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INTERVIEW WITH MOHANAD YAQUBI

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Mohanad Yaqubi (b. 1981) is a filmmaker, producer, and co-founder of Idioms Film (Ramallah) and Subversive Films, a collective focused on militant cinema. He produced *Infiltrators* (2013), *Suspended Time* (2013), *Pink Bullet* (2014), and co-produced films including *Habibi* (2010), *Though I Know the River is Dry* (2012), *Ambulance* (2016), and *Ouroboros* (2017).

His directorial debut, *Off Frame AKA Revolution Until Victory* (2016), premiered at TIFF and screened at Berlinale and over 50 festivals. His second feature, *R 21 aka Restoring Solidarity* (2022), premiered at IDFA and toured internationally.

Mohanad Yaqubi is currently a resident researcher at the School of the Arts (KASK) in Ghent, Belgium. This interview, conducted online on December 22, 2022, is part of the author's PhD research on the representation of Palestinian identity in art production.

KK: You were actively involved in Ramallah's art scene as a filmmaker, producer, and video artist before relocating to Brussels five years ago. How did you get started in filmmaking?

MY: I studied mechanical engineering, but in my third year, I took a black-and-white photography course. Around that time, the Second Intifada began, shutting down schools and universities. With a camera in hand, I started taking and developing photographs.

Friends encouraged me to pursue photography as art. I applied for the Young Artists Award and won either second or third place. Suddenly, I was an artist. I missed my graduation while working on *Fix Me* (2004), my first short film about a photographer following a chair through a city, which marked my transition to filmmaking. Shortly after, we established Idioms Film.

KK: Idioms Film has grown into an established independent film company within Palestinian cinema. How has your rela-

tionship with the West Bank's audiovisual scene evolved, and where do you position your work within visual culture?

MY: Palestinian visual culture is highly fragmented; the West Bank and Gaza scene differ significantly from each other—and even more so from the diaspora and refugee camps. For the past five years, I haven't been closely connected to the West Bank audiovisual scene. Even before, my focus was less on film and video art productions and more on interpreting the visual language of our production. Over the last decade, my primary work lies in researching Palestinian militant cinema practices while continuing with production. Idioms Film production remains small-scale—providing consultations, equipment, and occasional support.

KK: Since relocating, do you feel entirely disconnected from the scene, or have your focus shifted toward militant cinema and archival work?

MY: My focus has shifted to feature production and archival research. With Relocating, I naturally became more engaged with Palestinians in the European diaspora. Over the past decade, many Palestinian refugees from Lebanon and Syria have emigrated due to war—and represented the displacement of Palestinian artists and intellectuals from the region.

This is different from Palestinians in Jordan, where Palestinians and Jordanians have largely merged, with about 60% of Jordanians being of Palestinian origin. For instance, ***Farha*** (2021), directed by Darin Sallam, is a Jordanian production. Sallam was born and raised in Jordan; the film was funded by Jordan and represented Jordan at the Oscars. Yet both the story and her origins are Palestinian. It is the country of the production´s company that determines its´ origin.

This reflects a broader shift. Palestinian cinema once had a clear, ideologically driven focus. Today's landscape is more fragmented. I am not deeply familiar with the younger generation's work, particularly in visual art. I see myself as part of a transgenerational position—between the political committed filmmaking practices of the 1970s and 1980s, centered around classical national identity and struggle, and today's emerging filmmakers whose perspectives are shaped by a more complex 21st-century reality.

KK: You operate within an international network. Do you often experience that your identity is viewed through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

MY: In Europe, yes—but not in the Global South. At Documenta 15 in Kassel, we presented the ***Tokyo Reels*** archival project, which includes 20 films produced in Tokyo in the 1970s about the Palestinian struggle—its impact on community-building, education, healthcare, and more. It was interesting to see how surprised the German audience was that Israel was mentioned only three times across all twenty films.

In one film[1], a character says: "We differentiate between Jews and Zionists. We are not against Jews but against the racist Zionist state." Another Japanese film about the PLO office in Tokyo highlights: "Our struggle is not just armed resistance; the cultural and social struggles matter most against the fascist Israeli state." The issue lies with the character of the Israeli state, not with Israelis or Jews.

1 (1973-The Urgent Call-Ismail Shammout).

The archives give us the language and political clarity to confront these issues. It is not about demonizing people based on race or religion—it is a political struggle. I do not think Palestinians today mind living under Israeli rule—after all, who would not want access to social security? But the issue is that the system is racist, offering certain benefits only to certain people.

KK: As a producer, how do you navigate identity in collaborations? How do you approach co-productions? Are there any countries you would avoid?
MY: At Idioms Film, we have co-produced films with countries such as Sweden, Norway, Belgium, Japan, and Qatar. Since Palestinians don't have a state, we have a certain flexibility in choosing co-producers. I often tell producers—like a Turkish one I recently worked with—that co-production is not just about raising money but about solidarity, which is the real capital. It is not only about profit.

KK: There is a distinction. Some producers choose co-producers based on their countries' political agendas, avoiding certain states due to the geopolitical context (like Israelis in the Palestinian context), while others prioritize personal or project alignment over nationality. How do you approach this?
MY: Making a film is a political act, especially if you are Palestinian. No one expects us to create films solely for entertainment. So,working with an Israeli co-production does not really make sense because they have their own cultural and political agenda that often conflicts with ours. That does not mean we never work with Israeli producers — we do — but the condition is that we do not receive any funding from the Israeli state[2].

KK: When living in Europe, do people view your work primarely as created by a "Palestinian"? If so, how do you navigate that?
MY: Identity politics is everywhere. People instinctively categorize you:*"You're from Eastern Europe? Where exactly?"*, and networks are usually formed around these labels. I always like to challenge these norms and yet, keep aware of their dynamics. I like to make people guessing: *"I'm Belgian."* Really? *"No, I'm Palestinian."* Actually, *"I'm Moroccan. My grandmother was Syrian."* I enjoy playing with these identities as it reflects how we increasingly live in cosmopolitan societies where identity is fluid.

KK: There is tension between rigid political identities and cosmopolitanism. Palestinian identity is often overly politicized—framed internationally either as a victim needing Western support or as a Third World representative—views that can be beneficial for them but also reductive.
MY: Exactly. I am not affiliated with this institution in Brussels mainly because I am a Palestinian but because I am not white. It is a different layer of the same mechanism—being included to make the system appear more inclusive, representing the Global South in such a framework.

2 Idioms Film, among other Palestinian producers, follows the guidelines of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement, initiated in 2005 by Palestinian civil society to apply non-violent pressure on Israel through boycotts, divestment, and sanctions until it ends its occupation of territories captured in 1967, ensures equal rights for Palestinian citizens, and recognizes the right of return of Palestinian refugees under UN Resolution 194.

It goes back to what you mentioned—the NGO economy. That is what happened to the Palestinian struggle after Oslo. When researching the history of transnational solidarity movements in cities like Paris, London, Cologne, and Amsterdam, they were mainly connected to Global South solidarity networks. But once the peace agreements were signed[3], the international community reshaped their identity, recasting Palestinian solidarity movements from political actors into human rights activists — and many of these movements fell into the trap of the neoliberal victim economy.

Palestinians fell in this trap, becoming framed as victims dependent on Western aid, forgetting how to operate a struggle, letting some of the connection with African, Asian and Latin American connections. But many networks faded, leaving only the NGO structures on the basis of humanitarian aspects without any political goals.

KK: You mentioned the Oslo peace process and how Palestinians adopted then a victim image in relation to Western support. In 2014, you created *Suspended Time* (2014), a series by Palestinian filmmakers who reflected on the peace process two decades later.

MY: Yes, after twenty years of silence. It has been thirty years since the peace process began. *Suspended Time* captured the decay and erosion of memory it caused. However, we have yet to fully decolonize our mentality and society from that framework. Now, we feel it is time to produce another anthology—something like *Non-Suspended Time*—to explore how to decolonize Palestinian space, memory, and society in order to move forward.

KK: Given how time has shaped your perspective, what do you feel is important to express about these agreements now?

MY: I am not sure. But now, after almost 30 years of signing this agreement, I would rather talk about it as a contract than a peace process. They tied one side (the Palestinians) to political and economical obligations in exchange for keeping the salaries flowing in. Peace is essentially dead, but the agreements remain, allowing the Palestinian Authority (PA) to access taxes and international funding from the EU and the US.

To get this funding, the PA must share security information: names, birth dates, and personal data. In the West Bank, no one even thinks about data protection. If you mention it, they look at you like you are crazy. This is the reality of "peace"?

Today, when I see *Suspended Time* again, it reminds me that we tried to create a cut with this agreement to halt the erosion of memory and identity. Looking back now, we can assess how this anthology reflects the end of that process.

KK: As a producer, you have personal motivations for a project, but collaboration brings diverse perspectives. How do you navigate your role?

The answer is perhaps to revisit the same filmmakers we have worked with over the past

3 The Oslo Accords, signed in 1993 and 1995 between Israel and the PLO, aimed to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through mutual recognition and the creation of the Palestinian National Authority, granting limited self-rule in parts of the West Bank and Gaza. However, they did not establish a Palestinian state and faced strong opposition from both Palestinian factions and right-wing Israelis.

twenty years and ask how their views have changed over the past decade. It is not about starting fresh, but about reflecting on how our relationships — with those filmmakers, with each other, with our spaces, and with our politics — have evolved.

KK: Especially since these filmmakers represent groups with distinct viewpoints...
MY: The keyword here is accumulation as a way to disrupt the cycle of ruptures. For me, as a Palestinian, this has always been a struggle, For Palestinians, Long-term planning has always been difficult because we were constantly moving. From 1948 throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s, we did not have the luxury of staying put. Our bags were always packed, and with passports in hand to leave anytime.

Planning was short-term—like finishing the current school year—because you could never be sure you would stay in the same place or keep the same friends. This rupture may be less pronounced for Palestinians who were not displaced from their villages, yet instability still looms: siblings could be arrested, parents taken away. Even when physically rooted, these ruptures shape how we plan our time and how we perceive it.

KK: How do these ruptures, distorting the relationship with time and place, have shaped your work process?
Resisting rupture means fostering continuity—building communities around ongoing projects. This approach is not bound by conventional notions of time and space. It mirrors the Palestinian experience: those who stayed in one place lost their connection to time, while those who lost their place became more in control of it. This disruption of place and time distinguishes Palestinian communities from other societies.For example, Egypt's collective aesthetics, reflecting a society rooted in the same place for 7,000 years, interconnects time and space, and creates a sense of stability. This is evident in their art and film scene. Egypt, one of the first Arab countries to absorb European modernity, has blended it with ancient traditions, maintaining a deep, continuous connection between culture, time, and space.

KK: So, your approach overcomes ruptures when planning projects as a series. What particular rupture has influenced you the most?
MY: I think back to my childhood in Kuwait before the Gulf War in 1990. I spent my first ten years there, already grappling with what it meant to be Palestinian. I often wondered why Palestinians were different from Kuwaitis or Egyptians, even though we all spoke Arabic. Then, suddenly, I had to leave—my first rupture. Another rupture came when I moved from Gaza to the West Bank in 1999, just as the Second Intifada began. For eight years, I could not visit my parents, nor they me.

KK: Your parents still live in Gaza. How do you manage to see them now?
MY: They come for visits to Belgium, and I visit them sometimes. If seen as a personal rupture, it is painful. But when viewed as part of a broader pattern, it becomes a reflection of settler colonialism, which forces perpetual displacement. This perspective opens up the possibility of change. In that light, striving to build a movement makes more sense.

This summer, I visited the West Bank, and the year before, I went to Gaza. I do not combine the trips, as one is through Egypt and the other via Amman. I prefer it this way—it feels more grounded. Having lived in the West Bank, I nearly forgot how living in Gaza feels. But when I visited last in 2021, I realized Gaza has its own distinct modernity, different from the West Bank.

KK: How so?

MY: The companies, products, food quality, and street signs differ from those in the West Bank. I noticed a different vibe in the universities. I used to think the West Bank was more liberal and open-minded, but during that visit I felt more politically liberated in Gaza. It is the only place where Palestinians can express political views without fear of arrest. In the West Bank, that is not the case.

Despite political differences, I felt a sense of unity in Gaza. Just in my family's building, where three other uncles live, flags of different political parties were hung from the balconies—Fatah, Hamas, and PFLP—something you do not see in the West Bank. People in Gaza are acutely aware of the siege they live under and work together to manage resources—organizing electricity schedules and sharing supplies. In the West Bank, people do not share this same awareness; they accept things as just how life is.

KK: You left Ramallah for Brussels nine years ago. Was it for a specific opportunity, or did you feel the need to leave?

MY: At the end of the day, Ramallah is small, and it became increasingly difficult to grow artistically and academically. Although I had produced feature films, I felt I was no longer developing. Then, I had the opportunity to work as a researcher at the School of Arts in Ghent. While I was one of the few working with film archives in Ramallah, in Ghent I found a global community doing similar work. This shift allowed me to move beyond narratives of Palestinian victimhood from the Oslo era and explore broader themes: how people in struggle—not only Palestinians—create their own cinema, revealing patterns connecting Palestinian, Algerian, Cuban, and Chilean militant cinema globally.

KK: You teach found-footage filmmaking, do not you?

MY: Yes, I teach a course called "Film Units and Collectives" at the same time work on my research project *Imperfect Archives*, which is a title inspired by Julio García Espinosa's text *For an Imperfect Cinema* (1969). The idea is that imperfect cinema can only exist within imperfect, non-institutional archives. The memory of films and archives of the several transnational solidarity struggles such as Palestinian archives, , are not preserved in official cinematheques but in personal collections—holding posters, films, and materials from past liberation movements.

KK: Your upcoming found-footage film, *R 21 AKA Restoring Solidarity* (2022), explores Japanese archives of the Palestinian struggle. As it is your second archival project, did you choose found-footage out of necessity, or was it a deliberate creative decision?

MY: There are different motivations. Godard once said: "We live in a time of too many im-

ages," so why create more? Another key question is whether political memory can exist without a political party. Many archives were produced by organizations like the PLO[4], the Italian Communist Party, or the ICIAC[5]—most of which no longer function as they once did. So, what do we preserve exactly—the ideology, the memory or the practice of these filmmakers who used these structures to document their struggle?

Meeting revolutionary filmmakers while researching my first feature in 2010 was a turning point. Many had not been contacted in decades and shared invaluable materials I felt responsible for preserving. My work is not about rewriting history, but reshaping its´ representation. For instance, the Palestinian movements of the 1970s included secular Marxist factions—sometimes more progressive than their European Marxist-Leninist groups. Yet European audiences often reduce the Palestinian struggle to religious movements, like the Muslim Brotherhood.

KK: Your project connects Palestinians with various "others" facing similar struggles. After years of research, has your view shifted?

MY: My interest in archives emerged around the time of the Arab Spring. The movements that arose were difficult to fully grasp without connecting them to historical context. They operated reactively, focusing on the immediate moment rather than drawing from past experiences—a lack of reflection contributed to their failures. Archives, whether cinematic or otherwise, serve as political tools, providing essential reference points for understanding and reflection.

Looking ahead, any new political movement from the region must link with both recent and older archives to ensure continuity. This is reflected in how Palestinian and Arab artists or filmmakers frequently call themselves "the first" to achieve something, as if history continually resets.

KK: When working on a found-footage feature film, do you feel more pressure to consider the audience, especially given the financial stakes and, for instance, workshops involved?

MY: With my latest film, *R 21 aka Restoring Solidarity* (2022), I did not participate in any film development workshops. I was only interested in how Japanese and Palestinian audiences would respond, so I only sought their feedback. If the film finds an international audience, so be it, but my primary goal was to explore why Japan had preserved twenty-five Palestinian films and archival material for decades.

The film became a kind of love letter to Japanese solidarity movement with Palestine—to acknowledge solidarity that has gone largely unknown by Palestinians. There have been many distant acts of support for Palestinians, like Japan's. The more I examined them, the more interconnected I felt. Given our current

4 PLO – Palestine Liberation Organization: a political and paramilitary organization founded in 1964, unifying and centralizing Palestinian factions to represent Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Later, in 1974, recognized as their legitimate representative by the Arab League and UN (UNGA Resolution 3236), it later shifted from armed resistance to diplomacy, notably through the 1993 Oslo Accords with Israel.

5 Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, a Cuban state institution dedicated to film production, promotion, and distribution.

political realities, I always remember what the filmmaker Masao Adachi[6], once told me: "Japan will not be free until Palestine is free."

KK: That is a powerful statement.
MY: It is. But look at Japan today—it recently increased its defense budget at the U.S.'s request. The film touches on this: Japan's occupation didn't truly end in 1960 with its defense agreement with the U.S. Even now, the U.S. controls its seas and airspace. In a way, Japan remains under a form of occupation, though less visible.

That made me think—Palestinian freedom is not just about Palestine. It is tied to dismantling a broader global power structure. Israel exists because of the American support; if that grip weakens, Japan, too, in some sense, could be free. It is a larger geopolitical idea that extends beyond the Middle East.

KK: You talk about Palestine, freedom, and struggle—terms that carry many interpretations today. How do you personally define them?
MY: I am not sure what freedom truly means. I think I can travel and speak freely, but the core issue is injustice. It goes back to 1948, to the forced displacement of people that shaped entire generations to come. Exiled people had to reconstruct their memories, their bodies, their social behaviors severed from their history.

And this is not just about Palestine; it is happening everywhere. The real question is: When will we fully acknowledge it? And when we do, will we be able to rewrite history?

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6 Masao Adachi (足立正生), born May 13, 1939, is a Japanese screenwriter, director, actor, and former member of the Japanese Red Army. Active mainly in the 1960s and 1970s.