

Politics in the Everyday: Women in Palestinian Women's Films

LILA ABU-LUGHOD

Columbia University

This Is Not Living. 2001. 42 minutes. A film by Alia Arasoughly. For more information contact Women Make Movies, Inc., 462 Broadway, Suite 500WS, New York, NY 10013; (212) 925-0606; www.wmm.com

Blanche's Homeland. 2001. 28 minutes. A film by Maryse Gargour. For more information contact Dunya Films, 345 W. 40th Street, New York, NY 10001; (212) 967-4318; www.dunyafilms.com

Four Songs for Palestine. 2001. 13 minutes. A film by Nada El-Yassir. For more information contact Dunya Films, 345 W. 40th Street, New York, NY 10001; (212) 967-4318; www.dunyafilms.com

A gem of a film stole the show at the opening night of the Palestinian film festival "Dreams of a Nation." Only 13 minutes long, the quiet and disquieting fiction short, *Four Songs for Palestine*, follows a young Palestinian woman around the large rooms she lives in, as she starts her day. She washes her face, makes herself breakfast, then picks up and cares for her small baby. The television is on all the time. Sometimes she watches; sometimes the familiar drone of the news of violent encounters and politics is just background, as for viewers, it is the only sound. The film exquisitely captures a gendered experience of living under siege. The woman is confined. She stays in her pajamas; she has nowhere to go. Yet the thick stone walls of her quotidian domestic life, keeping safe a new innocent brought into the world, are permeated by politics. The opening shots have her looking into a mirror. Gradually, superimposed on her reflection are television news videos



Frame from *Four Songs for Palestine*. (Courtesy of Annemarie Jacir)

depicting the brutalities of the *Aqsa intifada* and the reoccupation of the West Bank. The news is her; there is nothing else. National belonging also enters in the moments when images dissolve into visually stunning color swirling into a thick liquid: the colors of the Palestinian flag, white, red, green, black, one by one segmenting the film.

An art film about the everyday, *Four Songs for Palestine* shares much with two other recent documentaries by and about Palestinian women. Between them they reveal the wide range of women's experiences, from the nostalgic longing of those in the diaspora (those made refugees in 1948, the most fortunate of whom have lived out their days in Beirut, Paris, or Salt Lake City) to the painful or suspended living characteristic of life on the ground in a Palestine under Israeli military occupation—in villages and towns of the West Bank, and in those special places, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They also illuminate the gendered nature of political violence and national identity.

Blanche's Homeland, made by Maryse Gargour, a Jaffa-born journalist and television documentary producer based in Paris and Beirut, is the story of Blanche, a 90-year-old woman who was the little princess of a landowning family, exporters of Jaffa oranges. The pre-1948 photographs of her with white bows in her hair, playing the piano, the old embroidery with flowers and French script she stitched, are fragments that anchor the memories of her elite girlhood in Palestine. She is caught up in memories as she narrates, first in French and later in Arabic, the still incomprehensible experience of having been forced to leave her country. She is a displaced person, living for her children, who phone from time to time, and waiting for her end. She finds personal solace in church, getting there through the snowy streets of Salt Lake City. Her daily life is taken up with the little tasks of old age: a trip to the shop to buy a few items, cooking a meal, washing some plates, playing the piano, watching television. She has not, for a minute, forgotten Palestine and is touched as she watches a video of a Palestinian rally in London, to find so many young men and women, with British accents or Arab, speaking with vigor and enthusiasm about being Palestinian. *Blanche's Homeland* is a film whose genteel subject, against a backdrop of gentle piano sonatas and slow clouds moving through the sky, reminds us that Palestinian women in the diaspora have not forgotten their homeland. Their identities, even when they spend their time in the comfortable everyday of living and raising families, are tied up with national belonging and the trauma of loss.

Women's lives under Israeli military occupation are not so gentle. *This Is Not Living*, directed by Alia Arasoughly, a film critic and filmmaker who grew up in a refugee camp



Frame from *This Is Not Living*. (Courtesy of Women Make Movies)

in Lebanon and then worked in the United States before moving to Ramallah, tries to evoke that experience through a documentary structured around the reflections of eight women in the West Bank. These women are Christian and Muslim, upper middle class and struggling, urban and rural, middle aged and teenaged, working mothers and drama teachers, editors of television news and peasants braving Israeli settlers to harvest their olives. They speak articulately and, for the most part, quietly, in matter-of-fact tones, about what their daily lives are like, what they have witnessed, what they fear, and what they desire. Their sorrow is captured by the camera in their imploring eyes and clenched hands. Their confusion is revealed in their questions about how such injustice could occur. Their endurance is represented by their insistence on going on with life, driving on flooded roads to avoid military checkpoints to open a shop that has no customers; spending all day editing video footage of unspeakable horrors, like a face split in two, for an anxious public; and leaving for work at dawn to allow time for the delays in getting to

a job that is needed to support nine children and a handicapped husband in a refugee camp.

The narratives of these soft-spoken but passionate women—women who read newspapers, who describe their efforts to protect their children from missiles as like a cat carrying her kittens from one room to another looking for safety, who are frustrated because the theater in which they gave drama and ballet classes was fired on in the afternoon when children were there, who are looking for some useful role for themselves, who describe the sorrow of losing a brother—are punctuated by the roar of planes, the staccato of gunfire, and the shattering of the night air with missiles that flash when they explode. These harsh war sounds alternate with an eerie soundtrack that blocks out voices as we watch violent clashes, funerals, and even surreal snowflakes racing toward the night sky in a home video made by the family of the young martyred brother in happier times.

This Is Not Living has no climax. It simply moves back and forth between the intimate portraits and quiet narratives of the women, and the harsh world of these jarring sounds and sights made by men. In remarkable footage we see the men, mostly Israeli soldiers: soldiers with guns looking down over the gate to Jerusalem, soldiers with menacing helmets on horseback charging crowds during Friday prayers, soldiers halting people and demanding identity cards at checkpoints, soldiers in jeeps or riot gear shooting, firing tear gas, and ducking to avoid stones. Some Palestinian men are there, too—teens hurling stones with slingshots, setting tires on fire, and being carried dead, wearing the Palestinian flag as a shroud, on funeral biers on the shoulders of grief-stricken and angry men while women wail.

The drama of the women's lives is this contrast between the quiet confinements of living rooms and the everyday domestic activities of frying an egg, comforting a child, and dusting a shop window, and the violence outside. In these films by and about women, ordinary women live as women, in the personal, but their personal worlds are not sheltered. Their personal worlds are shaped by their political predicament and their national tragedy. This leads them to say, sadly, as one woman does, "I hope things calm down and a solution is found."