

## PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

### New Student Films from Palestine: Dreamers and Dreams in the Classroom

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#### Abstract

*Palestinian student filmmakers based in the West Bank and Gaza tell stories of daily life in a collected set of short films which provide valuable insights for classes on the Middle East.*

**Keywords:** Palestine, student film, refugee camp, dreams, incarceration, representation, resistance, West Bank, Gaza, checkpoint, community, creativity

**R**ecent Palestinian student films comprise a body of notable creative expression and valuable insights for students of the Middle East regarding political context and lived experience in the West Bank and Gaza. The films are made in journalism, media, and filmmaking classes at Palestinian universities and community arts programs. Student filmmakers employ the full range of styles and genres, from experimental and poetic to documentary-essay and ethnography to scripted narrative fiction. Palestinian student films are characterized by their low-budget and non-commercial approach, their local feel and community-centered focus, and their embedded “Palestinianess.” From 2017 to 2020, over 100 student filmmakers from Birzeit University, Al-Quds University, Al-Quds Bard, Dar Al-Kalima University (Bethlehem), Hebron University, Palestine Polytechnic University (Hebron), An-Najah University (Nablus), Al-Azhar University (Gaza), Theater Day Productions (Gaza), and Al-Aqsa University (Gaza) submitted short student productions for inclusion in an annual film festival at Duke University and subsequent classroom use at Duke and other U.S. universities. This essay will focus on the pedagogical uses of several films, both fiction and documentary, in American university classes on the Middle East. The most effective films for classroom screening and discussion contain dreams and dream-like sequences. The films included in this essay were made by students who have, with some

exceptions, given permission to their films to be shown in academic venues in the United States. (For information on viewing the films, see the note at the end of this piece.)

Films with brief dream sequences and fleeting visions provide insights into issues of Palestinian media self-representation and pose questions about the dreams' importance in film stories of Palestinian lives. For classroom use, the films and their dream sequences invite interpretation from students. My first-year college students are close in age to the Palestinian filmmakers, and they share a digital (as opposed to analog) sensibility. American students, in their watching and interpreting Palestinian student films, have varying knowledge of circumstances on the ground in Palestine. The films enable my students to be exposed to, for example, restrictions on freedom of movement under occupation, representations of Palestinians in prison, and daily life in refugee camps. Accompanying an academic study of the Middle East, student films help my classes learn from individual narratives and visual storytelling. The juxtapositions, incongruities, humor, and biting commentary of the films and their dream sequences complement and add nuance, images, and topicality to the conventional scholarship found in my syllabi.

My classes use these student films across the semester as part of our study of documentary expression and the politics of representation in the Middle East. For the history and significance of Palestinian filmmaking, we read selections from Hamid Dabashi's *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema* and watch Mohanad Yaqubi's documentary *Off Frame aka Revolution Until Victory*. My students compare current Palestinian student films with the revolutionary tradition in Palestinian filmmaking. They spot the key connections (themes of resistance) and contrasts (emphasis on the quotidian) to Palestinian films of the 1970s. Moreover, student films stimulate discussion across the semester because they are short, recent, and made by peers. We use the films to complement, challenge, and enliven the study of 1948 and Palestinian refugees, the 1967 war, the First Intifada, Oslo, and the situation in Gaza. We generally bring the filmmakers into the classroom via a video conference app to respond directly to student questions.

First-year U.S. college students note that vision and fantasy elements disrupt some conventional representations of Palestinians as either victims or combatants. The films directly transcend physical realities such as overcrowding, disability, or imprisonment. For my students, the films show resourcefulness in the face of adversity and creativity working against the confines of occupation. Characters in the films express agency

rather than powerlessness, and a “making do” in the face of oppression. The films put forth imaginative outcomes, without diminishing or sugarcoating real-life problems.

In straightforward, multi-generational interviews in the documentary, *What Will You Do When You Go Back to Your Village*, by Mohammad Alazza, residents of the Aida camp in Bethlehem recount their hopeful plans for visiting their pre-1948 homes – now inaccessible inside Israel. The elders intend to walk in and see their village. Some of the younger people have more elaborate and visionary proposals: to build a swimming pool, a playground, or a hospital. The young people and children are serious about these ideas and the filmmaker takes them seriously, amplifying for my students both the continuing gravity of the year 1948 for Palestinians and the variations of the dream of return for multiple generations in a community.

In fiction films made by Palestinian university students, young children are protagonists with dreamscapes of their own, based in creative play. Two short fiction films, *Reporter, Suspended*, by Sanabel Ibrahim, Renad Nasser, and Salam Yahya, and *Memory of a Fish*, by Yousef Salhi, portray children using imagination as a source of power and achievement. In *Reporter, Suspended*, a boy’s verbal patter expresses his take on incidents large and small in his hometown. With his mom’s cooking pot as his flak helmet and her cellphone in hand, he enacts his fantasy of reporting alongside a professional journalist. A similar playfulness infuses *Memory of a Fish*, in which the main character narrates his story of how a pet fish helped him improve his bad memory. A lengthy dance-dream, filmed in close-up, shows Samy the goldfish darting around its bowl to a Latin-French-fusion music accompaniment. In both of these child-centered films, imaginative dreaming allows for one individual’s optimistic envisioning of his future: as a reporter or as a person with a better memory. In my classes, students relate to the humor and universality of these films and their genial picture of Palestinian families.

Other cinematic dreams in student films have pedagogical worth beyond highlighting collective memory for 1948 lands or positive depictions of family life. For example, the documentaries *Moving Dream* by Alaa Alaloul and *The Living of the Pigeons* by Baha’ Abu Shanab are teaching opportunities on the subject of mobility and constraints on freedom of movement in Palestine. *Moving Dream*’s protagonist, Nader, imagines himself at his old job directing traffic in a busy urban intersection in Gaza City. As we watch Nader at work, car traffic is filmed through the wheels of his wheelchair. A breathy choral chant takes over from the traffic

sounds, emphasizing that we are in a dreamscape. This dream milieu is quickly interrupted by a sharp whistle, revealed to be part of Nader's arsenal for directing traffic, along with his hands and his swiveling chair. The mood of the film changes when the dream abruptly ends: Nader now sits motionless at a window, the unused whistle in his hand. As Nader gazes wistfully out the window, the scene suggests the view is from a prison window. Immobilized in his chair, Nader is a visual representation of Gaza as a prison. My students note this metaphor; our discussion of the setting, plotline, and soundtrack of the film allows the class to see how the filmmaker artfully moves from dream to reality to make a larger point about conditions in Gaza.

*The Living of the Pigeons* documents workers at "Checkpoint 300," which separates Bethlehem from Israel. The film highlights the carceral infrastructure and dehumanizing routine of the checkpoint, with its crowds of Palestinian workers waiting in the pre-dawn hours to cross for a day of work. My students connect the cinematography's nightmare-escape with the history of movies about dystopian societies. Students ask about the film's framing of masses of workers, resembling Appalachian coal miners, for example, in classic labor documentaries. Students find evocative visual contemporary links throughout the film to spark discussion of restriction of movement in Palestine and elsewhere. News footage of the US-Mexico border, for example, or refugees at crowded borders in Europe, visually matches the daily scene at the checkpoint.

The contrast between dreamscape and real life is starkly apparent in *The Cage*, a documentary by Khaled Tuaima. Mohammed Halawa, a resident of Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp, narrates his visit to the verdant fields next to Gaza's fence alongside Israel. *The Cage* teaches students about the one-sided appearance of Gaza in mainstream media by filming two dramatically different visual environments: the gray and crowded camp is juxtaposed against the sunshiny green of the empty borderlands. The film complicates the image of Gaza as purely a wasteland. The film also belies media biases that reduce Gaza to a source of violence against Israelis when Halawa points out the danger from Israeli snipers: Halawa's cousin Fadel was shot dead although he was 450 yards from the fence (*The Cage* was completed in 2016, two years before the Great March of Return). The film also gives a sense for the patience, watchfulness, and time needed for catching birds in Gaza. With Gaza blockaded by land and sea, the film's views of birds trapped in their cages is a harrowing parallel. For my students, *The Cage* highlights themes of entrapment and perseverance.

An actual prison is featured in *Endless Dream*, a student fiction film by Amjad Abu Baker and Lilian Al Azzeh with an evocative dream sequence. *Endless Dream* shares elements of many Hollywood prison films – the bleak and claustrophobic surroundings, the intense interactions between prisoners, and a feeling of helplessness. The film, however, uses technicolor fantasy to represent a prisoner’s uniquely Palestinian dream when it switches from black-and-white to a colorful moment of freedom and happiness. The central character, an imprisoned artist, discovers he has a magic gift. When he draws an outline of a window with a piece of black chalk, he finds himself able to jump through his prison wall. His dream of an idealized Palestinian street is fleeting, but suggests his, and by extension, all prisoners’, suppressed and wasted capability. In a flash, the dream ends, and the prisoner is back in his cell; the would-be window has disappeared. In the classroom, the film raises questions about the judicial system under Israeli military occupation and also triggers discussion of mass incarceration in the United States.

*Ambience*, a fiction film by Wisam Al-Jafari, sets the scene in the Deheishe refugee camp’s close confines and creates a visual and aural portrait of a noisy wellspring of creativity and community, constantly thwarting two musicians trying to make a pristine audio recording. The drawbacks of living in the camp, such the shared walls separating one family home from another, are shown in an absurdist series of scenes that function as mini-nightmares for the musicians seeking a quiet place to record. In one scene, the musicians can’t help hearing an argument about a recipe in a nearby apartment. They shout to the neighbor their opinion about how to cook the dish. By the end of the film, the musicians find an innovative response to the din: to treat the unwanted “noise” as rich vernacular sound, perfect for their audio project. Out of the sounds of children playing and day-to-day activities of Deheishe, the musicians create an indigenous audio dream-world to be celebrated by the film’s audience. My students learn about daily existence in refugee camps and glean the film’s messages from its production design and audio texture. Actual homes and streets in Deheishe serve as the film set, so my students become aware of the strength of the community despite its problematic overcrowding. The film emphasizes artistic creativity and persistence despite, or because of, the refugee camp environment.

The fantasy, dream, and magic elements of these films bring to mind *The Driver Mahmoud*, by Mourid Barghouti (in *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*). I assign this story and engage my students to contrast it with the student films they’ve watched. In Barghouti’s story,

Mahmoud is the driver of a *servis* taxi van who is under time pressure to deliver his assorted passengers from Ramallah to Jericho on roads blocked by “flying” checkpoints. When Mahmoud drives his taxi off the road along an improvised route, he remains cheerfully confident that he’ll deliver his passengers on time. Then, facing a wide and impassible ditch, Mahmoud and his group are rescued by a *deus ex machina*: a crane lifts the taxi up and over the impediment. Mahmoud has outwitted the occupiers and delivered his passengers, while maintaining his professional standards. The appearance of a taxi-carrying crane is similar to *Endless Dream*’s creation of a window through a concrete wall. Barghouti says that the rescued taxi represents “our attempt, in a mixture of courage and fear, to impose our will through wit and cunning” (p. 109).

My students find that dreamscapes in Palestinian student films similarly offer an alternate solution to daunting realities of confinement including personal handicap, checkpoints and refugee camps, imprisonment, siege, and occupation. Are the dreams simply fanciful and cinematic, even risible, in their attempts to find any solution or even amelioration to life in the West Bank and Gaza? My students’ response to the optimism and creative resistance in the films suggest that these stories express Palestinian aspirations rather than mere dreaming.

Films cited:

- Ambience
- The Cage
- Endless Dream
- The Living of the Pigeons
- Memory of a Fish
- Moving Dream
- Reporter, Suspended
- What Will You Do When You Go Back to Your Village?

A collection of 35 Palestinian student films, including the titles discussed here, are archived at Duke University’s Rubenstein Library: <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/palestinianstudentfilms>

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