

Basma Alsharif, Azza El-Hassan,  
Mohamed Jabaly, Ahmed Mansour, Arab Nasser,  
Tarzan Nasser, and Abdelsalam Shehada  
Editing and commentary by Nadia Yaqub with  
an introduction by Azza El-Hassan

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## **Gaza Filmmaking in a Palestinian Context**

### **A Gazan Filmmakers' Roundtable**

In March 2021, I convened a virtual roundtable of Palestinian filmmakers as a means of incorporating the perspectives from Gaza into this book. Interviews with individual filmmakers from Gaza abound, but they usually focus on particular films and are directed at global film audiences. As Azza El-Hassan points out in this discussion, Palestinian filmmakers rarely get a chance to engage in deep discussion about filmmaking with each other. Filmmaking in Gaza has proliferated during the past decade, in part due to technological advances that facilitate amateur filmmaking and in part because of the proliferation of training opportunities; for instance, students from al-Azhar University and al-Aqsa University and Theater Day Productions have all submitted films to the Palestinian student film festival that has run at Duke University since 2017 (Kalow 2021). However, it was important that the roundtable include filmmakers from earlier generations as well. There are dozens of filmmakers from outside the Gaza Strip who have made important works about Gaza, but I chose to focus on those with close family ties and the

lived experience with Gaza that can only be mediated and facilitated by such ties. I wanted the roundtable to be a conversation among filmmakers rather than with me, an academic who studies and writes about film but who has never worked in filmmaking. I thought, rightly, that this would create a kind of intimacy and opportunity for reflection. So, I invited Azza El-Hassan, a Palestinian filmmaker and scholar whose documentary work is informed by a provocative interviewing style and who has engaged deeply with Palestinian cinema history, to serve as moderator for the roundtable. The two-hour roundtable exceeded my expectations and, as a rare opportunity for Palestinian filmmakers to gather for the express purpose of discussing their work, served as a small contribution to Palestinian filmmaking more generally through the community-building work it performed.

This chapter includes a brief reflection on the roundtable by El-Hassan, followed by excerpts from the discussion and my own comments on it. Filmmakers' statements have been edited for clarity and concision.

— *N.Y.*

### *Habibti Gaza (Gaza, My Love)*

By Azza El-Hassan

Film festivals are usually a space for filmmakers to meet and engage with each other. Yet, when it comes to Palestine and the Palestinians, what is usually the norm is not possible even for cinema, where imagination should be able to materialize dreams. While films can travel across borders and checkpoints, in Palestine filmmakers and their cameras most of the time cannot. The segmentation and segregation of Palestinian communities from each other, which is enforced by a military machine, means that a Palestinian film festival in the West Bank cannot host Palestinian filmmakers except those who are from the West Bank or who have foreign passports that can grant them entrance to the territories as non-Palestinian imposters. The same applies to a Palestinian festival in Jerusalem or Haifa, which cannot host filmmakers from the West Bank or Gaza, and to a Palestinian film festival in Gaza, which would only be able to host Palestinian filmmakers from Gaza itself. This is why when Nadia Yaqub asked me if I wanted to be in conversation with filmmakers from Gaza, I jumped at the opportunity: I wanted to meet them, to talk to them, and maybe to accumulate a narrative about them.



**Figure 1.1** An aerial shot of “abandoned Gaza” from Basma Alsharif’s *Ouroboros* (2017).

### A Gazan Film

As I watched the films of the Gazan filmmakers whom I would soon meet, I could not help but think of what sets the cinema that they are making apart from the one that is being made a few kilometers away, in other Palestinian cities and towns. In the West Bank, borders and checkpoints mark the landscape and can, in a film, signal the beginning or end of a scene, as in *Rana’s Wedding* (2002) and more recently in *The Present* (2020). In both films the narrative evolves and changes due to checkpoints and borders. That is not the case in a Gazan film. The space in Gazan cinema is not interrupted by checkpoints. Instead, there is a continuity within scenes that other Palestinian filmmakers crave. Yet, this continuous space is also a confined one. Gaza is an open-air prison, and Gazan filmmakers do not miss an opportunity to illustrate the limitation of the space. In *Ouroboros* (2017) by Basma Alsharif, aerial shots of isolated, abandoned Gaza set the scene in the opening sequence. Gazans are observed by the viewer from a distance in a shattered landscape, as Alsharif presents Gaza as a space separated from the rest the world.

The absence of Israeli soldiers in Gazan films also struck me. Unlike Palestinian films from the West Bank, where Israeli soldiers are present, in Gazan films the soldiers are outside the frame. They control and alter the fate of the protagonists from a distance, as we see in the last scene of *Gaza*



**Figure 1.2** The Mediterranean Sea appears in Ahmed Mansour's *Angel of Gaza* (2021).

*Mon Amour* (2020) by the Nasser brothers. The voice of the Israeli soldier is heard coming from the sky. The sound of a helicopter accompanies it as the soldier instructs the film hero and heroine to not venture farther into the sea. The effect of Israeli soldiers whose presence dominates without their being visible can be clearly seen in *Ambulance* (2016) by Mohamed Jabaly, who records his daily life after acquiring his first camera and begins working in a hospital on the first day of the 2014 Israeli bombing of Gaza.

As I thought of all that differentiates films coming from Gaza from those that are being created in the West Bank, I could not help but also notice that Gazan films always include the Mediterranean Sea, something that Palestinian filmmakers in the West Bank cannot use as a film location because access to Palestine's sea has long been denied. The long shots of the seafront, where Gazan film protagonists usually seek normality within an abnormal existence, seemed to also insist on the sea as an integral part of the Palestinian visual landscape and a reminder that what has been forcefully omitted from Palestinian cinema in the West Bank remains ours. That is what you get when you view a Gazan film.

### **A Conversation with a Friend**

Abdelsalam Shehada is the only one of the filmmakers I knew previously.

Abdelsalam and I have collaborated in the past on several projects. We met in the late nineties, before the Second Intifada, when movement be-

tween the West Bank and Gaza was still possible. We would tour Gaza City, searching for filming locations. Together we filmed *Sinbad Is a She* (1999) and a collection of short films.

We both began making films following the Oslo peace agreement, which was a period of hope, when everyone, even those who did not support the agreement, felt that there was a possibility for things to get better. This optimism translated itself in Palestinian cinema through the exploration of new film themes. Instead of focusing only on the Palestinian struggle for liberation, Palestinian filmmakers began to reflect on their own society and the layered identities and issues that formed its losses and gains. During that period, I filmed *Arab Women Speak Out* (1996) and *Sinbad Is a She*, which, as their titles suggest, deal with women's rights in an evolving Palestinian society. As for Abdelsalam, he filmed *The Shadow* (2000), which focuses on the effect of a problematic past and present on the mental health of a recovering Palestinian society.

Yet, that period soon ended with the collapse of peace talks and the brutal bloody response of the Israeli army to the Second Intifada. At that point, Abdelsalam decided to stop making films and instead focus on documenting and recording what was happening in the hope that if the world knew, then it would act, while I insisted on continuing to search for some kind of normality within our daily existence.

Our different perceptions and approaches to dealing with what was happening around us and how our world was changing captured me so much that in *News Time* (2001) I decided to use it as a prologue for the film. The film begins with a telephone conversation between me and Abdelsalam in which I try to convince him to abandon filming news and the harsh, painful reality and to instead come and join me in shooting a film. But Abdelsalam rejects my offer, leaving me to make a film without a cameraman and, in a situation of war, trying to make a film that does not deal with war. Our documented conversation became the bond with which many people now connect us.

### **Gaza Is Not a Coincidence**

It was now time to meet the other filmmakers.

As a Palestinian who grew up in exile and returned to Palestine only in 1996, first as a foreign imposter and later receiving the right to stay because of the Oslo agreement, I shot my films all over Palestine. I filmed in Nablus, Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem, and so on. Palestine was not about a specific city or town. I observed it just as an ex-refugee would: an object of desire



**Figure 1.3** Filmmaker Azza El-Hassan tries unsuccessfully to convince the Gazan cinematographer Abdelsalam Shehada to abandon the news and work on her film essay in *News Time* (2001).

and imagination. Returning to it was a cathartic act to undo dispossession in which I was indulging every time I made a shot.

The work of the filmmakers I was now meeting was very different in that respect. These were filmmakers for whom shooting a film in Palestine meant shooting a film in Gaza and nowhere else. Gaza was their subject and location. *Gaza Mon Amour* was not actually filmed in Gaza, but the Nasser brothers re-created and reproduced Gaza in their perfect film set in Amman. The films of Basma Alsharif, who was raised abroad, are not limited to Palestinian narratives, but when she does work on Palestine, it is Gaza that is her location and desire.

This insistence on Gaza intrigues me. Why is it that these filmmakers do not imagine stories outside Gaza? Did the Israeli segmentation and disconnection of Palestinian areas succeed in limiting our imagination? Can we now formulate narratives only within the spaces that are allowed to us by a military machine? I asked the filmmakers why they always choose Gaza, and the answer came simply and straightforwardly from the Nasser brothers and

Mohamed Jabaly: This is the place we know. It is where elements that make our characters come from, and it is where we have memories.

“Is Gaza, then, as a location, a ‘coincidence’?” I asked. This idea seemed to provoke Basma, who insisted that Gaza was not a coincidence but a choice—an ethical choice, which is the subject of her film *Ouroboros*.

As I watched the filmmakers on my computer screen, I could not but notice that as much as they differ from each other in their experiences, narratives, film styles, and more, they all shared the act of archiving Gaza. It is the Gaza of Abdelsalam’s father, for whom he recorded its past and present in *To My Father* (2008). It is the Gaza that has a history that stretches far earlier than the modern Islamists, which the Nasser brothers bring back to life in the statue their fisherman finds in *Gaza Mon Amour*, and it is the harsh reality that Jabaly films in *Ambulance*. It is the Gaza that we see through their eyes.

## The Gazan Filmmakers’ Roundtable

Translated and edited by Nadia Yaqub with Ahmed Mansour

Gazan filmmaking begins with a relationship to place—the intimate knowledge that arises from long residency and relationships to people. “I know Basma’s grandfather, Dr. Haydar ‘Abd-Shafi’ and his family. The purple tree in the courtyard of his house enchants me. Every day, I walk by his house in Gaza City and gaze at the purple tree at the door and am reassured because this house is a reflection of the glory of Gaza, its dignity and its rich, human history, the generous inhabitants of Gaza,” Abdelsalam Shehada says. The tree that brightens Shehada’s immediate environs also brings to mind specific details about Gaza’s history and past conditions. ‘Abd al-Shafi’ was a prominent medical doctor in Gaza and actor in Palestinian national politics from the 1950s until his death in 2007 and was widely known for his principled political stances and commitment to unity. The tree, then, operates as a chronotope for Shehada, imbuing the difficult present with history, nostalgia, and personal memories. Details like this enrich filmmakers’ works in ways that may not always be evident to distant viewers who do not share this intimate knowledge of Gaza. Arab Nasser tells an anecdote about making the film *Gaza Mon Amour*:

There was a discussion about using a song by Julio Iglesias. The copyright holders asked us to explain why we wanted to use that song in particular



**Figure 1.4** Issa, the film's protagonist, cooks while listening to Julio Iglesias in Tarzan and Arab Nasser's *Gaza Mon Amour* (2020).

and what the song means in Gaza. Although our film is set in 2013–2014, the song evokes Gaza in the 1990s when our father would drive us from our home in Jabaliya camp to school in Bayt Lahiya in the north. . . . He always liked to listen to Julio Iglesias. Until now, whenever we hear Julio, we return to Bayt Lahiya, the red flowers around that area, the wild mulberry trees, the green fields, and the beautiful old buildings that have completely disappeared—now Gazan architecture is a solid concrete block, so that you can't even breathe.

Such details are essential for filmmakers working in a mimetic mode. Tarzan Nasser adds:

We made two fiction films in Jordan. First, we looked for locations that resemble Gaza. Palestinian refugee camps everywhere, in Lebanon, in Jordan, more or less resemble each other, but the camps in Gaza have their specificities. We do all the art directing and design to ensure that it is precisely like Gaza. This is not easy, searching for the exact paint and other details. It's a responsibility if you undertake creating the feeling of Gaza in the film. . . . I watch films made about Gaza but not by Gazan filmmakers and, to be honest, as one who lived in Gaza, and knows Gaza, I feel that they are off.

Nostalgia informs filmmakers' work subtly. The Nasser brothers may feel it particularly strongly after living outside Gaza for more than a decade. Shehada addresses it directly in his film *To My Father*, in which he meditates on the auratic quality of older images and their effect on the present and





Figure 1.5 Nostalgia in Abdelsalam Shehada's *To My Father* (2008).

the future. There is a form of reflective nostalgia in that it is empathetic and questioning (Boym 2001, xviii). The bittersweet feeling of yearning is marshaled to create bonds between viewers and subjects of the film, the filmmaker, and Gazans.

The need filmmakers feel to evoke Gaza as a specific, unique place may be related to an ambivalence toward Palestine as a national question, born of specific experiences in Gaza. Azza El-Hassan, who grew up in the diaspora and whose films are often framed by the national, does not feel this need to represent place:

For me, as a Palestinian filmmaker and in my films, Ramallah is a coincidence. It's not a space. I am making a film with a Palestinian narrative in it, but the space itself, it could be Bethlehem, Gaza, as far as I am concerned, it doesn't really matter where it's taking place.

The relationship of filmmakers from the diaspora to Gaza is complex. Basma Alsharif is adamant that she does not work from the positionality of a resident of Gaza, although attachment to place, built over years of visits to her family's home and its importance for her mother, is key to her work:

I was born and raised outside Gaza. I have a US passport. It's not that my life was always easy, but I told myself I can abandon this pain because I haven't experienced it. As the situation worsened in Gaza, I felt as if I were not a Palestinian. But at the same time, I realized that I could not escape it. We visited constantly. My mother's family is from there and they were very political, and because of my grandfather's activism and ideology and the work he did, I grew up with that. Though I have a Gazan ID and have the Palestinian passport, I also have this other experience which is very hard to forget. I feel that always being able to leave and come back is a massive privilege. It [the violence inflicted upon Gaza] is very devastating and impossible to forget. Perhaps it is made more traumatic by the fact that I don't have to endure it so there's this intense guilt and there's this intense . . . I don't know what makes me different from my family or from the rest of the people of Gaza. It's just luck, it's chance. It's the result of where my parents studied and the circumstances of their work, of the political moment in which they had me. There is this constant duality of feeling completely outside and completely unable to escape. I think, through my work, I try to use that as a way to bring audiences into the space where they might not otherwise go, through the vantage point of someone who is straddling the inside and outside of a place that is a wound but is also a strength in my history that affects how I look at the world.

In fact, all the filmmakers except Shehada now live outside of Gaza and so must grapple with how exile affects their relationship to Gaza and hence their filmmaking. Mohamed Jabaly says:

The experiences we have had [in Gaza] are a part of who we are wherever we go. On the topic of leaving Gaza, we actually never leave it. Look at what I have here [he shows us a plaque]. It is the symbol of the Gaza City municipality, which is a phoenix.

Arab Nasser says:

Gaza is occupied, but Gaza itself occupies the Gazans themselves. We have been away from Gaza for ten years, partly in Jordan and partly in France. We still haven't learned the French language. Part of it is because I don't focus on it, but the main part is that I don't acknowledge the new place after I left Gaza because it occupies me. Now, it's as if we've never left Gaza. If you come and see how we live here, you would see that we are still living in Gaza.

Alsharif echoes these sentiments:

We take Gaza with us wherever we are in our houses, this is how my mother raised me in Chicago. I always felt as if she were a caged bird, actually, in America. She didn't know how to live. She re-creates Gaza wherever she goes, and that's how I was raised and maybe that's also why I have such a strong attachment. Whenever we would go back to Gaza, it was clear that this is where she belongs. And this kind of experience has become more talked about in a way that I think is very powerful.

What constitutes the Gaza that filmmakers carry with them in the diaspora? Certainly, family ties and connection to geography and history are important, but it also comprises the trauma of living through multiple Israeli attacks. Jabaly describes his experience with the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, which was also the beginning of his experience as a filmmaker:

There was a feeling that there was a war, that, as now, at any moment there could be a war in Gaza. It was a direct moment, as you said. The event was in front of me, and I ran with it. I knew I would create something with the footage, but I didn't know when or where or how. Really, the experience, as an experience, editing the film was much harder than living the actual moment because you relive all the moments again and again in your memory as you edit. If we think about the trauma that they speak about here, all people in Gaza are born and raised in trauma. All the millions are traumatized. Even if it doesn't show, we cure ourselves from ourselves. The trait that distinguishes the Palestinians is that they are like an electric generator full of energy that helps them get rid of this trauma and to continue smiling and to live off the hope that the situation will improve.

The film that Ahmed Mansour is working on currently is related to the effects of trauma that he still carries with him from the 2014 war:

I have been in the US for five years. After the last war, I left [Gaza] in order to forget. I studied in New York City, and after that I could not forget and wanted to make a film in which I confront the details that Arab, Basma, and Mohamed, and Abdelsalam have spoken about. When I left Gaza, I lived near JFK Airport. The sound of the planes drove me crazy because I would wonder, are they going to bomb now? So, I changed my apartment. But then I said, enough is enough, I can't live like this, always escaping. So, I decided to open that chapter. A wise man once told

me, “Most people can acknowledge their trauma and deal with it but never confront who caused it.” So, I spent three years doing research, searching for an Israeli soldier who was in Gaza during the war. I found one in Boston, and I’ve been building trust with him. I just started filming. This is the toughest thing I have ever done in my life. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t opened this chapter. But it feels right because otherwise it will keep haunting me.

In late May 2021 I spoke with Mansour again, just a few days after the cease-fire ending Israel’s May 2021 attack on Gaza. This was the first such attack that Mansour had experienced from outside Gaza, and he described the experience as more difficult than any of the three major bombings (2008–9, 2012, 2014) that occurred when he lived there. When 2014 happened, he simply wanted to escape Gaza. Now separated from his family in Gaza during the attack, he said he felt as if he had been sleepwalking through the past five years and had now been shaken awake. Experiencing war in Gaza from afar was galvanizing, prompting him to start a new project, an arts and music festival called *We Rise from the Rubble to Resist*.

For Alsharif, who was visiting Gaza when the 2012 attacks occurred, experience with violence clarified the difference between her personal experiences and relationship to Gaza and a national sense of belonging, something that other filmmakers also shared:

I grew up outside. My mother only took us to Palestine to go to Gaza to visit her family. Up until 1998 we would stop in Ramallah, but I felt as if it were a part of Amman. Then they [i.e., the visits to Ramallah] stopped, or the visits were briefer because there was no relationship with it, and, then because it [Gaza] has been systematically separated [from the rest of Palestine], that’s the only place I was going, so Palestine became Gaza and I started to feel that it’s really important to make that distinction. When the war happened in 2012, which was not traumatic by comparison with the other two wars, I was there with my grandmother. It was a surprise for me, but when I spoke with my friends in Ramallah and in Jerusalem or whatever, I felt as if I were speaking to Switzerland. They said, “Oh, how is it going? We’re sad for you. We don’t know what to say to you.” You are Palestine, by the way. We are all Palestine, why are you talking that way? I was surprised and upset. It’s really strange, this phenomenon, and to not be aware of it is actually more dangerous, so it’s important in my work to make clear that I am not making a film about Palestine, and I am not speaking about Palestine, but I am

speaking about Gaza and there's a reason why I can't talk about the rest of it.

This sense that Palestinians from other parts of Palestine have had different experiences informs her filmmaking, as well as that of others. Arab Nasser says:

Life in Gaza has changed more—in Palestine wherever you are it's harsh as shit—but in Gaza everything has changed and stopped working, was broken and destroyed, and built, and repaired, et cetera. In Ramallah and the West Bank or other areas, it hasn't changed as much. It is the same details—the Gazan uses Egypt to travel, the West Bank uses Jordan to travel. There you have Israel on the ground, we have them in the air and the sea and in all areas around us. There you have a Fatah government, we have Hamas. From all angles, the situation is similar, but the situation of Gaza changed a lot in the past ten years, more than in the West Bank. In the West Bank there is a little prosperity and opening to some extent. In Gaza everything is deteriorating.

Arab Nasser is describing a key difference between the experiences of Gazans and those of other Palestinians. Palestinians throughout historic Palestine are aware of the inexorability of ongoing dispossession, whether through the erosion of civil rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel or the encroachment of settlements, continued land confiscation, and time theft through checkpoints and imprisonment in the West Bank and Gaza. This reality is reflected in films that engage deeply with the past whether nostalgically, reflectively, or analytically. Filmmakers such as Arab Nasser who came of age after Hamas came to rule Gaza in 2007 have experienced a different temporality, one characterized by both ongoing deterioration but also repeated spectacular destruction resulting from Israel's military attacks. That experience of repeated interruption encourages a radical engagement with the present—at times to process traumatic events as in Jabaly's film *Ambulance* but also to explore the relationship between those events and the everyday as in the Nasser brothers' social realist fiction.

The fragmentation of the Palestinian experience, the fact that most Palestinians cannot travel between the various regions of Palestine—the West Bank, Jerusalem, the parts of Palestine that became the State of Israel, and Gaza—is also important for Shehada:

I consider myself lucky to be among the filmmakers who visited Palestine, who saw it. When Oslo was signed and they allowed people to travel

between Gaza and the West Bank by bus, I covered the story for Japanese TV. I asked myself, What do I want to do? What should I film? Wide shots and the bus? I decided to focus on the eyes of the young people. . . . Eyes, only eyes that blinked and moved. It is not natural, this yearning that they had been denied, that they were cut off from. I decided to only focus on their eyes to document their experience.

Shehada's description of his reportage speaks to the awareness filmmakers have of their viewership and responsibilities they feel in using their films to connect Gaza with the world. Filmmakers work against the widespread understanding of Gaza as a humanitarian space controlled by a terrorist regime in which victimhood is overdetermined. Arab Nasser addresses this issue in response to Mansour's description of his own viewing of *Gaza Mon Amour*. Mansour said that he cried while watching the final scene because it reminded him of his own experience hiring a fisherman to take him and his sweetheart out to sea to steal some private time together in overcrowded Gaza:

It's difficult to escape politics. In our last film we told a love story, but politics was present in every detail of life, in the main character, in politics, in love, in the electricity, and water, and gas, in the crossings, in everything, between the woman and her daughter. Politics is present everywhere and you can't escape it, but we don't address politics directly. There are two lovers and there is a surveillance drone in the sky filming them. It's hard to avoid politics, there's no escape. But in the end, we chose a story that is human because the whole world shares a human story. It's not necessary for me to tell you to carry responsibility [for Gaza] or feel what happened to the people and cry for them. We are not victims. You, as a viewer, if you choose to call them victims, that is part of your personal freedom, because the Gazan people, or the Palestinian person is like other people, they have their flaws and positive traits. . . . We also have a problem in that over the years all our expression has been politicized. Today there is just one form for the woman, one form for the man, one form for society, one form for the narrative. We always try, as directors, to not deliver a political point of view. We want to tell an ordinary, very simple story. That is its [the film *Gaza Mon Amour*] structure, but it has no point of view. You [Mansour] said you cried at the last scene, but the scene is ironic even though it made you cry. You chose to cry. It was not my goal to make you cry. At some screenings people clapped

at the last scene because the hero chose to pursue his love even though there are Israeli warships around him sitting and shooting at him. He just closed the door.

Mansour describes the oscillation between humanitarian and terrorist representations of Gaza as a trap that all filmmakers must work to avoid. Alsharif does so through a careful awareness of her subject position:

I am not speaking on behalf of people who are living there [in Gaza] constantly and also, it's not my interest to tell Gaza's story. What I'm more interested in, and this is also I think where I have more power, is to bring this part, this history, this conflict, this present outside of its isolation. I am against people looking at Gaza as if it is unique in the history of the world and politics and conflict because it's not. That's actually the tragedy. It's not. This has happened countless times. What's painful is that it's happening and being recorded, and nothing is changing. We're watching this brutal disappearance, this suffocation of a place that's happening very slowly and recorded in real time. So, I feel, rather than speak on behalf of Gaza, which is something I can't do, or as someone from there, I have an intimate connection and I want to connect Gaza with other parts of the world, other histories and to make people understand their complicity in what is happening in Gaza as what has happened in many parts of the world and in our shared history as a civilization, because I think that the more civilized we become and the more aware we become of what is a crime against humanity, the more we are allowing it to happen, the more impotent we are in the face of the tragedies that are happening around us. So, I think that's the aim of the work, to also say Italy is not better than Gaza, and France is not better than Gaza, Mexico is not better than Gaza.

The care with which Alsharif considers her own positionality and that of Gaza within the global imaginary is related to the attention to detail that Tarzan and Arab Nasser discussed earlier. In both cases, filmmakers are concerned with what one might describe as an ethics of accuracy whereby an awareness of what one can and cannot know in relation to one's viewership and one's characters informs one's work. Alsharif also situates her work within a global conversation about social justice in a way that differentiates her from the filmmakers who work from a positionality firmly rooted in Gaza. While Shehada, the Nasser brothers, and Jabaly are keenly aware of their viewership and the work their films do as they circulate globally,

they also engage with Gaza at the local level and, in particular, with social, political, and personal issues that mainly concern Gazans themselves. This is reflected in the way they represent politics, as is evident in this exchange between EL-Hassan and Arab Nasser:

EL-HASSAN I found the last scene [of *Gaza Mon Amour*] very problematic because I felt real anger against Hamas in the middle of the film, but I felt as if the operation of the two soldiers in the ship was just a police operation, not occupation. I felt it to be soft on the occupation and that bothered me.

ARAB NASSER The whole world knows that we are occupied. The news [about Gaza], the media, and propaganda are everywhere in the world. “We know that you are Palestinian, so I need to cry over you or hate you.” But in this scene, there is more than two lovers present and the Israeli sailors who make them return to Gaza. After the difficult journey of the fisherman who can’t find space for his love story [on land], he decided to go to the sea. We thought that what we showed was worse than if [the Israelis] had killed him or shot him or stolen from him. No! There are two lovers in the sea, a sea that is not open. We presented the occupation as the devil that surrounds the love story without focusing on how monstrous it is. To say, in 2021, that we have three nautical miles and after that they shoot and kill you is unbelievable! Regarding Hamas, some portray them as caricatures of stupidity who pray and wear sandals. No! They are not stupid. I’m not saying they are the smartest people in the world, but they are not stupid at all. They have ruled Gaza since 2006 and they came to power legally, through elections. The occupation is definitely the source of all our problems. If we didn’t have the occupation, we would discuss other issues, as happens in Egypt. They don’t have an occupation, but they debate matters of concern in an Arab country. But today the occupation serves as a peg on which we can hang everything. It’s true it exists, but Israel left Gaza in 2005. They left Gaza, but they are present on four sides, and they cover the sky with surveillance planes and the sea. So, now we look inward. Inside, there is Hamas, which maintains Gaza the way that is, through the ways it gets funding, how it trains employees, its structure and strategies. But the presentation of Hamas in the film is realistic. It’s an experience we lived. I haven’t lived my whole life in Gaza, but we lived under Hamas for six or seven years.





**Figure 1.6** A talkative, Tramadol-popping character in Tarzan and Arab Nasser’s *Dégradé* (2015) does not represent “the Palestinian woman.”

The problem of how to represent Hamas and the occupation relates to the question of self-critique, as Arab and Tarzan Nasser say:

ARAB NASSER I can add to that that as Palestinians we also have a problem with self-criticism. We think that our problem is the occupation or that we shouldn’t show certain images to the West or the world in general. Palestinians want a particular image to circulate. As Palestinians, we have started to critique our situation because we also have our internal problems. Really, the moment we accept to criticize ourselves is the moment when we can develop. For example, I have a gossipy aunt who is addicted to Tramadol. I liked the story, so I put it in my film. The criticism I got is “Why do you insult the Palestinian women?” I have an aunt, two aunts, actually, both with long tongues, and this particular one talks with complete freedom. I am not saying that my aunt represents “the Palestinian Woman.” I am telling a story. Often people can’t distinguish between telling a story and representing the Palestinian woman or the Palestinian situation.

TARZAN NASSER The problem could be a lack of Palestinian films. That’s important. How many films are there? How many filmmakers are there? How many Palestinian films come out of Palestine about the Palestinian story? In Egypt, for instance, there are forty to fifty films a year, and they vary between the good and the bad and offer this one’s opinion and that one’s opinion — we don’t have that. How many films come out each year? That affects the structures, the structures

of reference of the Palestinian story as a story, so we are not used to criticism in cinema.

ARAB NASSER Also, our instinct is to hide our problems at home, and this is a problem because we represent ourselves as angels. Angelic characters are not interesting to me.

Shehada also finds self-critique to be crucial:

At times I try to write, but the sheer amount of destruction and change mean that, for me, characters have become caricatures. Fantasy in Palestine has lost its cinematic meaning in relation to reality. The fantastic nature of what has happened . . . and the number of events that have happened mean that the Palestinian story has not yet been told. We each have to search inside ourselves, but the big questions are not easy [to address]. Let me mention one of our friends, Annemarie, for instance. She confronted reality in her last film and revealed some of our flaws.<sup>1</sup> Why do we want to be preoccupied with the ideal Palestinian all the time? No! I am full of diseases and prejudices. What does it mean that our reality changes every ten years? Yes, we need to change the slogans of Palestinian cinema. There is a lot of grief in our films, and we need to search for happiness to help us live. And the most beautiful thing, I will repeat so as not to forget, is that we have tools with which we can build our nation even if only in film or art or writing [rather than on the land] in all its details. We need theories that explain our experiences and the value of what has been plucked out and implanted [through all these changes]. This isn't easy. . . . Everyone says "Gaza" as if we have become a distant, shattered fragment. We are two million people, and those from '48 have become quite varied.<sup>2</sup> It's a chaotic situation. The idea of the ideal Palestinian? No, I am not perfect. There is a problem inside me. There is an occupier inside me. My inside is occupied. Inside me are twenty-five occupied personas and maybe more! We need to find the courage to tell the Palestinian story.

The need for self-critique and the difficulty of thinking through how to represent the occupation arise in part from the sedimentation of certain types of images and narratives over the course of more than fifty years of filmmaking by Palestinians. That includes representations of heroism, steadfastness, and sacrifice that have come to define Palestinian national culture more generally (Khalili 2006). El-Hassan raises this question directly by noting the difference between Palestinian cinema of the revolutionary period and that being made today:



**Figure 1.7** Children write an ambiguous message in sidewalk chalk in Basma Alsharif's *Ouroboros* (2017).

Let me tell you something. Palestinian cinema in the 1960s [and 1970s] was a cinema that said to the viewer, I have a problem, but I am going to solve it. The cinema that you make now, in my opinion, is completely different, as if there is, at times, a burdening of the viewer with responsibility. In Basma's work it's very clear because her work is a campaign of responsibility, like the clip in *Ouroboros* when the girls write "help" or "hell," and we don't know what they are writing. There is a relationship with the viewer. In the films of Arab and Tarzan there is always the feeling that those people have problems they won't be able to solve because the [challenges of] their condition are stronger than they are, and I think the same is true with Mohamed.

Mansour reflects on Palestinian film history through the lens of generations of filmmakers:

Abdelsalam and I have talked a lot about this topic. He explained it to me that our generation is different. For the first generation after the Nakba, the Cause was still alive, and there was hope as Tarzan said. The second generation came after Oslo, and what resulted from that was Fatah and then Hamas [rule in Gaza]. We are the third generation. The first generation tried to create a revolution and attracted filmmakers from Arab countries and from around the world, but it failed. Their slogan was that what was taken with violence had to be retrieved with violence.

With the second generation, Oslo, came peace, and it also failed. So, we are the third generation. As Abdelsalam always tells me, the burden on our generation has become heavy, and it gets heavier every day because of the two failed experiences, the experience with arms and the experience with negotiations. So, I believe that we need, at this time, to enter a reflective mode, to reflect on what vanquished us, because any intellectual renaissance, and I believe the artist is the one who prepares for an intellectual renaissance, needs to clarify the reasons for those two experiences so that the next generation can see them without the slogans and jingoism that we were raised on. Wisdom lies here: how to deal with those two experiences and how, at the same time, to build a bridge to the next generation with investigations into what happened.

Jabaly understands his role as one of responding to a fragment of the history of which he is a part:

With regard to cinema and history, and the cinema of the revolution, what we do now is a continuation. We are a fragment living for a time, and we have had many experiences during this time period. So, we speak [in our films] from our own experiences, and it's natural that we differ. We each tell a different story, and if I were to make a fiction film it would be in a different style [from my documentary work]. It's also normal that future generations treat the same history differently. Look at how many films are still being made about World War I, for instance. But we have to communicate with each other; I understand the point of view of Arab, Tarzan, Ahmed, Abdelsalam, and Basma. Each of us has a point of view, and it's natural that there would be divisions and there might even be a time when there is competition among us. We each deliver a part of the story that we live.

Shehada elaborates on Mansour's notion of filmmaker generations:

I wanted to comment on the responsibility of the new generation of filmmakers. Yes, it's a big responsibility, but this responsibility is what will build the bridge between our Palestinian stories and the world. This generation is the one that can allow the Palestinian interior [to emerge], by allowing us to tell a different narrative, this generation that knows Gaza and is tied to its roots. Let me also add that today we are lucky. Before the First Intifada there was almost no capacity for a Palestinian to make a film, and a narrative was imposed from Britain, the United States, and Europe. Filmmakers would come with a producer who had

the plan and film us the way they wanted. Now we have Palestinian eyes and Palestinian cameras and Palestinian equipment. That allows us to remain aware of our cause and of the responsibility we have to tell our story to the world and to ourselves.

### Notes

- 1 Annemarie Jacir's latest work, the fictional feature film *Wajib* (2017), addresses generational conflicts regarding relationship to family, as well as political and social constraints on Palestinian citizens of Israel and divisions among Palestinians. In fact, this type of self-critique has characterized all her films.
- 2 "Those from '48" refers to the refugees who were expelled into Gaza during and shortly after the 1948 war.