natoli on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1977. AAMOD, Archivio Unitefilm (1963 – 1997), Francia. After complaining about missing reels from Unicité, he writes : “I express my deep regret at this kind of behaviour, which threatens the trust in our common work that we had hoped to develop in the future” (my translation).

23 Letters between Mustafa Abu Ali, Dario Natoli and Jacques Bidou, on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 1977. AAMOD, Archivio Unitefilm (1963 – 1997), Francia.

24 “Accordo fra l'Istituto Palestinese del Cinema e l'Unitefilm”, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1977. AAMOD, Archivio Unitefilm (1963 – 1997), Tall el Zaatar.

25 Italian TV channel RAI 2, which participated in the co-production, insisted that there should be only one version of the film, in both Italian and Arabic. Interview with Pino Adriano on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

So, even though *Tall El Zaatar* appears as the first actual co-production between Palestine and Italy, it was one in several collaborations between the PLO's film organization and the PCI's audiovisual company. As new as the Palestinian institutions were, the making of *Tall El Zaatar* relied on a political setting built over the course of several years in the audiovisual collaboration, in the sectors of writing (political conception), directing and distribution. It relied on strong ties in a network that included officials of both political organizations, filmmakers, producers, technicians and activists. Cooperation with external actors on such sensitive material as the reels from Beirut did not, on the other hand, go as smoothly, as shown by the example of *Unicité*. In December of 1977, the film was finally ready to be presented on the closing day of the Festival dei Popoli in Florence<sup>26</sup>.

### From testimony to archive.

This section will analyze the different steps of the *devenir-archive*<sup>27</sup> (archival becoming) of *Tall El Zaatar* footage, from its production as a Palestinian narrative of the war and a memory of collective struggle, to its reinterpretation within the context of contemporary Palestinian cinema. The thematic framework of the film<sup>28</sup>, written jointly by Mustafa Abu Ali, Adriano Pino, and Jean Chamoun, planned a progressive depiction of the situation. It started with a factual description of the context:

1. What was Tel al-Zaatar before the conflict [...] 3. The other "camps" of Beirut.

An analysis relying on Marxist ideology and laying stress on class relations as a fundamental way of explaining the situation followed :

6. Why are the inhabitants of Tel al-Zaatar the first non-coincidental victims of the war ? The camp of Tel al-Zaatar is at the centre of an industrial zone; the owners of the factories, fascists and conservatives, are the same as those who hold political power in Lebanon.

The film was to finally exalt the resistance of the camp as a foundational myth within the history of anti-capitalist struggle :

10. Tel al-Zaatar in the heart of the civil war: heroic resistance; in the history of the Arab world it is the first example of mass urban political-military-social organization – see the *Commune*, see the Workers' Councils – [...] 12. After the fall, Tel al-Zaatar immediately became a myth: poems, songs, testimonies, paintings, recognition and solidarity.

26 SANTUARI Aurora, « La lotta dei palestinesi in un film per la TV "Tall El Zaatar" collina dell'onore», in *Paese Sera*, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1977. AAMOD.

27 NINEY, François. "Que documentent les images d'archives ? » In : *L'image d'archives : Une image en devenir* [en ligne]. Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016. <http://books.openedition.org/pur/46518> [Consulted on 07/30/2021] pp. 43-51.

28 The following quotes were taken from a 14-point thematic programme for the film. Only the most relevant points have been selected here. "Per *Tall El Zaatar*. Scaletta tematica", ABU ALI Mustafa, CHAMOUN Jean, PINO Adriano, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1977. AAMOD, Archivio Unitefilm (1963 - 1997), Tall el Zaatar.

As a matter of fact, the film relies partly on a didactic discourse that aims at encompassing the Palestinian resistance within a larger struggle against racism, capitalism, imperialism, relying sometimes on an edifying voice-over commentary on maps of the Levant or silent images. It may appear reminiscent of the solidarity films with which Western audiences were familiar<sup>29</sup>.

Despite this, the film is not strictly ideological, but instead narrates the siege through the speech of the people who survived it. It is composed primarily of interviews of no less than 25 protagonists who were in the camp under different conditions: from the two last medical doctors, Dr. Labadie and Dr. Iraki, to children or teenagers like Yunes Iraki, Mahmud or Zainab. The main object of the operators' attention is to give credit to their speech. Because no cameras were allowed into the camp during the whole duration of the siege, their testimonies became the rawest material with which to write the history of the massacre. The many points of view of those who testify, their names spelled out on the screen, let the viewer have a glimpse of the daily struggles in the camp. The precarious water supply, for example is evoked several times: an officer explains that there are five water dispensers for 25,000 individuals; doctors state they lack basic supplies including water; a woman recounts how she was shot on her way to the water dispenser. The way these interviews are set also strengthens the interviewees' credibility. They speak while looking towards the camera; the interviewer is mainly quiet but also asks for details, especially when interviewing children. The framing sometimes insists on the interviewee's contained emotion: as a boy is depicting factually how his sister starved to death, the camera focuses on his hands with a close-up, showing his frenetic scratching, even though his face remains impassible. Many protagonists are interviewed in front of their peers, like Adham, a fighter interviewed in the middle of a group of *fedayeen*, or Mohammed, a teenager who speaks in a group of boys. These passive onlookers are not simply a decoration, but guarantee the authenticity and integrity of the speaker and remind the viewer that the interviewees speak not only for themselves but represent thousands of people who have not had the chance to tell their story. The credit given to the interviewees becomes even more crucial as they describe the war crimes they witnessed. Marie Haddad talks about the systematic murder of unarmed men in addition to her sister's rape. Georgette Haddad speaks about how her mother was shot in front of her. Um Karrum depicts the variety of violent treatments the Phalangists inflicted on civilians who had surrendered. Last but not least, illustrative shots attest to the protagonist's affirmations. Scenes of gun fighting shows the violence of the war in the whereabouts of the camp; interviews of Lebanese and Palestinian people fleeing the city in different vehicles out of fear from the Phalangists corroborate the violence of the latter. Short but significant shots of the camp show the end of the siege, complete with ruins full of corpses, reinforces the authenticity of the testimonies. Thus, the way in which the interviews are filmed is mainly focused on taking the victims' testimony as evidence of the events narrated, which responds to the lack of images acting as proofs. After speaking of an atrocious massacre, Abu Al Rus, a young fighter, adds that: "unfortunately there were no journalist to testify". The *missing image*<sup>30</sup> is not the simple absence of an image, but the need to produce a mental representation of its object and thus the start of a thinking process about it<sup>31</sup>. It raises the question of the right way to witness a massacre so that the event might belong to collective

29 GINSBERG, Terri. *Visualizing the Palestinian Struggle: Towards a Critical Analytic of Palestine Solidarity Film*. Springer, 2016. pp.37-77

30 *The Missing Image* (Rithy Panh, 2013, France) is a documentary dealing with the lack of visual documentation about the Cambodian genocide and the ways to recover a troubled collective memory.



memory, eventually making its way to the writing of history. So, the role of the documentary is to cinematographically compose the truth of the victim's testimony<sup>32</sup> with a coherent discourse about the events relying on the multiplication of viewpoints and a comprehensive framework for interpreting what the victim says.

Even more than the story of a massacre, *Tall El Zaatar* tells the story of a people's resistance. The film ends after an emotional sequence focused on the grief of the people as they have just left the camps. The mood is emphasized by Mustafa al-Kurd's melancholic version of "Biladi, Biladi"<sup>33</sup>, and the sequence finishes with a quotation from Yasser Arafat's speech at United Nations: "War bursts from Palestine, peace will come from Palestine". His words serve as a reminder that the ultimate goal of the Palestinian's painful struggle is the return to Palestine. Within the structure of the film, this confidence in the justice and ineluctability of the Palestinian revolution does not come from a leader's speech, but from the interviewees' words. Indeed, many of them accentuate their acts of resistance. Ahmed, a young man who was not originally a fighter, shows how he managed to keep carrying a rifle even after his arm was injured. Sarah and Mohammed, both teenagers, explain how they fought within groups of men. Hasan explains how he and his group orchestrated using loaded enemy rockets as a booby-trap against them. Indeed, these witnesses' suffering is emphatically linked to their resistance: "Our wounded were dying, but our people hasn't given up" says Saleh Zeidan. A woman addresses the interviewer, as the camera films a crowd of men around her: "For every dead Palestinian, a thousand will rise and continue to struggle, struggle, struggle and free Palestine". The film constructs a collective being through the display of shared emotions, shown either through close-ups on individuals' displays of sentiment, or by way of wide shots on crowds moved by a shared grief. It offers to the audience a *representation*<sup>34</sup> of a people, moved by the same emotions and moving in the same direction, the liberation of Palestine. Thus, *Tall El Zaatar* bears on the same time the collective memory of a constitutive massacre and the representation of a people in struggle. The film has been widely distributed after its initial release. In Italy, it was shown on the TV channel RAI 2 and aired a few times during the month of August 1978. It managed its way through Italian and European festivals (Taormina, Oslo and Paris) and also won a prize at Baghdad Palestinian Film Festival. At least twenty-five copies of the film were requested, most of them in Arabic for the Palestinian Cinema Institution, to be sent to the PLO offices all over the world<sup>35</sup>. But in 1979, the PCI dismantled Unitelefilm and its films were deposited in a newly created archive, the ASAMO, which later became the AAMOD, still active nowadays. A few years later, during the siege of Beirut, the PLO offices were looted and the archive where the Palestinian Cinema Institution films used to be stored disappeared. When the reels of *Tall el Zaatar* resurfaced in the beginning of the last decade, it was described as a

31 PHAY, Soko. « L'Image manquante de Rithy Panh. Le cinéma comme expérience de l'Histoire », *Écrire l'histoire. Histoire, Littérature, Esthétique*, n° 13-14 (10 octobre 2014): 157-67, <https://doi.org/10.4000/elh.493>. [Consulted on 07/30/2021]

32 NINEY, François. *Le documentaire et ses faux-semblants*. Paris, Klincksieck, Vol. 47, 2009. p.133

33 *Biladi, biladi* is the anthem of the PLO.

34 On the dialectical relation between emotion and representation, see DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. "Rendre sensible" in BADIOU, Alain, et al. *Qu'est-ce qu'un peuple ?*. La fabrique éditions, 2013.

35 "Situazione vendita copie *Tall El Zaatar*" AAMOD, Archivio Unitelefilm (1963 - 1997), *Tall el Zaatar*. See also Letter from Mustafa Abu Ali to Unitelefilm on February 24<sup>th</sup> 1978. AAMOD, Archivio Unitelefilm (1963 - 1997), *Tall el Zaatar*.

“staggering discovery”<sup>36</sup>, despite the fact that both the paper archives and the reels had been stored and catalogued in Rome the whole time. They were simply not taken into consideration before. If the value of an archive lies in its status as a collectively owned piece from the past, then that status requires “a fundamental event : death”.

Death to the extent that the archived document *par excellence* is, generally, a document whose author is dead and which, obviously, has been closed for the required period before it can be accessed. [...] Other than in exceptional cases, it is only at the end of this period of closure that the archived document is as if woken from sleep and returned to life.<sup>37</sup>

As a matter of fact, it took almost twenty-five years after the dissolution of the Palestinian Cinema Institution before a discussion about its cinema emerged in English language<sup>38</sup> academic fields<sup>39</sup>. Interest in *Tall El Zaatar* grew only in the 2010s, after the death of its most prominent author, Mustafa Abu Ali, in 2009. It thus seems that the film wasn't lost and re-discovered, but that it just went through the regular “period of closure” required before acquiring the status of archive that justifies a public interest in its contents.

So that *Tall El Zaatar* could live again as archival images, an effort of restoration had to be made with its materials. First and foremost, Monica Maurer and Emily Jacir accomplished between 2012 and 2014 the digitization of the footage from the thirty-three reels deposited in the AAMOD<sup>40</sup>. Two digital copies of the whole collection were sent to the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut and Ramallah, to be made available to everyone. More than a process of property restitution, the opening of the audiovisual archives invigorated collective memory and allowed the reconstruction of history. Monica Maurer made it clear: « collective visual memory has to be publicly accessible »<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, since the original had been missing after the siege of Beirut, she restored the Arabic sound-mix of the film to reproduce an Arabic version and managed to show it for the first time in Amman since the early 1980s. Dr. Labadie, one of the two doctors of the camp interviewed in the film, presented the restored version of the film. It allowed people who witnessed the massacre and their relatives to reactivate the process of collective memory preservation, through exchange of views and discussion<sup>42</sup>. Last but not least, the status of the archival image was realized through the *reprise de vues*<sup>43</sup> (re-shooting) of the film footage as part of the film *Off Frame: AKA Revolution Until Victory* (Mohanad Yaqubi, 2015,

36 BUALI, op.cit.

37 MBEMBE, Achille. "The Power of the Archive and its Limits." *Refiguring the archive*. Springer, Dordrecht, 2002. p. 19-27.

38 As my knowledge of Arabic academic literature on Palestinian cinema is insufficient, I restrained my statement to English-language literature. The following work in Arabic can be mentioned: AL-ZUBAYDI, Qays. *Palestine in the Cinema*. Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, 2006.

39 See GERTZ, Nurith & KHEIFI George, *From bleeding memories to fertile memories: Palestinian cinema in the 1970s*, 2006. and MASSAD, Joseph. “The weapon of culture : cinema in the Palestinian liberation struggle” in DABASHI, Hamid (dir). *Dreams of a nation*, London, Verso, 2006.

40 MURPHY, Maureen Clare. « 1970s Film of Palestinian Struggle in Lebanon Restored » [online], *The Electronic Intifada*, November 17<sup>th</sup> 2013. <https://electronicintifada.net/content/1970s-film-palestinian-struggle-lebanon-restored/12914> [Consulted on 07/30//2021]

41 Interview with Monica Maurer on June 5<sup>th</sup> 2020.

Palestine/France/Qatar/Lebanon). In this film the footage from many Palestinian and solidarity films of the 1970s was remade in light of four decades of history. This approach allowed on one hand a distanced questioning of the representations at stake in the footage, and on the other hand the production of a discourse on the contemporary political situation in relation to the past. To that extent, the *reprise de vues* allows in *Off Frame* the accomplishment of the two values of the archival image: history and memory<sup>44</sup>.

To summarize, the presence of a film like *Tall El Zaatar* and its paper documentation in the archives of the AAMOD is the result and the evidence of a prior relationship between OLP and PCI filmmakers. But their mere presence was not enough to exercise their archival value: they needed time, restoration and reinterpretation to be able to produce new meanings in contemporary cultural and historical production.

### **New histories to be written.**

This concluding section aims to advocate the methodological stance of the research approach in this article. However I must first acknowledge the historical conditions that made this research possible: there are archives of the Palestinian Cinema Institution partners, but there is no archive of the Palestinian Cinema Institution. Archives are the privilege of constituted states and require political stability; the Palestinian, as a people subject to oppression, are compelled to collect the material of their historical legacy under the constant threat that it could be lost, destroyed or looted<sup>45</sup>. These artifacts, when they are looted, are subject to a new rule of knowledge imposed by the power who benefits from the looting:

With the mass expulsion of Palestinians, their archives were partially destroyed and partially converted into a pile of appropriable segments by the newly established sovereign state and the international organizations that endowed these deeds with their acceptability<sup>46</sup>.

42 For instance, still shots or clips from the film are often used as illustrations in Facebook groups dedicated to the victims and witnesses of Tal el-Zaatar. Interview with Monica Maurer on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2021. On the practices around the use of images in these groups, see YAQUB, Nadia. "The Afterlives of Violent Images: Reading Photographs from the Tal Al-Za'tar Refugee Camp on Facebook." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 8(2-3): 327-54. 2015.

43 NINEY, *op.cit.* p.41-42.

44 SCHWARTZINGER, Charlotte. "En quête d'image(s)." *Regards - Revue Des Arts Du Spectacle*, (21), 2019. 31-46. <https://journals.usj.edu.lb/regards/article/view/12> [Consulted on 30/03/2020]

45 "Palestinian history is the history of creation and destruction of archives. Palestinians have struggled to create archives, from pre-48, and then certainly in the PLO period, and then they get destroyed, whether in Beirut, or Ramallah... and then they [the Palestinians] go back and create a new archive. It is part of being a people, with a common history. It seems to me that if you give up creating archives, it means you've decided you're not a people anymore, and you've decided to be a part of another people's history." YAQUB, Nadia. "Talk with Dr. Nadia Yaqub about her book *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* moderated by Lubna Taha". Seminary "On Cinema and Revolution". Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center. Ramallah, Palestine. December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/KhalilSakakiniCenter/videos/406633537445753> [Consulted on 07/30/2021]. See also YAQUB Nadia, *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution*, University of Texas Press, 2018.

Research within Western archives, whose interest lies to some extent in the suppression of Palestinian film archives, indirectly advantages from the oppressive regime imposed on the Palestinian legacy<sup>47</sup>. The researcher – who often works as part of European or North-American institutions – benefits, either statutorily or financially, from this system. This justifies the assertion that researchers must act with the understanding that their position has consequences vis-à-vis Palestinian institutional memory; choosing to engage with these archives will allow new histories to be written<sup>48</sup>. From this stance, at least two necessary objectives can be inferred. First, to ensure the accessibility of this research, for instance by giving priority to open access publication<sup>49</sup>. Second, to facilitate with any attempt to use it towards the restoration of a Palestinian cinema archive.

Finally, as an incentive to replicate this research approach, a few examples of ongoing research on Palestinian revolutionary cinema in their partner's archives can be mentioned<sup>50</sup>. Independent author Irit Neidhardt is conducting a work on European audiovisual cooperation with the PLO. Her in-depth research focuses on the relations between the PLO and the two German states from the 1970s to the present day and aims to disclose the economic and political structures of these collaborations. The part on the German

46 AZOULAY Ariella. *Potential History*, Verso, London, 2019. p.210. On the regime of power imposed on archives, see also SELA, Rona. "The Genealogy of Colonial Plunder and Erasure-Israel's Control over Palestinian Archives." *Social Semiotics* 28(2), 2018. pp.201-229

47 Following Azoulay's synecdoche of the camera's shutter as "the operation of the imperial enterprise altogether", one could argue that the archival record is the result of an operation that focuses light on a particular point of view on the one hand but also suppresses the view outside the frame on the other hand. Even if a more accurate and complete picture of Palestinian cinema existed – the looted archive of the Palestinian Cinema Institution –, the production of knowledge takes as its focus point the accessible and protected archives of Western institutions. Were the better picture available, such archives may be less valuable. On "The Shutter" see AZOULAY, *op. cit.*, pp.1-8.

48 This follows Florence Piron's efforts to uphold "cognitive justice" within the research field: "scientific research cannot claim to be willing or able to be satisfied with an internal mission of advancing science without concern for the world in which it exists, which funds it and uses it, or which may need this knowledge to solve problems or inform societal choices" (my translation). See PIRON Florence, « Justice et injustice cognitives : de l'épistémologie à la matérialité des savoirs humains », in TREMBLAY Émilie and DORCÉ Ricarson (dir.) *Les Classiques des sciences sociales. 25 ans de partage des savoirs dans la francophonie*, Québec, Éditions science et bien commun, 2018, pp. 259-273. This article argues for socially responsible research practices, i.e. practices that take into account both the social conditions in which research is conducted and the way in which the knowledge produced will be distributed and used.

49 "Whenever a Northern scientist makes his or her work available to the public, he or she is making it accessible not only to his or her peers, but also to government officials, teachers, companies and associations in his or her own country, and potentially to all students in the South who would never be able to read it without the technical possibility of open access." (my translation). PIRON Florence et al. "Le libre accès vu d'Afrique francophone subsaharienne." in *Revue française des sciences de l'information et de la communication* (11), 2017. <https://journals.openedition.org/rfsic/3292> [Consulted on 07/30/2021]

50 In addition to the works mentioned here, my own PhD thesis, begun in 2019, focuses on the exchanges between the PLO and French organizations. Unlike the PCI, the French Communist Party did not actively collaborate with the PLO as far as audiovisual cooperation (Interview with Jacques Bidou, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021). Thus, this research does not focus on a single party, but on a myriad of organisations that either made films with Palestinian factions or about the Palestinian struggle, showed Palestinian films in assemblies, festivals or universities, or exchanged views, techniques and materials with Palestinian filmmakers.

Democratic Republic (GDR), the most documented, is based mainly on bi-lateral agreements and production files from the "Foundation Archives of the Political Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR in the Federal Archives" (SAPMO). Besides, a master's thesis focusing on the ties between Palestinian revolutionary cinema and the Third Cinema movement has recently been published by Lubna Taha Alarda<sup>51</sup>. Amongst other films like *Tall El Zaatar*, it deals with the history of *Palestine, Another Vietnam* (Gianonni and Danti, 1971, Argentina), an Argentinian solidarity film recently found in 2014 by filmmaker Rodrigo Vazquez in the Cuban archives of ICAIC<sup>52</sup>.

Overall, this article on *Tall El Zaatar* shows that there are still sources to be consulted and stories to be written about Palestinian revolutionary cinema. Like Unitelefilm, other organizations were active in collaborating with the PLO, and their documents may well shed light on new facets of the structure of PLO audiovisual institutions. The exploration of these sources should be part of the process of reconstructing Palestinian audiovisual memory and could complement the reconstruction efforts of the Palestinian Cinema Institute's film archive.

51 ALARDA , op. cit.

52 Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematograficos.

## Appendix

### Archives

Archivio Audiovisivo Del Movimento Operaio e Democratico (AAMOD), Rome, Italy.

Archival fonds : "Archivio Unitelefilm (1963 - 1997)"

- ◆ Al Fatah - Palestina (box 12 - folder 120)
- ◆ Bagdad. Festival del film sulla Palestina (41-433bis)
- ◆ Firenze. Festival dei popoli (41-442)
- ◆ Francia (35-410)
- ◆ Giordania, Guinea (37-414)
- ◆ La lunga marcia del ritorno (15-172)
- ◆ Libano, Lussemburgo, Norvegia, Olanda, Perù (38-417)
- ◆ Tall el Zaatar (25-287)
- ◆ Taormina. Settimana del filmnuovo (42-471)

### Interviews

Interviews with Monica Maurer on June, 5th 2020, on June, 18th 2020, and on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2021.

Interview with Ugo Adilardi and Monica Maurer on September, 15<sup>th</sup> 2020.

Interview with Luigi Perelli on October, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2020.

Interview with Jacques Bidou on February 2nd, 2021.

Interview with Pino Adriano on July 6th, 2021.

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YAQUB Nadia, *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution*, University of Texas Press, 2018.]



**ABSTRACT:** [Le film *Tall El Zaatar* (1977, Abu Ali, Pino, Chamoun, Palestine/Italie), une coproduction entre l'Institut du cinéma palestinien et la société audiovisuelle du Parti communiste italien (PCI), a été considéré comme perdu pendant trois décennies et redécouvert en 2011. Au-delà des récits spectaculaires qui entourent ce film, *Tall El Zaatar* révèle surtout l'importance de considérer la dimension transnationale du cinéma militant palestinien.]

Dans cet article sur le film *Tall El Zaatar*, j'aborderai l'histoire du cinéma révolutionnaire palestinien à travers les traces laissées au sein des archives d'une institution avec laquelle les cinéastes palestiniens ont collaboré. Sur la base d'un ensemble d'entretiens et de documents consultés dans les Archives audiovisuelles du Mouvement ouvrier et démocratique (AAMOD) à Rome, je montrerai ce que l'historien peut apprendre des fragments d'archives résultant des échanges des cinéastes palestiniens avec des institutions européennes en général et italiennes en particulier.]

**KEYWORDS:** [cinéma révolutionnaire, Palestine, Tel al-Zaatar, Parti Communiste Italien, Unitefilm, transferts culturels, histoire transnationale, archives, activisme culturel]

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