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# Cinema and Palestinian History

## Interview with Annemarie Jacir<sup>1</sup>

*When I Saw You*  
(Annemarie Jacir, 2012)



*Annemarie Jacir est l'auteure de nombreux courts-métrages et de deux longs-métrages primés dans plusieurs festivals internationaux. Née à Bethléem en 1977, elle a grandi en Arabie saoudite, puis étudié le cinéma aux États-Unis tout en se rendant régulièrement à Bethléem. Mais elle est depuis 2007 interdite de séjour en territoires palestiniens. Sa dernière fiction, *When I Saw You* (2012), a pour cadre l'histoire des camps de réfugiés palestiniens en Jordanie à la fin de la guerre de 1967. Nous l'avons interrogée sur l'exil, le travail de mémoire et la place des archives visuelles dans son œuvre, mais aussi dans l'histoire palestinienne.*

par **Estelle Sohier** et **Clémence Lehec** (UNIGE)

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**Your last film, *When I Saw You*, takes place in 1967' Jordan, when tens of thousands of refugees poured across the border from Palestine. The main characters are two refugees, the eleven years old Tarek and his mother, who flee the "Harir" camp to join a group of *fedayeen*, whose life in the forest the spectator discovers through the child's eyes. You made this film while you were in exile, as you have been banned from Palestine since 2007. How does this fiction relate to your own life?**

**Annemarie Jacir** – *From the earliest days of my life I crossed the border into Palestine, visiting family and friends, working, making a home for myself. These crossings of the bridge between Jordan and Palestine with my family year after year remain my most humiliating and painful childhood memories. Those experiences shaped forever the person I am today and definitely shape my work as an artist. All that came to an end when I was refused entry in 2007 and no longer allowed to return. I moved to Amman and from then on, I could only see Palestine from across the Jordan valley. I lost my apartment, my life, my world. I was cut off from my loved ones, and I understood something, or rather felt something, I had never experienced before: looking into the distance and seeing a place you recognize as your own and know intimately, but which has become a forbidden one. For many people who have been displaced, the hardest experience is to see the place one has been banned from.*

*I was from then on an exile, Jordan became my new home. I was deeply depressed but I wanted to do something positive with the feelings which consumed me. So I began working on *When I Saw You* (*Lamma Shoftak*). The film is about moments in a person's life when things change, when you have the impression of seeing something or someone for the first time – whether you have never seen it before, or seen it a million times already – when you are seeing a person, a place, your homeland across the border, a loved one, your own life for what they are, or what they could be. It is the moment you understand something new, that is the film's emotional back-story.*

#### **Why did you place your film back in 1967?**

**AJ** – *I set the story at a time I wasn't born yet, but 1967 had a deep impact on my life. That year, what was left of Palestine was lost and everything changed for my parents and their families. Just as in 1948, some of our people turned refugees, some were stuck outside, some were stuck inside, some began living under military occupation, some fled to other places for a better life... 1967 divided them, it became a point of absolute reference: whenever they speak about their life, they start their talk with the expression "Before 1967," or "After 1967".*

#### **Is your film meant to call into question the previous generation's heritage of war and exile, and engage several generations in a work of memory?**

**AJ** – *Absolutely. The film is a clear criticism of the precedent generation, most specifically of the present Palestinian leadership. The film asks them why things went so wrong. By the end of the film, we all know that the refugees are still waiting to go home and that our leadership failed us. That is the point of the film. Unlike today, the late 60s were a time of great hope for Palestinians, like anywhere in the world. In the midst of a great tragedy, there was rebirth, an infectious sense of hope and a feeling that ordinary people could change their own lives. Students' movements, anti-colonial and civil rights activities... I did not want to go back out of sheer nostalgia or to pay tribute to those before us, but rather because that past is so relevant to understand our lives today, there is much we can learn from it. In many ways I tried to regain that generation's feeling of hope and change, which had somehow been lost.*

#### **What is the use of that romantic view of history?**

**AJ** – *Despite its criticism of the Palestinian leadership, the film celebrates men and women who were heroes. They were young and ordinary people who decided to take their lives into their hands. They decided there was no saviour to wait for. They believed in justice and equality and dedicated their lives to this conviction.*



**Does your idealizing of the past aim at rehabilitating the Palestinian resistance fighters' role in the 60s and to suggest another reading of this episode to the audience?**

**AJ** – *The idea of the film is not at all to be nostalgic about the 60s but to explore what we can make out of that period and use today. The struggle is still very much alive today but it is grossly manipulated. Many people have lost hope. I wanted to rediscover that hope which burns in people's hearts no matter what.*

**In the last scene of the movie, Tarek and his mother run up to the military fence that stands between Jordan and Palestine. How did you think of this scene?**

**AJ** – *That was the very first image that came to me – before there was a screenplay, even before there was a story. I always knew the end. It came to me a few years ago – this moment of truth between two people, mother and son, looking into each other's eyes and knowing that it is now or never.*

**Was that the only way to end your movie or did you think of alternative endings?**

**AJ** – *It was the only way, to freeze it exactly there, to leave it open for the audience. To finish it at a moment of hope, full of life, a moment that we know now never happened for the refugees. A bittersweet moment.*

**Did this scene provoke reactions among the public, particularly among refugees?**

**AJ** – *Yes, really beautiful reactions that mean more than anything to me. The strongest responses to this scene are from Palestinian refugees. Several years ago, I was showing my first feature film, Salt of this Sea, at a film festival. Towards the end of the screening, I left the cinema and stepped outside where I met a Palestinian man in his mid-50s, hunched in a corner. He looked up and I saw his face was covered in tears. He told me: "In your film I saw what I have been trying to see all my life, I saw Palestine. You managed to do what we never could." We spoke for some time and I understood he was in Jordan in the late 60s and 70s, a fighter with the Palestinian resistance, a fedayee.*

*He said: "A few times I made it to the Jordan River, but we never managed to cross. It was night, and I saw the lights of our homeland! Shining like stars. That was the closest I ever got."*

**So you targeted specifically a Palestinian audience with *When I Saw You*?**

**AJ** – *I believe an audience chooses its films, and not the other way around. My main audience is mostly Palestinian, but in no way limited to that circle, as it spreads over borders, as always, and more than one might think. That's the beauty of filmmaking. Anyone who has been separated from a loved one or lived in exile can relate to *When I Saw You*.*

**Can you tell us more about your Palestinian cinema curator's projects?**

**AJ** – *Yes, the 1960s are also at the centre of much of my archival research, documentation and preservation projects for the Palestinian cinema since 2001. I searched for the lost Palestinian Film Archives<sup>2</sup> and was simultaneously involved in finding ways to preserve the Palestinian cinema and images which had been lost or made invisible. This meant creating the Palestinian cinema new archives, but also setting up a database, finding new films and filmmakers as well as ways to make them and their work available. Part of this work led to the Dreams of a Nation Project<sup>3</sup>, in which we organized among other things international film festivals and screenings of Palestinian cinema all over the world, including films from the lost archives in Palestine, some for the first time ever.*

**You organized an ambulant festival of Palestinian archive movies in 2003. What is the role of those images in the construction of the region's history and the Palestinian memory?**

**AJ** – *As Palestinians, our entire existence, history and current reality is constantly being denied on all levels by people and governments with a strong political*



Collection: Getty Images/Photographer: Ken Cedeno

*agenda designed to erase us. These images are crucial.*

### **How did you use these archives in *When I Saw You*?**

**AJ** – My research was very important a decade later in Jordan in the development

of *When I Saw You*. Research is always an ongoing process and always essential for cinema, even if ideas change and if one departs entirely from reality or historical “truths”. The research results were of course important in the script writing phase but also to document pre-production for the different departments. And as I didn’t live at that time, research was all the more important. I collected hundreds of images and footage from people, organizations, several film archives, newspapers, reports, and literature. Documentaries, archival photos and films were critical to recreate the refugee camp’s appearance, the look of the people and of the fedayeen.

My collaboration with Helene Louvar, director of photography, couldn’t have been better. Helene had a deep understanding of the script and the story. We had a real meeting of minds. I showed her images, colours, photographs and films that I liked, which inspired me artistically, as well as the archival images. We watched a lot of footage together relating to that period of time, images of the Palestinian refugee camps as well as training camps. I wanted to create a fresh and fantastical vision at times, but with hints of the harsh reality which fantasy escapes from.

I also had several interviews, mostly in Jordan, with people who were involved in the resistance. There were of course broad questions, but also superficial ones like, “What brand of cigarettes did you smoke?” “What was your favourite song?”...

### **Did you also make researches to create a 1967 sound ambiance?**

**AJ** – Music plays a large role in the film’s narrative and story development, as indicated by two fairly

*long sequences in the film in which the Fedayeen are playing music. In the late 1960’s Palestinians were very much connected to what was happening all over the world – they were listening to Arabic classics and also creating a new kind of music, influenced from both the east and the west, and pushing boundaries, as in their own lives. I worked with long-time collaborator Kamran Rastegar on the original track and also researched and discovered a lot of obscure musicians and bands of the time; Lebanese rock, Armenian fusion, Egyptian jazz, Moroccan avant-garde Gnawa, some really fun stuff, and that is what we hear on the radio most of the time in the film, other than the constant news broadcasts. And just as today we look back to this period of resistance, at that time they looked back to another period of resistance – the resistance against the British colonization of Palestine. In one scene, we hear one of the most famous Palestinian resistance songs, Sijin Akka (Akka’s Prison), written in 1930 against British rule, as a commemoration to three men who were hung, a call to continue the struggle for freedom. 1930, 1948, 1967, 1982... Everything is tied together. Sound, like image, picks up and leaves off poetry and history in a million places. It’s important not to look for symbolism in the image or the story but rather see and feel the poetry of image and sound.*

**The precursors of Palestinian cinema in the 60’s and 70’s were politically committed and paid special attention to the situation of the Palestinian resistance. Have you also been inspired by their work, such as the work of Mustafa Abu Ali, who used to work with Jean-Luc Godard?**

**AJ** – Of course, I also returned to the films of the Palestinian revolutionary cinema, as well as to works of other international filmmakers at the time, from obvious ones like Godard to other less known image-makers. Aside from the films of the political parties, they were also making experimental works, or simply filming to document their daily lives.

*During my research for the Palestinian film archives, I developed wonderful friendships with those pioneer*

filmmakers, many of them who were part of the various film units of the Palestinian resistance movement of the 60s and 70s in Jordan, such as Mustafa Abu Ali, Kais Al Zobaidi, Khadija Habashneh, and many others. The film is wrought with references to their works. In fact, it is a homage to them. Again and again in the film, I tried to make a direct nod to those filmmakers and the way they filmed themselves and saw themselves, full of light and life. It's also one of the reasons for the freeze frame at the end, among other shots.

**Did you use archival material also for the geographical setting of the film?**

**AJ** – The film is entirely set, and filmed, in Jordan and we had two main locations for the film. The first was the fictional “Harir Refugee camp”, which is entirely constructed. Between 1967 and 1968, “emergency camps” as they were called, were set up all over Jordan and Syria in order to house the influx of refugees from Palestine. Of course they were meant to be temporary and as we know the refugees were never allowed to return. These camps today still exist but look nothing like they did then. So we built the whole camp set from scratch. We found an empty plot of land and built a camp based on photographs and films.

The second major location is Dibeen forest, where the fighters live. This is the actual location of where the Fedayeen hid and trained for years. Scouting there was an incredible experience. We found remnants of the time period everywhere; bullets, shell casings, and canned food. The tunnels you see in the film, where they hide and where they store supplies, are the actual tunnels the fighters made. We discovered the most intricate tunnels, connecting to each other, a whole underground world. We even found the tunnel where they built a hospital. Deep in the mountains, you enter a small hole to discover seven or eight large rooms, and inside all the remnants of the former hospital, including medicine, bottles, IV bags, and other supplies. Even the writing is still on them

which include where they came from. For example “A donation from East Germany”, or from Kuwait, Russia, and many other countries.

**So you also made a kind of archaeological research?!**

**AJ** – Discovering all these remnants of that period, this lost world, was incredible for our team. The period came to life again for us. As we were working, the local villagers around Dibeen discovered us too. They were both nervous and intrigued by what we were doing. And they shared with us their own personal stories about their involvement with and helping of the Fedayeen. Many of them were hired and worked on the film with us. We reconstructed an entire training camp in Dibeen, with all kinds of training facilities, in the exact locations the real fighters trained in. I remember one day we were filming, and for the particular shot we were doing, we had every actor out in the field, dressed in military uniforms with keffiyas wrapped around them and Kalashnikovs in their hands, doing a full scale training circuit. Suddenly we heard helicopters overhead and within moments I think half the Jordanian army was above us wondering what in the world was going on. It must have looked like some 1970 flashback to them from up there.

**In geography, we use the term “sense of place”. So this kind of field training was a way to create a special “sense of place” to the actors**

**AJ** – I asked the cast to sleep in Dibeen forest, to listen to the sounds of the night, to develop relationships with each other and with nature, to become part of the landscape. I never showed them the script but rather worked on who they were and how they got there rather than the story itself. For me, I was most interested in the emotional story and background. The feeling rather than the narrative. The film has a romantic vision of the fighters, but it was also important that the cast knew what they were doing. So I had them go through military training before we began production. Imagine how stupid they'd look if

they couldn't shoot a Kalashnikov or climb the ropes? They went through weeks of intense training. At the same time I was easy on them because to be true, these men and women were not in an organized army and didn't have real training. They were simply young people from the refugee camps, volunteers... They were people looking for a life of dignity and peace. Like the fedayee I met at the screening of my film, who told me he had finally been able to see through my film what he wanted to see all his life: home.

**Did you face any problem by working on such a sensitive topic?**

**AJ** – We did. Although the film is not meant to be realistic and is told from a child's point of view, I was surprised to discover that it's still a very sensitive topic in Jordan, even after so many years. This "political" tension was felt by our crew and also our cast, who are made up of a lot of young people, some of them the children of Fedayeen, and who often experienced this tension when growing up in Jordan as well as in their daily lives. Most often when people heard the film was set in the 1960s and had something to do with the Palestinian fighters in Jordan, they grew nervous. We felt it when looking for financing and for local sponsorship to make the film. We also faced occasional obstacles with the authorities during the production that caused setbacks, but we also found a lot of support. Thanks to this support we were able to make the film.

**Did you recruit actors who had lived in a camp during this period?**

**AJ** – One day while we were in the "Harir Refugee camp", a scene called for a food line where a charity worker serves food to the refugees who wait in the heat and in humiliation. It happened that one of the extras working on the film was an elderly woman. As we worked through the scene, I noticed her, because she was an excellent actress, and absolutely believable. She was wonderful because she was paying no attention to the camera, the main actor, or any of the crew or equipment around her. Instead for every single take she was wholeheartedly acting out the



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scene as if it were totally real. Afterwards I approached her, and before I had a chance to say anything she apologized to me and said she had been brought to a refugee camp in Jordan in 1967 and that as we were filming, she had completely forgotten we were making a film and thought it was a real UNRWA line for food. She stood there in the heat, totally oblivious to us, and returned to another time and place.

**In *When I Saw You*, like in *Salt of this Sea*, the main characters are women. Does the mother of Tarek reflect the ambiguity of the role played by Palestinian women, between a patriarchal society that limited their role in the public sphere and the role they played in Palestinian history?**

**AJ** – Ghaydaa is not limited by her role as a Palestinian woman but rather limited by her role as a single woman, raising a boy on her own, in the 1960s. She is fighting to keep the only thing she has left, Tarek, protected. It would have been the same for her if she had come from any other country in the world at that time. And even today – in America, in Europe, in Africa, in the Arab world – we are still dealing with a grossly patriarchal society where, arguably, things might even be worse now than they were then for women.

*When I Saw You*  
(Annemarie Jacir, 2012)

- 1 Cette contribution est un montage de fragments extraits de l'article «(Re) searching *When I Saw You* (Lamma Shoftak)» d'Annemarie Jacir, complété d'un entretien inédit entre Annemarie Jacir, Estelle Sohier et Clémence Lehec. Avec l'autorisation de l'auteur.
- 2 The Palestinian Film Archives went missing in Beirut in 1982 after the Israeli invasion.
- 3 <http://electronicintifada.net/content/coming-home-palestinian-cinema/6780>