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CHAPTER 32

CODA

Flashes of Arab Communism

LAURA U. MARKS

IN many parts of the Arabic-speaking world, communism was a dream cut short by Arab governments, deals with global superpowers, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and historical bad luck. But communism fights on in Arab independent cinema. In recent years a remarkable number of Arab filmmakers have turned their attention to the history of the radical Left in their countries: labor movements, near-forgotten communist parties, secular armed resistance movements. I came across some of these works in my research on experimentalism in Arab cinema in the early twenty-first century. With historical research and imaginative reconstruction, filmmakers from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco have been urgently seeking models from earlier generations for grassroots movements that can unify and mobilize people against the government, corporate, and religious powers that oppress them. They recount their own stories, interrogate their elders, and delve into archives. In these ways Arab filmmakers rediscover the audiovisual cultures of previous generations when communism animated anticolonial revolutions, workers' organizations, guerrilla movements, and international solidarity. This coda explores two strata of communist audiovisual praxis: in the radical cinema that supported labor movements and guerrilla actions from the 1950s to the 1980s, now part of an Arab communist archive; and in recent films that draw on that archive.¹ The archive holds sparks, embers, the potentials of communism that have been neither fulfilled nor entirely extinguished. The new films devise ways to release their unspent energy into the present.

No doubt a fragrance of nostalgia wafts through these movies' choice of archival footage and photos: female *fedayeen* bearing arms; Lebanese strikers articulating their goals in Marxist language; a Shi'i communist fighter recovering from his injuries in Kiev; a filmmaker declaring that Moroccan cinema must express proletarian issues.² Nostalgia is part of what drives filmmakers to restage events from the communist past: an FLN operative's mission; a student occupation of the university president's

office; some good-looking Algerians debating revolution in a bar, gesticulating with cigarettes.³ However, the best movies looking back to Arab communism are not just nostalgic but making plans. They earnestly desire to discover what the Arab Left today can learn from the political strategies of their forebears. Could Arab Marxists have better extricated themselves from their ideology's European sources? What were the warning signs that communists would be crushed by the state socialists they helped bring to power? How did the secular Left lose power to fundamentalist religious movements? The filmmakers, not only in their historical investigations but also in their persistent, imaginative methods, are coming up with diagnoses and prescriptions. These films are a part of the activism that led to the uprisings of 2011 in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Bahrain, and of the deep reflections after those uprisings were brutally crushed in Egypt and Syria.

BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNISM IN THE ARAB WORLD

A sketch of the history of communism in the many Arabic-speaking countries begins in the early twentieth century.⁴ The Marxist doctrine that revolution must arise from the industrial proletariat did not initially speak to Arab countries where the mass of workers were peasants. However, industrial workers—cotton and textile workers in Egypt, tobacco workers in Lebanon, artisans and transport workers in Iraq, and so on—began organizing labor unions from the 1910s on. Initially communism appeared to many as a foreign import, introduced by Arab bourgeois intellectuals who had studied abroad, and supported from within by ethnic and religious minorities, chiefly Shi'i Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Kurdish, and Armenian. Yet this diversity was the communist movement's strength. *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs—The Iraqi Connection* (Switzerland/Iraq, 2003) by Samir portrays four Iraqi communist writers who were forced to emigrate because they were Jewish. Over images of bustling, sophisticated Baghdad before World War II, they recall that in the 1940s the Iraqi Communist Party had hundreds of thousands of members: "not only Jews but Shiites, Christians, and then Sunnis, Kurds from the north, and farmers from the south," as Sami Michael says. "People looked up to us. We were Iraqis, Communists, and patriots." *Forget Baghdad* echoes the warnings of many Arab communist writers that nationalism and sectarianism would destroy the movement.

The long history of colonialism and imperialism—first by France and Britain after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, then by the United States and Israel—shaped Arab communists. They drew on Lenin's critique of imperialism and his insistence that Marxist principles adapt to local economic circumstances. Failure to do so results in mimicry and self-Orientalism. In a 1974 book, Hassan Hamdan (aka Mahdi 'Amil), a Lebanese

Communist Party member, diagnoses the cultural imperialism by which the instrumental reason of Euro-American capitalism has been universalized, leaving Arabs and others to critique their own supposed inadequacy.⁵

Communists took part in anticolonial struggles in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, the People's Democratic Republic of (South) Yemen—which in 1979 became the Arab world's only officially Communist country—and by the Palestinians. The question of which had precedence, class struggle or anti-imperialism, drove Arab Communists at every point in their history, especially in relation to Israel: the Palestine Communist Party, founded in 1919, struggled and ultimately failed to reconcile worker internationalism and anti-Zionism.⁶ Communist organizer Nadine Acoury articulates the problem in Mary Jirmanus Saba's *A Feeling Greater Than Love* (Lebanon, 2017): "Workers' struggle and liberating our land are both important. This equation doesn't exist in the West. Marx came out of the West, Lenin from Russia. No one colonized Lenin. Not like us—300 years of the French, then the Americans, then they brought in Israelis on top of it all."

After independence, the "Arab socialist" states of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Algeria nationalized agriculture and industry and carried out progressive reforms in health care and education, at the same time that they brutalized and imprisoned communists. Communists' critiques of the military coups in Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958, and Syria in 1963, according to the Marxist doctrine that military coups can only lead to fascism, have proven correct. As Nasib Nimr, who with comrades in the Party of Socialist Revolution quit the Lebanese Communist Party, argued in the 1960s, Marxism-Leninism was meant to transform according to local conditions, but in Arab communism "we stripped Leninism of its democracy and kept centralism. Democratic centralism is only a slogan, a curtain we hide autocratic rule and personality cults behind."⁷

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union supported Arab communist parties and socialist governments, in exchange for Arab acquiescence to Soviet foreign policies even when these crippled their anti-imperialist interests.⁸ In 1967, while Arab communist parties supported UN Resolution 242 calling for Israel to withdraw to the 1948 borders, dissident communists refused to recognize the 1948 establishment of Israel and called for armed struggle. They asked, in words that resonated with international liberation movements, "The enemy bombarded us with napalm and other terrible weapons; should we bombard him with politics and peaceful expressions—surrender?"⁹

Communism effectively died in the new socialist republics that imprisoned communists alongside Muslim activists. 'Amil was shot dead on the street in 1987, the same year that fellow Shi'i communist Hussayn Muruwah was assassinated, among many communists murdered either by governments or Islamists. In the course of the Lebanese civil wars, communist militias dissolved along sectarian lines—a tale told with sad deliberation in Maher Abi Samra's *We Were Communists* (Lebanon, 2009), eccentrically in Mohamed Soueid's *My Heart Beats Only for Her* (Lebanon, 2009). Communist parties continue to be banned, and strikers often imprisoned, in most Arab countries.

THE ARAB COMMUNIST AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVE

Arab communism from decades past produced audiovisual cultures that, to the extent that they are preserved, continue to smolder and flash in our time. The Algerian revolution had its realist militant cinema from 1957, which hardened into a state-subsidized official revolutionary cinema in 1967.¹⁰ The vast majority of engaged films from the 1960s and 1970s were made by filmmakers in solidarity with the Palestinian *fedayeen*: the Palestine Film Unit (*Aflaam Falastin*), formed in Jordan in 1968 by Hani Jawhariyyah, Mustafa Abu Ali, Khadija Abu Ali, and Sulafa Jadallah (the first Arab camerawoman, according to Emily Jacir).¹¹ After the Israeli Army forced the PLO out of Beirut in 1982, the PFU's archive was lost. Activists have labored for decades to find, preserve, and release some of these precious militant films.¹² For example, Mohanad Yaqubi's detective work for *Off Frame, aka Revolution Until Victory* (Palestine, 2016), uncovered PFU filmmaker Mustafa Abu Ali's long-lost rushes for *Tal al Zaatar*, which preserves bits of fire like female *fedayeen* training and a Palestinian farmer plowing his field with a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. *A Hundred Faces for a Single Day* (Lebanon, 1969), the recently rediscovered documentary by Lebanese filmmaker Christian Ghazi, uses an avant-garde montage aesthetic, especially striking in its use of abrasive sound, to contrast the righteous struggles of the *fedayeen* with the decadence of the Arab bourgeoisie. Iraqi filmmaker Kais al-Zubeidi, who now lives in Berlin, also brought experimental strategies to his pro-Palestinian films.¹³ Lebanese filmmaker Marouñ Baghdadi's *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers* (Lebanon, 1978) portrays the men and women who fought with the Communist Action Organization in the Lebanese civil war.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Syrian filmmakers (employed, as in Algeria, by the state) studied in Moscow, Prague, and Kiev, and this Soviet-satellite training informs the radical aesthetics of Omar Amiralay, Mohamad Malass, Nidal al-Dibs, and others of this period.¹⁴ Sometimes revolutionary aesthetics appear in the films of sympathetic foreigners, like Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (Algeria/Italy, 1966) and the many Palestinian solidarity films, including Wakamatsu Koji and Adachi Masao's *Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War* (Palestine/Japan, 1971), and more famous works.¹⁵

This body of earlier films, together with archival documents of all sorts, supplies the material from which contemporary Arab filmmakers looking for flashes of communist fire depart. Viewers now have the thrill of witnessing well-organized masses: strikers, guerrillas training in formation. We can see and hear workers, fighters, and intellectuals articulately deploy Marxist analysis and admire the magnetism of courageous individuals who fully embody Marxist praxis. These films give evidence that in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s women enfranchised themselves to organize, strike, and fight alongside their male comrades. The accessories of the international revolution are on display: keffiyas showing Palestinian solidarity, Moroccan hair spun into Afros in stylish sympathy with the Black Power movement (in Ali Essafi's *Wanted!*, Morocco, 2010), noms de guerre

honoring leaders of the movement. We glimpse too the audiovisual styles of montage, inspired by Eisenstein, Vertov, and Brecht, that filmmakers of earlier generations deployed to rouse viewers' critical analysis, and techniques of militant cinema that Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, Santiago Alvarez, and Wakamatsu Koji shared with Palestinian filmmakers.¹⁶ We hear the surprisingly romantic poetry written to embolden the struggle, revolutionary anthems belted out in unison.

NEW COMMUNIST AUDIOVISUAL CULTURES

The outpouring, in the last fifteen years, of Arab films looking back to past communist culture cannot just repeat the hortatory address of Third Cinema, nor the once-radical aesthetics of Soviet montage, Brechtian reflexivity, and Marxist realism. This would be to fetishize the revolutionary sparks that glimmer from these films. Historical research faces the Foucauldian dilemma that recorded words, images, and sounds from the past cannot speak to the present directly. The same is true of memories of people who lived through these events. Filmmakers have to devise methods to disrupt rather than repeat communist styles of the past, activating the potentials that glint within these recordings and memories.

When they can, the filmmakers interview living activists to try to grasp a time when Arab communism was healthy. Sometimes their interlocutors paint a vivid picture, as in *Forget Baghdad*, when Musa Khoury recalls, "Most party members were laborers. One was a shoemaker with a big thumb. After I failed to explain the difference between idealism and materialism, Mr. Big Thumb did it, quoting Marx. I was so disappointed with myself." His memory, resonating with the radical films of the 1970s, stirs dim awareness of a character now rare in popular culture, the articulate worker-intellectual. But more often, filmmakers must deal with interviewees who forget, out of despair, trauma, or self-censorship. The gentle communist protagonists of Reem Ali's *Foam* (2006), broken in a Syrian jail, do quiet activism but refuse to speak of the past. In Mohamed Soueid's *Nightfall* (Lebanon, 2003), veterans of a pro-Palestinian militia drown their communist sorrows in arak. In Namir Abdel Messeeh's *Toi, Waguih* (Egypt/France, 2005), the filmmaker's father, an Egyptian communist imprisoned for five years and tortured, frustrates his son by speaking of his experience only in the third person plural.

Often they begin by searching for archival documentation of communism. The struggle to access archives that are sequestered by governments, held privately, or lost altogether occupies many films. The empty-archive film, a sturdy and often productive trope of Arab cinema, must be handled deftly to produce more than lassitude in its audiences.¹⁷ In the best cases, filmmakers treat the archive as volatile but opaque, troubling the images and sounds they do find, releasing latent energies for analysis. The example I love the most is Soueid's *My Heart Beats Only for Her* about the "Vietnamese," that is, communist wing within Fatah. Beginning in 1963, pro-Palestinian fighters traveled to Vietnam to learn resistance methods from the Viet Cong, taking noms de guerre like Abu Khaled Hanoi

and Abu Ali Giap. Soueid's audiovisual montage deftly narrates the diffusion and dissipation of the *fedayeen's* communist ideals. The Fatah chant "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh" rises to a roar over a slow-motion film of Ho performing martial arts, followed by Yasir Arafat in a similar pose. The chant carries over black-masked soldiers of the Lebanese fascist militia Kata'eb and motley street fighters of the Lebanese civil war; ending with Hezbollah, the official armed resistance, and the only group that still makes use of the techniques Fatah learned in Vietnam. Over the giant bronze statue of Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi we hear a speech of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. "Either Lebanon is Hong Kong—or it is Hanoi!" he thunders, as the crowd cheers. "We are able to present to the world a country where there is construction, economy, state, corporations, competition, productive sectors, . . . and resistance!" Nasrallah's voice reverberates metallically. This, Soueid economically suggests, is what has evolved from the dream of communist internationalism: an organization holding a religious monopoly on armed struggle, happy to collaborate with capitalist imperialism, and ready to form a government.

To fan the embers of communist history, filmmakers also use creative storytelling. Soueid interweaves interviews and archival footage with the fictional tale of the son of a *fidai* who retraces his father's experience in Vietnam. In *Zanj Revolution* (Algeria, 2012), Tariq Tegua creates a journalist character who, galvanized by a remark from an Algerian demonstrator, embarks on the search for an adequate origin story for the 2011 Arab uprisings in the twentieth-century history of the Arab Left and—in a stunning Afro-Arab genealogy for communist struggle—in slave uprisings in nineteenth-century Iraq.

The new "communist" filmmakers approach the past personally and aggressively, often using text to pry open the image. As Saba's *A Feeling Greater Than Love* pores over the handful of militant Lebanese films made between 1971 and 1982, a title reads, "I thought if I stared long enough at the images, I might understand why their revolution was not sustained." An all-caps title interrupts an argument among communist strike organizers reunited after forty-five years. "THE FILM REJECTS THE STATEMENT BY AHMED DIRANI THAT MARX WAS WRONG!"

Saba finds an invaluable resource in actor-turned-organizer Nadine Acoury, aka Warde, whose life in the communist movement yields lesson after lesson. She tells Saba, "I discovered the bourgeoisie are weak willed. They have no values. They're always imitating the French. They messed us up. I was searching for the people." Acoury joined the Organization of Communist Action and began organizing female workers. She leads Saba to another spark from an earlier generation of communism: a well-theorized feminist critique. (Arab Communist Party programs included women's liberation from the beginning.¹⁸) She recounts trying to convince a young worker that all people are equal under communism. "I gave the example of the USSR, but she said to me, 'People are not equal, why do you want to make them equal?'" Saba intercuts this with an ironic scene from Ghazi's *A Hundred Faces for a Single Day*. Fiddling with the radio, a man briefly gets a staccato Soviet national anthem. His wife brings him coffee in bed and asks him pointedly, "Jalal, do you support the Palestinian resistance?" He tells her to iron his blue shirt instead of asking questions like that. Saba follows this with an all-male march

from the 1970s and an anthem whose words include "I kiss the ground beneath your feet"—one of many songs that addresses the revolution with the words of a lover. Like Soueid, Saba distorts the anthem, and as it grotesquely slows and stops, a viewer can ponder the vertiginous gap between Marxist and feminist praxis.

The artists of contemporary Arab communism restage and reenact struggles with earnest vigor. *A Feeling Greater Than Love* begins with a reenactment that uncannily shakes the past into the present. Najib Ismail drives through the towns and hills of southern Lebanon with a loudspeaker on the roof of his car, calling, "Oh people of Nabatiya and all the villages of the south! Join us to support the strikers occupying the Regie building. Our government called in the tanks, the army, and security forces, and put them under siege. The owners are trying to seize the profits they did not labor over." Except for the detail of the Regie tobacco factory, that call for solidarity could be made today, but would the people mass on the streets as they did in 1973?

The desire that restaging will lead to informed action animates several recent Arab films in which activists, workers, or prisoners (Zeina Daccache's *12 Angry Lebanese*, Lebanon, 2009) reenact crucial events. Damien Ounouri convinces his uncle to restage his actions as an FLN operative in *Fidai* (Algeria/France, 2012). Marwa Arsanios remakes the bomb scene from *The Battle of Algiers* in *Have You Ever Killed a Bear? or Becoming Jamila* (Lebanon, 2014). To make *Out on the Street* (Egypt, 2015), Jasmina Metwaly and Philip Rizk invited Egyptian factory workers to reenact their confrontations with bosses and police, performing different roles in turn, in order to demystify the mentality of authority. In *The Sheikh Imam Project, or, How to Play Arabic Music on a Large German Instrument* (Lebanon, 2014), Gheith Al-Amine seeks to embody the tradition of leftist dissent by lustily reperforming a 1960s protest song by Egyptian singer Sheikh Imam only available in low-fi recordings. The video's subtitle indexes the difficulty of harmonizing Marxism with an Arab context. Reenactments like these suggest that to truly embody a revolutionary attitude would allow the performers to bypass the Foucauldian divide and incarnate the *feeling* of revolutionary struggle, which would in turn, for the filmmakers or viewers, lead to new action.

In these ways, Arab filmmakers create a new communist audiovisual culture. Pressing reluctant interlocutors, squeezing and remixing archives, dealing creatively with absence, and performing the Left back into being, they stir embers of communist praxis into flame.

NOTES

1. For more on this movement, see the chapter "Communism, Dream Deferred" in my book *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
2. In Mohanad Yaqubi's *Off Frame, aka Revolution until Victory* (Palestine, 2016) and many other films; Mary Jirmanus Saba's *A Feeling Greater Than Love* (Lebanon, 2017); Akram Zaatari's *In This House* (Lebanon, 2005); and Ali Essafi's *Wanted!* (Morocco, 2010).
3. *Fidai* by Damien Ounouri (Algeria/France, 2012); 74: *Reconstitution of a Struggle* by Rania and Rafed Rafei (Lebanon, 2012); *Inland* by Tariq Tegua (Algeria, 2008).

4. This history draws on Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998); Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, "Labor and National Liberation: The Trade Union Movement in Iraq, 1920–1958," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 139–154; Rami Ginat, *Egypt's Incomplete Revolution: Lutfi al-Khuli and Nasser's Socialism in the 1960s* (London: Frank Cass, 1997); Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner, 1991); Tareq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998); Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2005).
5. Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 144–148. Later 'Amil, with other Arab and South Asian Marxists, bitterly critiqued Edward Said for lumping Marxism with Orientalism, undermining indigenous communist struggle. Gilbert Achcar, *Marxism, Orientalism, Cosmopolitanism* (London: Haymarket Books, 2013), 71–74.
6. See Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919–1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010).
7. Nasib Nimr, *Falsafat al-Harakah al-Wataniyya al-Taharoriya* (Philosophy of National Liberation Movements; Beirut: Dar al-Ra'ed al-Arabi, n.d.), quoted in Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, 70.
8. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World*, 21. The Algerian Communist Party sided with the French Communist Party's goals of gradual change rather than the radical anti-imperialist stance of the FLN. Arab communist parties fell in step with the Soviet Union's approval of the partition of Palestine in 1948.
9. "Marjan Comments on Bakdash Article in Nidal al-Sha'ab," *Ila al-Amam*, September 10, 1967; translated and cited in Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, 69.
10. Roy Armes, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 15–17.
11. Emily Jacir, "Palestinian Revolution Cinema Comes to NYC," *The Electronic Intifada*, February 16, 2007. <http://electronicintifada.net/content/palestinian-revolution-cinema-comes-nyc/6759>
12. See Sheyma Buali, "A Militant Cinema: A Conversation between Mohanad Yaqubi and Sheyma Buali," *Ibraaz*, May 2, 2012. <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/16>; Terri Ginsberg and Chris Lippard, "Lost Archives of Palestinian Films," *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema* (London: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 255–256; the Dreams of a Nation archive, <http://www.palestine.mei.columbia.edu/dreams-of-a-nation>; Joseph Massad, "The Weapon of Culture: Cinema in the Palestinian Liberation Struggle," in *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, ed. Hamid Dabashi (London: Verso, 2006), 30–42; and Leah Caldwell, "Unearthing Jordan's Soviet Cinema," *Al-Akhbar*, May 23, 2012. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/7615>
13. Jacir, "Palestinian Revolution Cinema Comes to NYC."
14. See Kay Dickinson, *Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai and Beyond* (London: Palgrave, 2016), and Rasha Salti, ed., *Insights into Syrian Cinema* (New York: ArteEast, 2006).
15. See Terri Ginsberg, *Visualizing the Palestinian Struggle: Towards a Critical Analytic of Palestine Solidarity Film* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

16. Buali, n.p.
17. On the inventive archival practices in Arab cinema, see my chapter "Archival Romances" in *Hanan al-Cinema*.
18. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, 18.

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