5 Communism, Dream Deferred

A Lebanese man working at a company in Dubai has produced a spectacular advertisement for a French automobile. It required an airborne shot of an airplane in flight releasing a minivan full of parachutists. The bulbous vehicle sails out of the plane's open cargo door, and the parachutists rise and flutter around it. Accompanying this impressive achievement of international cooperation, booming male voices sing a rousing anthem of Fatah, the Palestinian National Liberation Movement. This jamming of revolutionary fervor and virtuosic merchandising, in Mohamed Soueid's *My Heart Beats Only for Her* (2008), creates an uncanny feeling, as though something you repressed has returned to stir the hairs on the back your neck.

The surrealist André Breton wrote that he was only sensitive to "those works of art that … straight off arouse a physical sensation in me, like the feeling of a feathery wind brushing across my temples to produce a real shiver."[1] Breton relates this sensation to erotic pleasure, though the images need not be sexual, suggesting that eroticism is the attraction not of the known but of the unknown. A surrealism of our time unfolds something so unspeakable that it has become unimaginable, something truly uncanny—not sex, not even death: Communism. The word itself might produce in you an ecstatic tremor similar to what Breton described. Communism is the deeply repressed contents of our time. It seems radically out of fashion, beyond thought, beyond caring.

To bring those stories into a present that is mostly indifferent to them requires diligent research and creative imagination. The notion that Communism is a dream may make Chinese and Russians shudder and Scandinavians roll their eyes. But in many parts of the Arabic-speaking world, Communism—or, to begin to be more precise, the secular, radical left—was a dream cut short by deals with global superpowers, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and historical bad luck. This chapter does not collapse the desire for democracy, transparency, and self-determination onto Western models but sees in them a germ of Marxist ideals that have never been fulfilled.

Why the Provocative Title?

The long history of Arab left-wing intellectual and activist work, dating to the nineteenth century, is influenced by Marxist thought, not Communism per se. Thus "Marxism, Dream Deferred" is a more accurate title for this chapter, but it sounds rather dreary. The long-term secretary general of the Palestine Communist Party, Bashir Barghouti (1931–2000), admitted that many Marxists were more inspired by Rosa Luxembourg's insistence on democracy than by joyless Soviet-style Communism.[2] The French-educated Michel Aflaq (1910–1989), one of the founders of the Baath Party, said that he sympathized with Syrian Communists who were being persecuted in the 1930s but "was suspicious of their dogmatic views since I had learned my socialism from André Gide and Romain Rolland."[3] Socialism, with its more flexible views, has had a strong intellectual and political presence across North Africa and the Levant. However, the variants of "Arab socialism" under Nasser in Egypt and in the Baath Party in Iraq and Syria wove in other ideological strands and ended up in practice far from Marxist ideals. So "Socialism, Dream Deferred" is inexact. In fact the most accurate title for this chapter, given the appeal to Arab intellectuals and activists of Vladimir Lenin's incisive analysis of imperialism, would be "Marxism-Leninism, Dream Deferred"—but I fear most readers would smack the book shut! Therefore, Communism will focus this chapter on the remarkable outpouring of recent films that look back to Arab radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Recently a great many filmmakers have shown intense interest in their countries' near-forgotten Communist parties in particular and the radical left more broadly, especially secular armed resistance movements including the Palestinian fedayeen in the 1960s and 1970s. The film unit of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) is understandably dear to the hearts of filmmakers and activists who worked to uncover its lost archive. Some of the filmmakers participated in these movements themselves. In other cases, filmmakers of a younger generation interrogate their elders who were involved in these movements, or in their absence try to reconstruct their stories. In these movies you sense that time is slipping away and the filmmakers must urgently glean information from their sometimes reluctant informants while the latter are still living.

These were years when the term *freedom fighter* was used more often than *terrorist*. The resistance movements in Algeria and Palestine, plucky Davids taking on colonial Goliaths, captured the international imagination. Female freedom fighters, real ones like Algerian Front de libération nationale (FLN) insurgent Jamila Bouhired and fictional ones like those in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), aroused special fascination. Most unimaginable in our time, I think, is the degree to which the radical left once was able to mobilize international solidarity. A shared Marxist analysis of imperialism cut through differences of geography and language, allowing groups all

over the world to understand their struggle as a common one. And of course the common ideology was followed by a flow of arms.

Leftist characters nostalgic or in denial populate a great many films in the Arabic-speaking world, as they do elsewhere, and often the remnants of their inherited ideologies inhibit them from acting politically in the present. In Tariq Teguia's *Inland* (2008), for example, a crowd of Algiers intellectuals, including the main character's wife, gather for hours to argue fine points of Marxist-Leninist thought with great linguistic subtlety, while the main character chooses a nonverbal and anarchistic course of action, diverting power from the national electric works and taking off into the desert with a refugee from Chad. However, the hero of Teguia's next film, *Zanj Revolution* (2013), looks for the prehistory of the 2011 Arab uprisings in the twentieth-century history of the Arab left, and seeks much deeper roots as well, in the history of slave uprisings in ninth-century Iraq. Similarly, some of the films I examine in this chapter turn to research, imagination, fiction, and performance to try to resuscitate the now-inconceivable armed secular left.

This outpouring of films on the Arab secular left might seem part of the global pang of nostalgia wracking everybody who still believes Marx was right, as well as those who don't but find themselves irresistibly attracted to the period of Che Guevara and the Black Panthers, Afros and bell-bottom pants, keffiyas and bandoliers—in short, of radical chic. Writing about Olivier Assayas's *Carlos the Jackal* in 2010, John Patterson blamed the current wave of left nostalgia on Al-Qaeda. "Watching these guys dropping new fatwa videos and declarations of total war on, like, everything, one almost can't help but cast one's mind wistfully back to those halcyon days when sexy left wingers far too young to be so insane were hijacking planes, kidnapping industrialists or purging their own ranks with Maoist zeal. And their (relative) lack of misogyny meant that there were plenty of pretty young women among their ranks."[4] Patterson accurately characterizes the erotic appeal of the secular left, of which more later. Since he wrote this, the number and variety of humorless unsexy armed fundamentalists have only grown.

The best movies about this period are not just nostalgic, however, but making plans. They earnestly desire to learn what went wrong. What can the Arab and international left today learn from the political strategies of their forebears? Most pressingly, is there a future for secular left movements? Also, why did the left disarm? These filmmakers, not only in their historical investigations but also in their persistent, imaginative methods, are coming up with diagnoses that in some cases are also prescriptions.

A Brief History of Communism in the Arab World

In the 1920s and 1930s Communist parties formed in most every Arabic-speaking country across North Africa and in the Levant. They were founded by urban workers and intellectuals, many of whom were religious or cultural minorities—Jewish,

Christian, Shi'a, and Kurdish—as well as foreign residents and immigrants. Building on the secular left thought of the nineteenth-century *nahda*, or cultural renaissance, Marxist and Communist thinkers established a vibrant critical culture. Arab Marxists, Communist parties, and trade union movements were instrumental in the anticolonial independence movements across North Africa and in Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. However, official Communism faced numerous obstacles in the region. Communist parties were fettered by their ties to the Soviet Union, which used them as a tool of its foreign policy and often forced them to espouse policies that contradicted their anti-imperialist interests. For example, 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, which put them on the timid side of the Algerian revolution.[5] More damning, Arab Communist parties fell in step with the Soviet Union's approval of the partition of Palestine in 1948. Communism was unpalatable to the majority of Arab citizens after independence who wanted political platforms that blended social justice, nationalism, and religion.[6] In some countries, Communism never shook the appearance of a foreign transplant dependent on the Soviet Union.[7] For example, in 1946 the Muslim Brotherhood, after initially cooperating with the Egyptian Communist Party, red-baited its members as not Egyptian but Russian and as traitors to God.[8]

During the Cold War, the newly independent Arab states, and in particular Egypt, gained power from the nonaligned movement and pan-Arab nationalism. A constantly negotiated distance from both the Soviet Union and the new postwar power, the United States, allowed Arab governments to develop independent political platforms.[9] While Communists maintained Marxist "scientific socialism," other Arab intellectuals formulated versions of socialism more compatible with their countries' economies and cultures. Against classical Marxism, they argued that each country had its own path to socialism; it was not necessary to pass through all the stages of industrialization and the rise of an urban proletariat—a position that made a lot of sense for agricultural economies. Furthermore, many contended that socialism is not incompatible with religion; in fact, the socialist values of distributing wealth and lifting up the downtrodden are shared with Islam. The Baath Party, founded by educated Syrians from outside the Sunni majority—Alawites, Christians, and Druze—articulated an Arab nationalism that was based on the regional history of Islam yet transcended sectarianism. In 1952 the Baath Party merged with the Arab Socialist Party to form the Arab Socialist Baath Party and put in place a socialist platform that included redistribution of income and state control of the means of production. The platform proposed by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1962 included these policies as well as the excellent goals of health care and education for all and family planning.[10] Another policy was government control of foreign trade, a crucial strategy to prevent foreign companies from pumping profits out of the country, though by the same token it deters foreign investment.

Nasserist intellectual Muhammad Hasanain Haikal, writing in 1961, distinguished Arab socialism from Communism in several ways. Arab socialism seeks not the dictatorship of the proletariat but the dissolution of class differences. It protects the rights of property and inheritance; property is not theft, though exploiting the labor of others is. Arab socialism also rejects violent class struggle, which would tear apart the fabric of society: this echoed the Muslim Brotherhood's condemnation of Communism.[11] Such reformulations defanged Marxist thought and made it palatable to large swaths of the population, though they created policies that could easily be abused.

As new post-independence and (in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq) post-coup governments consolidated their power, Communists and the radical left were crushed, often with the complicity of the Soviet Union, by the very governments they had helped to bring to power. They repressed Muslim political parties just as viciously. Arab Communist parties went underground in some cases, splintered into nonaligned left-wing parties, and began to cultivate ties with international revolutionary movements. Later, as we'll see, Communist parties and other secular left movements suffered with the rise of religious resistance movements.

Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs—The Iraqi Connection (2003) by the Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker Samir expresses the bitter irony that Communists reject both nation and religion and yet are persecuted for the sake of both. Samir portrays four Iraqi writers, all Communists who were forced to emigrate because they were Jewish and who settled in Israel. After 1948 the Iraqi government passed a law allowing Jews to give up their nationality. Samir states that most Iraqi Jews didn't want to do so; indeed, some were convinced it was a conspiracy between the Zionists and the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, by the early 1950s 120,000 out of Iraq's 140,000 Jews had emigrated.

The film has a lot to say about the Israeli ethnic hierarchy imposed on Jews of different ethnicities, on which Ella Shohat, an Israeli of Iraqi descent also featured in the film, is eloquent. The Israeli government settled the emigrants in refugee camps and fumigated them like animals. But what strikes me most about *Forget Baghdad* is that the film breathes that "feathery wind" of something unconceivable: a strong Communist Party with hundreds of thousands of members, "not only Jews but Shiites, Christians, and then Sunnis, Kurds from the north, and farmers from the south," Sami Michael says. "People looked up to us. We were Iraqis, Communists and patriots." Understandably the Iraqi Communist Party attracted Iraq's communities most marginalized during the Baath regime. [figure 5.1] The interviews are accompanied by deeply nostalgic images of bustling, sophisticated Baghdad before World War II. They testify to the anti-religious, international belonging to which Communism appealed. Michael says that as a child raised in the Jewish quarter of Baghdad, he wanted to "break away from this moldy old community" and come into the twentieth century, whose ideology was Communism. Musa Khoury depicts an Iraqi Communist Party with a healthy

Figure 5.1
Samir, *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs—The Iraqi Connection* (2003)

proportion of worker-intellectuals. "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." As Ruth Tsoffar points out, the Israeli Communist Party's ranks grew in the 1950s from the working-class emigrants of the refugee camps.[12]

I think that Arab Communist parties' lack of power allowed them to act as their governments' political conscience. Communists argued that a revolution must not only fight imperialism but enfranchise the people most vulnerable in society, the proletariat and subproletariat. From the 1930s on Communist parties in Palestine, Syria, and Iraq criticized nationalism as a bourgeois movement fundamentally opposed to the interests of the proletariat.[13] Communists critiqued the military coups in Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958, and Syria in 1963 on the basis of the Marxist doctrine that military coups can only lead to fascism. Lebanese Communist Mahdi Amil argued in 1974 that the *nahda* failed because it was built by a bourgeoisie that came to power during colonialism; a true new culture, he said, can arise only from a proletarian revolution.[14] Similarly, the Egyptian economist Samir Amin pointed out that the ideology of global development, in both the International Monetary Fund and Soviet models, relies on a permanent unequal international division of labor, and also—in a remarkably prescient environmentalist critique—because the planet could not survive Western patterns of consumption extended to the entire world.[15]

These Marxist critics were right. Arab nationalist ideologies justified the consolidation of power and capital in the hands of the military and the bourgeoisie (often the

same people). Governments that resulted from military coups, even those with socialist platforms, eventually created tyrannical states. And when Communists and the radical left criticized their governments' disenfranchisement of the poor, workers, and minorities, they were imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes killed. This history of incomplete revolutions led to the discontent that gave rise to the Arab uprisings of 2011.

Memories of Resistance

Asking a former Communist or resistance fighter to relate his or her experience doesn't necessarily yield a compelling document. Some filmmakers find that their interlocutors are not able to speak of it at all, or are not able to give the answers they hope for. Reem Ali's *Zabad* (Foam, 2008), a delicate portrait of a Syrian family debating whether to emigrate to Canada, centers on Mohammad, a gentle man who suffers from schizophrenia. His sister Asmahan and her spouse, 'Ali, were Communist activists who met in prison and still fear persecution. Asmahan is a women's literacy activist: in the classroom she teaches her students to write *Ta'beer 'an al-rayy*, freedom of opinion. But sadness, fatigue, and indecision weigh her down. In Stefanie van de Peer's sensitive analysis, *Zabad* expresses its critique of the state through Asmahan's paralysis, which her brother helps to loosen up with his innocent chat.[16] [figure 5.2] Asmahan speaks only lightly of her experience, but her brother confides to the camera sympathetically, "My sister ate by herself in prison." Mohammad is probably the only character in Arab

Figure 5.2
Reem Ali, *Zabad* (Foam, 2008)

cinema who has good associations with the Mukhabarat, the secret service whose name is synonymous with disappearance and torture. Asmahan gives him a little smile and says, "Yes, they gave you sweets, didn't they."

After the 1952 coup in Egypt, the transitional authoritarian regime called the Revolutionary Command Council brutally suppressed strikes, abrogated the constitution, and banned political parties.[17] It imprisoned and tortured 30,000 of the Muslim Brotherhood, released those who repudiated the party, and killed at least 21. Hundreds remained in prison until 1970. Communists were a smaller party, but the council used the same tactic, imprisoning 150 Communists in 1953 and 1954 and another 1,000 in 1958 for their criticism of the coup in Iraq. Yet in a seeming irony, even from prison many Egyptian Communists applauded the leftward turn of Nasser's newly strong anti-imperialist stance.[18] In 1964 Nikita Khrushchev visited Egypt and agreed with Nasser to the dissolution of the Egyptian Communist Party, in the understanding that Communists released from prison would get posts in newspapers and the public service: in this way, the government could both benefit from their analysis and keep them on a short leash.[19] Effectively, then, Nasser's government absorbed palatable elements of Marxist thought and permitted "former" Communists to serve as intellectuals. Trade unions were absorbed into the state in 1957, which had a similar effect of incorporating and deradicalizing their movement.[20]

This is useful context for Namir Abdel Messeeh's *Toi, Waguih* (2005). Abdel Messeeh's father, Waguih, was imprisoned in the 1959 sweep and remained in prison until 1964. Many years later, the son tries to draw out his reserved and dignified father. Their conversations take place at their apartments in Paris, often starting off in French, and then Waguih switches to Arabic. Frustratingly to his son, he also uses the first-person plural. Asked how he lived through imprisonment and torture, Waguih says in Arabic, "We believed in the cause and had sacrificed everything for it. It was our reason for living. That's how we survived." Namir points out, in French, that his father is saying *ehna*, "we," again. "Yes, the group, we were very close, we practically spoke with one voice." The son replies rather loftily, "Personally I do not believe in losing one's individuality in a group." He tells his father he needs him to speak more personally. (Generalized reminiscences don't make a gripping documentary!) Waguih insists, "But I'm telling you that detention is really something we experienced collectively." [figure 5.3]

In another scene, as his father is preparing his medication at the kitchen sink, Namir says that Nasser was basically a dictator. Waguih disagrees: "He did more good than harm. Egypt changed radically from 1952 to 1970. He made us suffer but he was an Egyptian, a patriot. His main shortcoming is he wanted to impose military organization on society." Namir expostulates, "You get out of prison and you end up saying it's for the good!" If he had been thinking less personally, he might have drawn his father out on the critique of a military society and the reasons he and his wife decided to emigrate, which may be more revealing than the experience of prison. On his release,

Figure 5.3
Namir Abdel Messeeh, *Toi, Waguih* (2005)

Waguih recounts, "The whole village greeted me at the train station with percussion and music and carried me home. … They knew I was a Communist, but for them a Communist was an atheist at the service of the USSR. [My mother] would say go to church and pray. But I still don't."

Despite Namir's frustration and his father's resistance, the two are companionable. Waguih listens tenderly to a tape recording made while he was in prison of his son's voice piping, "Little Namir was bad, but we wrote a letter to God so maybe his dad won't scold him." The filmmaker attends to his father's fragility as he makes a cup of tea, closes the shutters, and wraps himself in a quilt. We glimpse the life that Waguih has built in France. Fond colleagues surround him at the ceremony for his retirement from a government agency. A brisk Egyptian song plays as he walks in a jogging suit and takes an exercise class with a kind young black instructor. Still, he says, "With all my heart I would like to live in Egypt. It's inside me; I think about it every day."

In *Fidaï* (2012) the Algerian-French filmmaker Damien Ounouri wants to get inside the body and mind of an FLN operative. Ounouri establishes an understanding of the FLN's motivation with a scene pairing peaceful shots of Algerian life—schoolchildren at study, youths in a soccer field, an old shepherd moving his flock along in the fading

light—with Pasolini's poem from *La Rabbia* (Rage, 1963): "On my befouled rags, on my skeletal nakedness, on my gypsy mother, on my shepherd father, I write your name. … On my lowly comrades, on my unemployed comrades, on my comrades drilling as soldiers, I write your name. … Freedom." The poem is moving, but it also feels like an imported perspective. More convincingly, *Fidaï* reconstructs Algerians' rage from their own accounts. Ounouri's great-uncle, Momamed El Hadi Benadouda, now has sweet grandchildren and a small shop in Algiers, but in the 1960s he was an agent of the FLN in France. El Hadi visits a woman who still lives in a farmhouse that in 1956 the French turned into a prison, where they tortured people suspected of helping mujahedeen. "Work that would take 30 minutes took us ten," she says, "because we didn't want to hear the prisoners' screams." She tells how the French soldiers mixed their couscous and oil with dirt. "They tortured and killed my brother. They raped women. Then they burned it all and went away." El Hadi visits a cemetery in which some of the people killed by the French are buried.

Ounouri gets his great-uncle to agree to return to France and reenact the missions he undertook on the leadership's command. They do this painstakingly. One mission was to kill a Moroccan named Moh. El Hadi didn't know why; only later did he learn that Moh had betrayed the FLN and stolen money. They restage the attempted shooting four times, in the very café where it occurred some fifty years earlier. Pressing his great-uncle, Ounouri asks, "What gets stirred up when you remember?" El Hadi responds tiredly, "It's done; the past is dead!" "How did you feel about shooting a man?" the young man insists. El Hadi answers, "They say he's a traitor. You have nothing to think about. If he's against the revolution, I have no mercy." The camera probes El Hadi's face for emotion that's not there.

They meet with an old friend of El Hadi who was in prison with him. He describes the cruel tortures they suffered during the police investigation and the tender care among prisoners. He would cure El Hadi when he got dizzy from the bad food by pressing his veins and splashing him with water; they would help people who got weak during a hunger strike. This scene of tender understanding between two old comrades feels like the climax of the film.

Back in his small hotel room, El Hadi lies down, dizzy. "I don't know how to say it in French. … I passed through somewhere where there are spirits. Demons. Djinns—that's it." Damien listens as his great-uncle explains that everybody has two recording angels, *malaika*; the one on the right records good things, the one on the left bad things. The right angel tries to persuade the left to be patient; the person may repent. It seems that his great-nephew's investigation has raised the fear that his missions for the FLN were recorded by the angel on the left. Ounouri worries that making the film has weakened El Hadi. But later, as they drive together at dusk, when Ounouri presses one last time, the old man says, "It was a revolution, in a revolution it's forgiven [*c'est pardonné, quoi*]." "Are you sure of that?" "Those who have never known colonialism,

Figure 5.4
Damien Ounouri, *Fidaï* (2012)

they would never believe it!" There is a pause; then they agree that the landscape they've been traveling through is beautiful. [figure 5.4]

These films show the difficulty of getting the answers the filmmaker wants from radical survivors. In *Zabad* Asmahan is paralyzed by the pain of surviving as a Communist in Assad's Syria; the filmmaker respects this and allows her experience to be expressed indirectly. In both *Fidaï* and *Toi, Waguih*, the younger men want to know how it felt to be a resister, to personalize it, as though that were the only way to understand. I think this is partly because they are French, but partly because the radical beliefs their elders held are simply unavailable now. Their elders resist personalizing their experience, insisting they did their duty as anyone else would have. They seem to have had a sense of collective responsibility to political resistance that allowed them to eclipse their individuality for the duty they had to carry out, and that is what is incomprehensible.

The subject of Ali Essafi's *Wanted!* (2010) is similar to *Fidaï*: an attempt to make tangible the memories of a member of the Moroccan underground in the 1970s, during what are called the Years of Lead. Essafi's strategy, however, is indirection. He pairs an audio interview with this man with a dense montage of archival images and sounds to bring all the conflicted feelings and ideals and the mood of the time sharply into consciousness. We see him just briefly at the beginning and a couple of times in the course of the half-hour film. At the end we learn his name, Abdelaziz Tribak, alias Mohamed Sahel, and that he served eleven years of a thirty-two-year sentence and was released in 1991.

In 1955 after Morocco's war of independence from France, it remained a monarchy and deepened alliances with the West, especially the United States. Left organizations including the Communist Party, the armed Popular Movement of Rif Amazigh (Berbers from the Rif Mountains), and the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP) advocated for democratization, the elimination of lingering French colonialism, and curbs on the king's powers. The UNFP came from the mountains and countryside but spoke for the urban proletariat. Its founder, Mehdi Ben Barka, was the secretary of the Tricontinental Organization for Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, in the decade's spirit of transnational South-South solidarity that was, write Tarek Elhaik and Dominic Willsdon, "beautiful yet preposterous, dangerous yet ethical."[21] Hassan II, while crown prince, took control of the national security forces; on becoming king in 1961, he began a harsh campaign against political dissidence. In 1963 the UNFP's leaders were sentenced to death for supporting Algeria's FLN government, and five thousand UNFP members were arrested; Ben Barka was kidnapped in Paris in 1965 and his body never found. (He is the subject of Simone Bitton's 2001 documentary *Ben Barka, l'équation marocaine* and Serge le Péron's *J'ai vu tier Ben Barka* (*I Saw Ben Barka Killed*, 2005.) The highly politicized national student union, as well as high school students, began a series of strikes that continued into the 1970s. Students were beaten, arrested, imprisoned, and "disappeared." The king said on national television, "There is no greater danger to the state than the so-called intellectual; it would have been better for you to be illiterate." Abraham Serfaty, a Communist founder of the far left organization Ila al-Amam in Casablanca, went underground in 1972 but was captured, repeatedly tortured, and sentenced to seventeen years imprisonment. Workers entered the fray later. In 1975 a new workers' union formed, and with the reorganized UNFP, it organized a general strike in 1981, after which the king adopted a "velvet glove" policy that permitted limited political opposition.[22]

All this begins to explain the secrecy and fear that surrounded Tribak's actions. The first image in *Wanted!* is from a graphic novel in French that sardonically describes the tortures a prisoner might undergo—the "Parakeet," the "Airplane." Later Tribak remembers that his comrade Ahmed once dreamed that Tribak had informed on him. The sound of an instrument being strummed plays over a drawing from the same graphic novel of a man being tortured, pain spiraling from his body as his torturers command him to speak. [figure 5.5]

At one point martial music accompanies a newsreel of a parade: huge crowds cheer as Hassan II's motorcade passes and the sleek monarch waves to the people. They are celebrating the success of the "Green March" of November 6, 1975, in which, in a fever of patriotism, 350,000 Moroccan citizens rallied to their king and, armed with Qur'ans, swept to the frontier with Western Sahara to claim Moroccan dominion. Morocco, Spain, and Mauritania had been squabbling over Western Sahara since the 1960s, when phosphate deposits were discovered there. Only Morocco's extreme left opposed

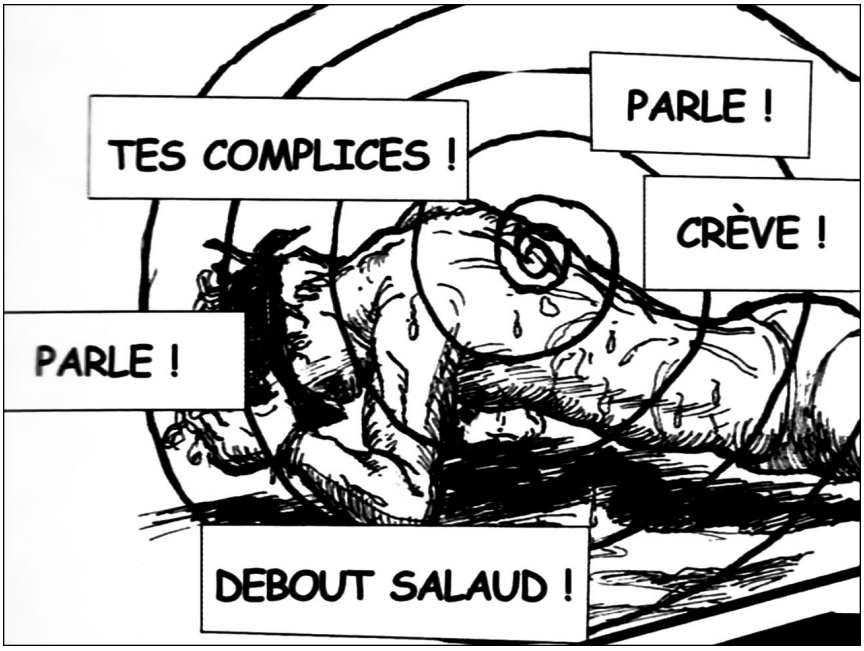

Figure 5.5
Ali Essafi, *Wanted!* (2010)

colonizing Western Sahara; the pro-Moscow Party for Progress and Socialism rallied behind the monarch. Essafi inserts a sardonic graphic novel in which a group of men gather around a television in a bookshop to watch the newsreel. "The music's stopping … our king is going to speak. In the silence, the king's voice lifted up." The comic summarizes the king's announcement that the court of The Hague recognized Morocco's administrative right over Western Sahara. Tribak says, "You started to doubt in front of this enthusiastic population. I felt I was off context." His feelings align him with the African and international nonaligned countries that supported the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi people's Algerian-armed military, in a drawn-out conflict that continues today.[23]

From the beginning and throughout the film, Tribak shares a trove of snapshots from prison; he notes that after the hunger strike of 1977, the prisoners were allowed cameras. They suggest the pride, affection, and solidarity that made it possible for these men to survive their long incarceration: in the courtyard they crowd together to pose, smiling, arms around each other; in the dormitory three men play instruments, surrounded by relaxed listeners; a snapshot of a young man with long wavy hair and lush moustache, leaning in a doorway, must be Tribak, recognizably in prison because of the small barred windows. [figure 5.6].

Figure 5.6
Wanted!

The years in prison sound almost like a relief after the painful solitude of the secret mission that required Tribak to break all contact with family and friends: "They suffered. Before I left my mom said, 'Who will take care of us?' I said, 'I don't care about personal issues.' Only the people's destiny counted for me! I made my mother cry." Like *Toi, Waguih*, *Fidaï*, and other films examined in this chapter, Tribak's memory emphasizes the radicals' need to quiet their emotions in order to allow the revolution to take precedence over merely personal issues. He moved to Casablanca, changed his name, assumed the identity of a teacher, and waited for his mission. A bold graphic from 1970s poster design, of a spiral stretching into an arrow, parallels Tribak's state of wound-up suspense. He says he supervised just two students, "and then, total silence for the rest of the week! I was stuttering; I had no body." A drawing of a psychedelic head sympathizes with Tribak's sense of being lost without language.

Wanted! evokes the style and cosmopolitanism of Casablanca in the 1970s: bustling streets, modern architecture, long hair, luxuriant moustaches, and Afros, and it jams together short clips from fiction and newsreel films, photographs, and graphic design propelled by agitated jazz music. In a shot (from Ahmed Bouanani's city-symphony film *6/12*, 1968) looking down at the street from far above, crossing figures rendered tiny, the white lines and arrows on black suggest a diagram of political forces. This and

other clips honor Morocco's first independent filmmakers with left sympathies, including Mostapha Derkaoui's *Quelques évènements sans importance* (1974), Ahmed El Maanouni's *Transes* (1981), and Mohamed Reggab's *Le coiffeur du quartier des pauvres* (1982). There is also footage from a film manifesto: a young, Afro-sporting filmmaker says, "Moroccan cinema must be committed. It must express proletarian issues. This concerns not only Moroccan cinema but the third world's cinema as well." His words echo the Algiers Charter on African Cinema, issued in 1975, that commits filmmakers to international struggles against imperialism.[24] Essafi inserts the speaker into a graphic of film frames, followed by a frame that reads "Censored film."

A news clipping from *Libération* on January 8, 1977, reports on the trial of 178 Marxist-Leninists (likely UNFP). It states that despite the judge's injunctions, they stood in a moment of silence to honor a comrade who had perished in prison. This leads to the end of the film, whose credits are punctuated by more of the photographs of the prisoners looking fine, proud, and unbowed. In this way, Essafi suggests that a revolutionary spirit survived the Years of Lead.

The Dramatic History of the Lost and Partially Found Archive of the Palestine Film Unit

The committed cinema on the 1960s and 1970s continues to inspire both filmmakers and people committed to secular left politics. Often this cinema undertook interesting formal experiments, sometimes reflecting a montage aesthetics that is likely Soviet in inspiration. You can see it in the early works of Syrian documentarist Omar Amiralay, an admirer of Dziga Vertov, who uses montage to draw attention to contradictions in his *Film Essay about the Euphrates Dam* (1970), *Daily Life of a Syrian Village* (1974), and *The Chickens* (1977). Lebanese filmmaker Marwan Bagdadi's *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers* (1978) portrays the men and women who fought with the Communist Action Organization in the Lebanese civil war. The vast majority of engaged films from the 1960s and 1970s were made in solidarity with the Palestinian fedayeen. *A Hundred Faces in a Single Day* (1969), the recently rediscovered pro-Palestinian film by Lebanese filmmaker Christian Gazi, 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. (Mohamed Soueid recalls going to Ghazi's house to interview him: the filmmaker met him armed with a Kalashnikov.)[25] The Iraqi filmmaker Kais al-Zubeidi made pro-Palestinian films in Syria, including *Away from Home* (1969) and *The Visit* (1970), and worked with the PLO film unit in Beirut.[26] Annemarie Jacir, Emily Jacir, and Hamid Dabashi worked for years to collect these and other Palestinian militant films in the Dreams of a Nation database, traveling film program of 2003–2004, book, and archive.[27]

Dreams of a Nation recovered some of the works of the most active group of committed filmmakers in this period, those associated with the Palestine Film Unit (PLU,

Aflaam Falastin). It was formed in Jordan in 1968 by Hani Jawhariyyah (who died while filming Palestinian fighters in southern Lebanon), Mustafa Abu Ali, Khadija Abu Ali, and Sulafa Jadallah (the first Arab camerawoman, according to Emily Jacir).[28] A true third cinema, in Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's term,[29] and moreover a militant cinema, the PLU produced numerous 16mm documentaries over fourteen years.

After its near–civil war with the Jordanian government in 1970, the PLO was ousted from Amman. The fedayeen made their way to the long-established Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, making Beirut the practical capital of the Palestinian resistance. This would exacerbate internal tensions and lead to the Lebanese civil war. Lebanese sympathizers, including the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and the Fatah Youth Brigade, organized in support of the PLO, and the PLO gave them training and arms. Later the PLO's guerrilla tactics would inspire other Lebanese militias.[30]

The Israeli Army invaded Beirut in June 1982 and forced out Arafat and the thousands of PLO fedayeen stationed in Lebanon. The PFU had to abandon Beirut quickly and left the archive of their films behind in a rented basement, intending to return and claim it later.[31] They did not, and their archive was lost. Yet since the PLU had disseminated copies to its colleagues all over the world, some films survive, including *Laysa Lahum Wujud* (They do not exist, 1974) by Mustafa Abu Ali, a study of daily life in the refugee camp in Nabatiyeh, Lebanon.[32]

Azza El-Hassan's detective movie, *Kings and Extras: Digging for a Palestinian Image* (2004), is a first attempt to track down this archive. All El-Hassan has to start from is some footage of Palestinian refugees crossing the Jordan River during the 1967 war, which, ironically, she obtained from the Israeli Film Archive. [figure 5.7] She locates as many people as she can who had something to do with the archive. She visits Heba, the daughter of Jawhariyyah, and other former members of the PFU—Mustafa Abu Ali, Khadija Abu Ali, and Omar Mukhtar. None of them knows whether the archive was lost, hidden, or destroyed. Moreover, like other former revolutionaries we have come across in this chapter, they have long since moved past their involvement with the radical organization. Omar has stopped filming. Mustafa and Khadijia were married but have since divorced and gone on to other things. And depressingly, though maybe not surprisingly, the people El-Hassan interviews on the street exhibit utter indifference to the archive lost twenty-four years earlier.[33] A group of women laugh at her question, admittedly rather naive, "Where do you think the archive might be?" They admonish her, "Now is not the time to be thinking about cinema." Others tell her, "If you want drama go to the checkpoint."[34] As I discuss in the introduction, this refrain has come up repeatedly in the Arab world over the last two decades: most people consider cinema, even activist documents, irrelevant when pressing political issues demand immediate attention.

All El-Hassan finds is one film reel, shot in 1978 and never developed. With great anticipation she has it developed, only to find that twenty-six years later, its images

Figure 5.7
Azza El-Hassan, *Kings and Extras: Digging for a Palestinian Image* (2004)

have dissolved into a mass of blurred colors. In a voice-over, El-Hassan takes advantage of the nothing-to-see to invent a fantasy. She dreams that these blurry masses conceal a film in which the Palestinians are the victors, justice is restored, and the victorious Palestinians travel the world righting wrongs.

At first this sudden passage into the virtual appears too hasty. It seems that some of her interviewees are keeping things from her and that stones remain unturned. However, as Nadia Yaqub points out, El-Hassan's films tend to use strategies of deflection and deferral, at the expense of a Palestinian triumphalism. Moreover, Yaqub suggests, her goal was as much to study the changing ways Palestinian images are made and used as to retrieve the archive.[35]

El-Hassan's work on the lost PLO film archive inspired others to keep on digging. Four years after El-Hassan completed *Kings and Extras*, clues about the existence of the PLO films turned up at the Jordan-Russian (formerly Soviet) Friendship Society: they may fill the gaps imaginatively held open by *Kings and Extras*. In 2009 Matthew Epler, an American artist teaching at the Red Sea Institute of Cinematic Arts, in Aqaba, came across 881 film cans at Royal Film Commission Jordan. They were donated by an artist who found them at the Friendship Society. Epler, citing the inspiration of *Kings and Extras*, and a group of artists and scholars have been crowd-sourcing translations of the film cans' titles and making some excerpts available to view.[36] So far the list of titles has yielded numerous Russian fiction and educational films, such as Sergei Paradjanov's *Ashik Kerib*, *Stories about Lenin (Arabic version)*, *We're Speaking Russian Lesson 16*, and

Body Care and Grooming; films from the Jordanian Ministry of Culture and Information; and independent documentaries. One documentary made under the auspices of the Jordanian ministry is *The Palestine Right* by Mustafa Abu Ali. Journalist Leah Caldwell notes the irony that the archive survived as the Jordanian government persecuted Communists and other leftists: "The endurance of these films throughout decades of crackdowns on freedom of speech and the press in Jordan is noteworthy if not astounding."[37]

Then, in 2011, Mohanad Yaqubi, who like El-Hassan is based in Ramallah, made the astonishing discovery of about two hundred reels of PLU footage in Rome: rushes from the documentary *Tal Al Zatar* (the name of one of the Palestinian refugee camps around Beirut where the Palestinian resistance grew). Yaqubi's explanation reads like a thrilling espionage novel.[38] He was reading the diary of Mustafa Abu Ali—the same man who was not especially forthcoming with El-Hassan, but with whom Yaqubi had been collaborating to subtitle *They Do Not Exist*. The PLU developed their films at the well-known Studio Baalbak in Sidon in southern Lebanon. In 1977 Abu Ali and the Lebanese filmmaker Randa Chahhal, concerned about attacks on the PLO by the Lebanese Phalange militia, smuggled four hundred reels in a ship from Sidon to Cyprus and from there by air to Rome. There, with the help of the Italian Communist Party, they deposited it with a production house that held militant films from all over the world. And there the films stayed and somehow were forgotten. The company changed hands, but Yaqubi was able to track the films down. Why didn't Mustafa Abu Ali tell Azza El-Hassan about this archive? Why, for that matter, did Yaqubi have to learn about it in Abu Ali's diary? Yaqubi's *Off Frame*, a first reconstruction of these findings, is scheduled to be completed in May 2015, when this book is in press; maybe it will give some answers.

Looking Back at International Radical Solidarity

The PFU filmmakers shared material support with left filmmakers from all over the world. Jean-Luc Godard visited the film unit in Jordan and donated his video camera. At a film festival in Algeria, Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez admired the formal economy of Abu Ali's film *Zionist Aggression* and insisted on giving him twenty-two bottles of fine Cuban rum.[39] Japanese filmmakers Wakamatsu Koji and Adachi Masao visited the Palestinians on their way back from Cannes and produced the solidarity film *Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War* (1971), which deploys Wakamatsu's landscape theory (*fukeiron*) to read political situations from the visible built environment. As Yaqubi says, "It was a unique mode of production, an underground world of cinema that was connected and active and very genuine."[40] The Jordanian film archive includes Vietnamese propaganda films that emphasize relations between Vietnam, Russia, and Arab liberation struggles in the 1960s and 1970s.[41] These facts bring us to a fascinating history of international cooperation among radical left organizations.

The PLO had been created by the Arab League in 1964 as an umbrella organization. It was under Egyptian control, and its army was allied with the armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. After the disastrous war of 1967, which demonstrated with humiliating clarity that Egypt and Syria, for all their military bravado, could not adequately defend the Palestinians, a Palestinian resistance movement emerged less beholden to either Soviet ideology or Nasserist pan-Arabism.[42] Wars carried out by nations would have to give way to guerrilla tactics. Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) turned for inspiration to successful political underdogs, studying the Cuban and Algerian revolutions and the Vietnam War, as well as the Chinese example of a people's war.

The *fedayeen* symbolically allied themselves with the emerging Third World revolutionary movements. In 1960 Yasir Arafat proclaimed an alliance between the Palestinian liberation movement and those in Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea, and throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[43] The fedayeen's international comrades responded warmly. As early as a 1964 meeting in Algiers, Che Guevara promised Cuban solidarity if the fedayeen decided to initiate armed struggle.[44] Fatah also appealed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, famously in Arafat's 1974 speech at the United Nations. As Paul Chamberlin points out, the appeal to the discourse of international human rights improved the Palestinian guerrillas' image on the world stage. "The image of the fedayeen cadre as Arab Che Guevaras challenged Orientalist constructions of the Arab militant as a backward, anti-Semitic religious fanatic."[45]

The Palestinian resistance fighters also found mutual support in American radical movements, including the Black Panther Party. Mounir Fatmi draws attention to the Black Panthers' international connections. For *The History of History* (2006), Fatmi invited Black Panthers David Hilliard and Huey Newton to Paris on the occasion of the release of classified FBI files on the party. They draw attention to the party's social justice initiatives that were ignored in the media's sensationalistic coverage. [figure 5.8] In *Memorandum* (2009) Hilliard talks with young French immigrants of African descent about his party's common cause in the 1960s with the Vietnamese fighters and the FLN in Algeria. Fatmi's *Muhammad Ali, le labyrinthe* (2010), celebrates Ali's agility in fighting racist stereotypes, especially after he became a member of the Nation of Islam. A cage of Arabic square-kufic writing seems at first to imprison the boxer. Then his Arabic names light up within it, suggesting that the Islamic association that Ali chose was not a prison but a path.

The fedayeen received not only moral but practical support from international colleagues. The Soviet Union provided logistical support through Syria and the Lebanese Communist Party, but its hands were tied for reasons that included its diplomatic relations with Israel. In 1968 Fatah sent four hundred fighters to Algeria for training. In 1964 Beijing hosted the first of several visits by Fatah's leaders Arafat and Khalil al-Wazir, and the following year China began providing the PLO with arms, equipment,

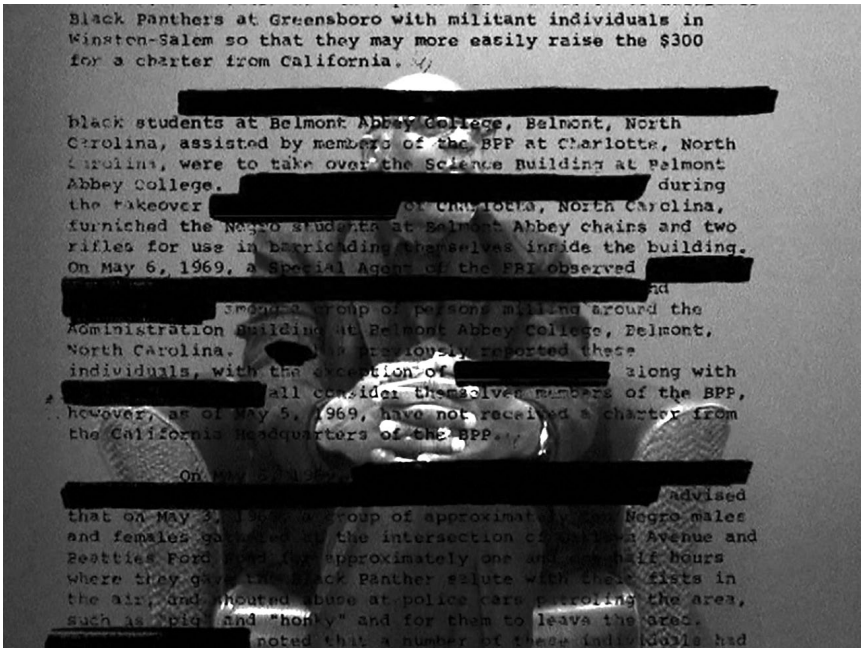

Figure 5.8
Mounir Fatmi, *The History of History* (2006)

medical supplies, and training in China and Syria. By 1970 China had shipped enough weapons, mostly through Basra and overland to Jordan, to equip fourteen thousand fighters.[46] After the 1968 battle in which the Israeli Defense Forces raided the al-Karamah refugee camp, they "displayed captured Palestinian weapons of Soviet, Chinese, Czech, Yugoslavian, French, British and even American origin."[47]

The global network of the fedayeen extended in ways too complex to discuss here, involving the Baader-Meinhof Group, the Weathermen, and other radical leftist organizations, many inclined not to fighting but to terror tactics, as well as the Venezuelan who joined the PFLP and became known as Carlos the Jackal. The three armed men who carried out the massacre in Tel Aviv's Lod airport on May 30, 1972, were not Palestinian but Japanese, members of the Red Army acting on behalf of the PFLP, trained in Lebanon, and armed with Czech weapons. The surviving attacker, Okamoto Kozo, was jailed in Israel and released in a prisoner swap in 1985, when the Lebanese government gave him asylum. The reclusive Okamoto appeared at the opening of a 2010 painting exhibition by Mohammed Shamseddine on the demise of the Marxist collective dream, which included his portrait.[48] Red Army members Shigenobu Fusako and Adachi Masao lived underground in Beirut for decades. French filmmaker Eric Baudelaire excavates this extraordinary node of the international militant left in

two films. *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years without Images* (2011) focuses obliquely on Shigenobu's daughter, May, who grew up in Beirut, living incognito and passing for Lebanese. *The Ugly Ones* (2013) is filmed in Beirut according to a screenplay written by Adachi, now living in Tokyo. In both, Baudelaire employs Wakamatsu's *fukeiron,* or landscape theory, to interpret Beirut's built environment.

The fedayeen's most interesting international connection is with Vietnam. In 1970 Arafat met with General Vo Nguyen Giap in Hanoi in a meeting orchestrated by Beijing. Giap gave the Palestinian leader this advice: "Stop talking about annihilating Israel and instead turn your terror war into a struggle for human rights. Then you will have the American people eating out of your hand."[49] A CIA document from 1970 mentions that Syria put Palestinian resistance groups in contact with China, Cuba, and North Vietnam.[50] A sympathetic Norwegian study of the fedayeen from 1971 reported, "Military training is systematic and is set up by commandos who have had experience in Cuba, Vietnam, or China. It is said that these countries have people on location training the recruits, but this is rather doubtful."[51] Chamberlin reports that North Vietnamese might have served as military advisors to the guerrillas.[52]

But no source I have found demonstrates the connection more explicitly than Mohamed Soueid's *My Heart Beats Only for Her* (2008). It is not a simple documentary but a symptomology. Like the French poetic documentarist Chris Marker, Soueid gently forces relationships between disparate, seemingly trivial points in order to unfold broad historical connections. Riding escalators in shopping malls in Dubai, listening to the president of the Lebanese Harley Davidson Club speak nostalgically of the Civil War, Soueid allows little feelings of unease to accumulate until they pass the threshold of consciousness. These feelings are what Gilles Deleuze, following Leibniz, called microperceptions, dim apprehensions of the interconnections among things.[53]

Soueid interviews Lebanese veterans of Fatah who recount how as students, after the 1967 defeat, they read Fatah's pamphlets about Vietnam and walked to Damascus to volunteer for the fedayeen army. As they sing what they can remember of the Fatah anthem, "I have broken the bonds, the bonds of my humiliation and carried my rifle … I am a son of Fatah. My heart beats only for her," we see archival footage of Palestinian fighters. They joined the "Vietnamese" (i.e., Communist) wing within Fatah. Amman was perceived as the Palestinians' Hanoi, and after they were forced out of Jordan, Beirut became Hanoi. Inspired by Ho Chi Minh and Giap, the fedayeen took *noms de guerre* like Abu Khaled Hanoi and Abu Ali Giap. And—as no historian writing in English seems to know—they relate that beginning in 1963, fighters of Fatah went to Vietnam to learn resistance methods from the Vietcong. Issam Akil was one of the eighteen who trained in Vietnam. Their leader, Abu Jihad, instructed them to avoid women, alcohol, and pork. Akil remembers asking a Vietnamese comrade, "How can you be a Communist and do palm readings?" [figure 5.9]

Figure 5.9
Mohamed Soueid, *My Heart Beats Only for Her* (2008)

Soueid inserts a lightly fictional story of a Lebanese motorcyclist and cinephile named Hatem Hatem who joined Fatah in the 1960s and longed to go to Vietnam to learn resistance methods from the Vietcong. After Fatah dispersed, he settled into life as a wedding videographer. Decades later, his son, Hassan Hatem Hatem, makes the voyage to Vietnam on his father's behalf. The sound of a lost generation of marching guerrillas accompanies Hassan's tour of Ho Chi Minh's house in Hanoi. So does "Lili Marlene," the song Hanna Schygulla sings in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's politically despairing *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979).

Remembering the era when the militant left realized common cause and made international connections, *My Heart Beats Only for Her* sighs over the present when the only remaining international force is global capitalism. Beirut, Hanoi, and Dubai are starting to look alike, coated with the smooth surfaces of global capitalism. Pretty women's gigantic faces in advertising billboards gaze upon the city. A Hanoi driver proudly explains to Hassan Hatem Hatem that an area that a few years ago was rice fields and water buffaloes is being developed for shopping malls, villas, golf courses, and entertainment centers. An unctuous Dubai businessman of Indian origin praises Dubai's visionary monarch's capacity to "deliver the dreams and projects Dubai has in store." The camera observes his shiny shoes under the expensive furniture. A Lebanese-Iranian

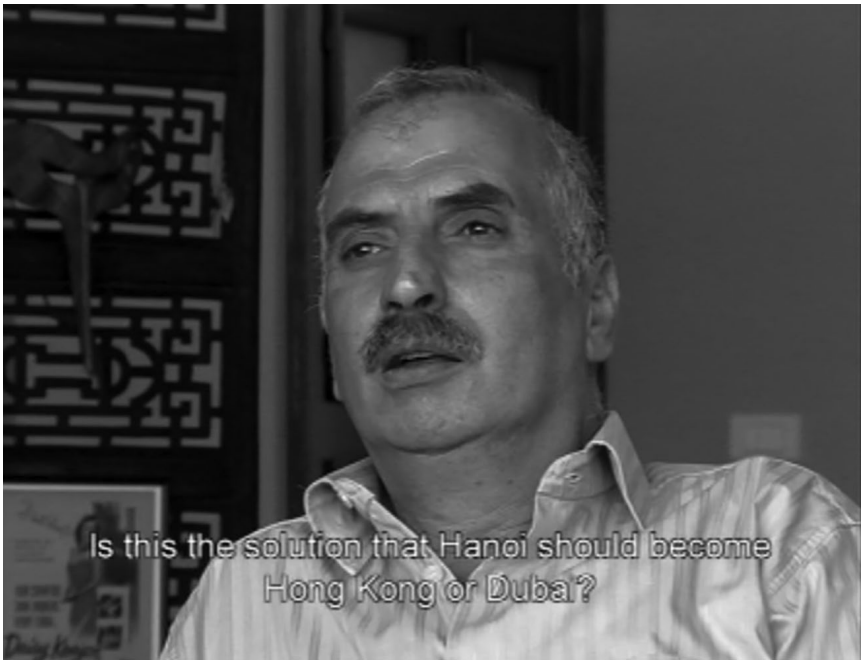

Figure 5.10
My Heart Beats Only for Her

woman who works in Dubai as a television producer remembers being enthralled as a child by the spiritual aura of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Now she practices yoga, the Hindu religious devotion that soothes many a harried acolyte of global neoliberal capitalism.

Issam Akil is disturbed to hear that Hanoi is becoming like Dubai and Hong Kong. "Is this really the solution for Vietnam? But on the other hand, should they still be fighting?" He admits that it's impossible to avoid taking part in the international economy, but the pain in his eyes indicates that this news is yet another blow to the ideals that shaped his life. [figure 5.10]

There follows a sequence that can't help but be the movie's climax, because it's set to Natasha Bedingfield's hymn to sensuous individualism that goes, "Feel the rain on your skin—no one else can feel it for you—only you can let it in." The uplifting song holds together glamorous Vietnamese advertisements, the hammer-and-sickle flag in front of a government building, Hassan reading in the papers that Vietnam Airlines is buying Boeing aircraft, and downtown Hanoi, where village women selling vegetables and a scuttling shoeshine man seem like apparitions between the gleaming new boutiques and shopping centers. [figure 5.11]

Figure 5.11
My Heart Beats Only for Her

Contradictions like these make folds in the commodified image-skin of global capitalism. Soueid's film cherishes these folds, and where he cannot find them, he makes them in the image, through montage, as when the pretty lady on the Zara billboard in Beirut dissolves into an archival film of a female militant at target practice.

Over images of leaving Hanoi airport, Hassam reads his letter to his father: "You called yourself Abu Hassan Hanoi because you wanted to belong to the best model of liberation wars. Did you know in our own wars we were closer to Cambodia than Vietnam? You are the son of a civil war, and I am your son, and that's just that." Near the end of the film, the Fatah chant, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh," rises to a roar over a series of images: Ho performing martial arts; Arafat in a similar pose; soldiers of Kata'eb, the Lebanese quasi-fascist militia, wearing black masks and white gloves; and motley crews of street fighters during the Lebanese war. The sequence indicates with economy how the initial Marxist impulse diffused and dissipated.

However, one party has survived, as we know: Hezbollah. Over the giant bronze statue of Ho Chi Minh, 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!" So this is what has evolved

from the dream of Communist internationalism: a religious monopoly on armed struggle, not concerned about economic imperialism, and ready to form a government.

The Paradox of the Secular Martyr

For good reason Communism appealed to the Lebanese Shi'a, the country's poorest population, concentrated in the country's underdeveloped south, marginalized by the French Mandate and then underrepresented in the Lebanese government,[54] and discriminated against by Sunni Muslims. In 1948 Hassan Mroué was in Iraq studying to become a sheikh when a member of the Iraqi Communist Party gave him a copy of the Communist Manifesto. Artist Rabih Mroué recounts the story of his grandfather's conversion. One day he shaved his beard, doffed his religious garb, put on a suit and tie, went outside the house, and knocked on the front door. His wife did not recognize him. He told her, "I'm Hussein, your husband."[55] Hussein Mroué became one of the leaders of the Lebanese Communist Party and a widely published Marxist historian.[56] His assassination in 1988 at the age of seventy-eight was attributed to Hezbollah.[57]

In the early 1970s young Shi'a flocked to secular left parties including the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Progressive Socialist Party (associated with Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt), and, especially, the Lebanese Communist Party, where they formed half its membership.[58] The Shi'a left also had a particularly strong sympathy with the Palestinian fedayeen. The Lebanese Communist Party founded the Lebanese Resistance Front in 1982 to fight the Israeli occupation, and other left parties followed suit.

Lebanon's secular left lost power for several reasons. Two years into the Lebanese civil war, Jumblatt was assassinated, probably on the order of Hafez al-Assad of Syria, leaving the Lebanese non-Communist left bereft of its unifying leader. In the early 1970s, Imam Musa al-Sadr, whose Movement for the Disinherited evolved into the Amal Party, appealed to thousands with his hybrid of Marxist and Shi'a ideas. Samir Kassir (the left-wing journalist whose thought informs the introduction to this book) argued that al-Sadr's idea that the Shi'a constituted a "community-class" devastated the left. "By a series of gradual and almost imperceptible shifts, the left ended up embracing a doctrine of communal division.'[59] Many Shi'a abandoned the secular left for Amal and Hezbollah, and many Christians quit the Lebanese Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. Finally, the PLO's dispersion from Lebanon in 1982 broke the back of the Lebanese secular left. Thenceforth the civil war played out increasingly along religious lines.

A number of Lebanese films examine the tension between the secular left and Hezbollah ("party of God"). Hezbollah, also formed in 1982, defended southern Lebanon against Israeli incursions; hence it is often referred to simply as the Resistance. The Taif Accord of 1989 integrated the Shi'a parties Amal and Hezbollah into the government and allowed Hezbollah to retain its weapons while the other parties disarmed.

Hezbollah's "victory" against Israel in the July 2006 war earned it the respect, pride, and fear of many Lebanese. In 2008 a three-day street battle in Beirut demonstrated that Hezbollah and Amal were strong enough to paralyze the government. The 2008 Doha Agreement gave Hezbollah veto power in the government. Armed by a foreign power, Iran, and supported by Syria, Hezbollah now is like a state within a state.

Early on, Akram Zaatari examined the health of Lebanon's left and the rise of the Islamic resistance in *All Is Quiet on the Border Front* (1997). In Zaatari's *In This House* (2005) the Marxist perspective of the warm-hearted former fighter Ali Hashisho clarifies a political history that remains murky when approached in terms of sectarian politics. Hashisho, a former militia member of the Democratic Popular Party, makes his political alliances clear: secular, Communist, on the side of the people and the poor (the familiar high-contrast picture of Che stands behind Ali as he speaks). As the resistance in southern Lebanon is often attributed entirely to Hezbollah, the only militia permitted to continue to hold arms after the Taif Accord, Hashisho is a reminder of a progressive and secular resistance. In Soueid's *Nightfall* (2000), members of the defunct Fatah Youth Wing look back through a haze of alcohol at the broken dreams of secular pan-Arabism and Lebanese-Palestinian solidarity, and his *Civil War* (2002) traces the shift of allegiances from the secular left to Amal and Hezbollah (see chapter 4).

The most sober and analytical self-questioning of what became of the Communist movement is posed by Maher Abi Samra in *We Were Communists* (2009). Tareq Ismael writes that at the end of the 1990s, the LCP "stood out among Arab Communist parties in that it was capable of initiating bold strategies in the construction of a nascent civil society in Lebanon,"[60] but Abi Samra gives a far bleaker view. Abi Samra was a Lebanese Communist Party member and fought with the party's militia during the civil war. In 2009–2010, he reunited with three of his old comrades to analyze what befell their party, and their own beliefs, during and after the war. They introduce themselves formally, stating date and place of birth and how they became involved in the Communist Party. Hussein is a Shi'a from a Communist family in south Lebanon. Bashar is from Beirut; his father was in the party leadership. He doesn't state his religion, but we learn later he is Druze. Ibrahim is a Shi'a from Ras Baalbek in the northwest and came to know the party through his family. And Maher is a Sunni from Beirut's southern suburbs who learned about the party in his neighborhood. Their voices repeat in unison the party's platform: "to defend Lebanon's unity and its Arab identity, the struggle against political sectarianism and the defense of the Palestinian revolution."

When the four meet in Abi Samra's sparely furnished apartment, the mood is almost festive as they compare the old and new demarcation lines on a map of Beirut. "It used to be between Christians and Muslims," one observes, "but now it's Sunni-Shi'a." Things are a little tense between the old friends. They laugh uneasily because Maher and Bashar drink alcohol but Hussein and Ibrahim stick with tea. So for the rest of the film, Abi Samra interviews each of his former comrades separately, back in their home

villages. The first interviews are conducted while driving, cradled in the familiar landscape of home, the car a safe shell, the speaker's face in profile not betraying too much feeling.

Abi Samra's comrades narrate in detail the battles of the war, the confusing shifts of allegiance and opposition. What is clear is that Hezbollah emerged as the sole resistance during the same period that saw the LCP weaken and finally, in 1994, dissolve. A terrible feeling of exile hangs over the film. The secularism of the Communist Party was a bulwark for these men. "When we entered the Party we put our sects in a box. When we left we had to reclaim them." Ibrahim recalls that for forty or fifty years, the Communist Party united everybody, involving thousands from many walks of life. "I was so depressed when it collapsed," he says. "The Resistance was like a solace."

The party's cohesion arose, as it had everywhere else, from the common interests of workers. As Bashar recounts, when the party lost power after the war, "the union ceased to be a platform for discussions of general issues. Instead, it became a space of subjugation," and workers had to rely on old sectarian alliances, as he did when he got a job in the ministry associated with Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Speaking in an office with views all around of the new construction downtown, sign of Saudi money flowing into and out of the country, he relates that at one of the last party meetings, "one guy said, 'Everyone go back to where they came from.' I stared at him and said, 'Where can we go? You're Shiite, you can go to Hezbollah, but what about us? We have nowhere to go.'"

Hussein expresses the least ambivalence. He left the party in 1992 and joined the Resistance. "My position was clear. This was the project with significance for me." Ibrahim took a break from the party and spent time with members of Hezbollah. "They showed off their glum attitude with prayer beads, but something appealed to me." He was able to serve Hezbollah as a journalist. He relates a conversation he had with a sayyid, or religious leader, about the difference between martyrs. "Theirs went to heaven, but our Communist martyrs went nowhere." The sayyid suggested that the Communist martyrs must have had, "in their hearts, the belief that there is something else." Ibrahim speaks cautiously, and we can only imagine that he experimented with religious conversion but it didn't take. "I never felt like them." The sayyid's comment to Ibrahim implies that only faith in a reward in the afterlife can compel a person to kill herself or himself for the cause. The concept of martyrdom and the term *martyr* (*shahîd*, witness) are significant in Islam and especially Shi'a Islam (on this, see chapter 6).

The paradoxical figure of the Communist suicide bomber is the subject of the video performance *Three Posters* (2000) by Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury. Khoury, the celebrated Lebanese novelist, also appears in Soueid's *Nightfall* analyzing the demise of the armed left in that country. Mroué and Khoury received a videotape of the 1985 final statement of the Communist fighter Jamal El Saati before he carried out a suicide

Figure 5.12
Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury, *Three Posters* (2000)

mission on Israeli military headquarters in south Lebanon. Martyr videos are a genre with well-established characteristics, but the fact that three takes were recorded made Mroué and Khoury reflect on the performance and recording of such videos. They noticed that the camera operator zoomed in on El Saati and slightly past him to show the Communist Party flag and posters on the wall behind him, to emphasize that not he but the party was the author of the mission[61] [figure 5.12]

It's strange to hear the religious speech of the martyr grafted onto the Communist ideology of secularism and, strictly speaking, atheism. Atheism has the political value of focusing believers' attention onto this life, since there is no hereafter to plan for. It's common to observe that a suicide mission proclaims that life is not worth living when you are living under occupation. Mroué more interestingly interprets the fact that El Saati recorded three takes of his martyr video as "a desire for the *deferral* of death in these depressing lands where the desire to live is considered a shameful betrayal of the State, the Nation, and the Father/Motherland."[62] The ideology of martyrdom dehumanizes the person who dies and insults the honorable struggles of the living.

The rise of Hamas in the Occupied Territories follows somewhat similar political and discursive shifts to the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Palestinian Islamists seized the

opportunity in the political vacuum created when the PLO was forced to leave Lebanon in 1982. The PFLP and other secular groups were not able to compete because they had not formed a serious opposition to Fatah, but, as Atef Alshaer points out, Hamas has been able to since its religious discourse was distinct. While the secular resistance tied its interests to international anticolonial struggles, the religious resistance drew on histories of religious struggle. [63]

Erotics of the Left

Akram Zaatari writes how as a child "I loved the Palestinian *feda'i*, my childhood mythical fighter figures, who used to give me all sorts of bullets to collect as a kid. I loved how they lived on the streets, how they slept in the fields or in vacant buildings. I loved how they smelled. I envied them for fighting for justice; I sincerely loved them."[64] The affective inclination toward freedom fighters that Zaatari recalls extends for some into a romantic attraction to the radical left—an embarrassing "weakness" that most histories repress. But people's motivations for political involvement are complex.

Ali Kays's *Nothing Matters* (2005) poignantly acknowledges the eroticism of Communism. A lot of story is packed into this short found-footage film with gentle male voice-over. The young Muhammad was initially attracted to the army and found himself marching behind them. Then—with blurry shots of fluttering flowers to a background of a Beethoven piano concerto—he joined the Communist Party and fell in love with a comrade named Mary. "Even his faith in Communist principles became a way to Mary's body." [figure 5.13] She mocks the shyness of his desire for her, and his wish that she remove her underarm hair, as bourgeois, declaring, "I am not an odalisque. I am like you and like your father and not responsible for your mood." After a fight within the party about whether to cooperate with the Muslim Brotherhood, young Muhammad is off to Vietnam on a mission. Over footage of soldiers on parade on an airstrip, in tidy uniforms complete with spats, Muhammad (the narrator recounts) muses on the beauty of the Vietnamese ticket agent while awaiting his flight to Ho Chi Minh City. The short film concludes with a text suggesting strategies to support the Vietnamese Muslim Brotherhood (evidently referring to Muslim descendants of the Cham kingdom, which Vietnam conquered in the nineteenth century). Kays's character is windswept by sexual desires that he just barely sublimates into proper cadre behavior in this odd and refreshingly unheroic movie.

The image of Jamila Bouhired, the Algerian FLN fighter who inspired the famous scenes of female terrorists in Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, continues to invite reverent fascination. Bouharid herself is still alive—in 2011 she called on Algerians to protest their country's nineteen-year state of emergency during the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt[65]—but her image has evolved independently. Marwa Arsanios enters the hall of mirrors in which Bouharid has been refracted in *Have You Ever Killed a Bear? or*

Figure 5.13
Ali Kays, *Nothing Matters* (2005)

Becoming Jamila (2014). Arsanios came across a picture of Bouhired and other Algerian female fighters in a 1950s issue of the Egyptian periodical *Al Hilal*. [figure 5.14] Her research finds Arab leaders using Bouhired to polish their own image and filmmakers Pontecorvo and Youssef Chahine romanticizing her. "Did Nasser purchase the rights to Jamila's image when the Egyptians supplied the Algerian anti-colonial movement with weapons?" the filmmaker asks. "Perhaps Chahine in *Jamila l'Algerienne* doomed her to endlessly repeat. But then I came across a photo of Jamila with Bashar Assad. She's become a guardian of dictatorship." (In 2009 Assad decorated Bouhired with Syria's highest honor, the Order of Civil Merit.)

Arsanios proceeds to multiply the refractions herself, restaging the café bomb scene from *Battle of Algiers* as though Jamila were directing the actress. Jamila is made to speak in the first person. "I was asked to acknowledge that my act was a dark stain in the history of the revolution. Did they expect a white revolution? … A revolution is not a virgin, but if it stops being a virgin, they hate it." *Have You Ever Killed a Bear?* restages actions from Jamila the fighter's point of view, running in the forest at night: she does not know whether the attacker she fires on is a bear or a comrade out to betray her. And the film weighs the paradox that the glamorous female fighter is appealing, but not the

Figure 5.14
Marwa Arsanios, *Have You Ever Killed a Bear? or Becoming Jamila* (2014)

woman on trial who asserts the necessity of violence. Jamila comes to embody the tense fascination with women who engage in armed struggle without a shred of feminine tender feeling—women who fight like men, in other words.[66]

Religious Fascination

A few experimental works, mostly Lebanese, undertake a critique of the culture of religious militancy, though it's a touchy subject. Vatche Boulghorjian's *Noble Sacrifice* (2003) squarely attacks it (see chapter 6). Akram Zaatari's *All Is Well on the Border* (1997) looked cautiously at Hezbollah's monopolization of resistance and the personal censorship it demanded. "No one was allowed to speak about the very personal defeat that they had experienced in detention," Zaatari told Chad Elias. "It was always framed as a sacrifice done for the greater cause of the resistance. In reality, many of these men were burdened with long-term medical and psychological problems.[67]

Marwan Hamdan's *O Swords Take Me* (2012) plumbs the culture of Shi'a millennialist militarism and shows what it might be like for a child growing up in a home decked with the trappings of martyrdom and hearing stories of the fantastical visions of martyrs. In Hassan Choubassi's *I Am the All Knowing, the Deceased* (2008), a man in the familiar pose of the martyr video begins to read the formal words of the martyr's speech, with prayers for Imam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Hassan Nasrallah, but he has to stop, shaking uncontrollably. He begins again: "I have vowed to go with my blood in my palm, ready to mix it with the soil as you did in soils of Karbala. … Teach my sons

Figure 5.15
Hassan Choubassi, *I Am the All Knowing, the Deceased* (2008)

and their sons to take the same path of martyrdom." His image begins to double, and there are moments where he is silent but "spoken" by the words that echo around him, as though he were melting into a multitude. Jump cuts shake him. He shuffles the papers of his speech and finally looks confused, small, and undone. [figure 5.15]

Palestinian filmmaker Sherif Waked also mimics the martyr video in *To Be Continued* (2009). The sincere speaker is framed in front of a roundel of religious calligraphy flanked by images of guns, as usual, but he is reading from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the stories Shahrazad told to postpone her execution. As Gordon Hon writes, "Instead of the endless dance of Barak and Arafat literally on the threshold of doomed peace talks, we have the doomed martyr endlessly postponing his self-sacrifice"[68]—a ludic gesture of deferral similar to that of Mroué and Khoury's *Three Posters*.

To my knowledge, only the Tunisian feminist filmmaker Nadia Elfani has made a bold profession of atheism, in *Ni Allah ni maître* (Neither Allah nor master, 2011). She exposes Tunisian religious hypocrisy, for example, the practice of covering café windows with paper during Ramadan so that men not observing the fast can eat and drink uncriticized. She points out to a factory supervisor that her employees would work better if they didn't have to fast. She participates in a Ramadan daytime picnic on the

beach, which would be illegal in Morocco. Elfani makes no apologies for her membership of an educated Francophone bourgeoisie: her point is that to nationalize religion becomes a basis for discrimination. In one scene she and her comrades show up at an antigovernment rally with their banners calling for *laïcité* (secularism). An Islamist shouts at her, evoking the language of the Occupy movement, "You are the 0.0001 percent!"; the divide between the secular middle class and the devout poor is starkly clear. The governments of Ben Ali and Bourgiba repressed religion harshly, so advocates of *laïcité* during the 2011 uprising could easily appear rear-guard. In October 2011 Nouri Gana harshly criticized secularists (as well as women's-rights advocates) as reactionary—perhaps seeing them as overly indebted to foreign interests—and argued that the established Tunisian opposition parties, including Ennahda and the Tunisian Communist Workers Party, were better able to guide the country toward democracy.[69] After Islamists attacked a hall in Tunis where *Ni Allah ni maître* was screening and sprayed the audience with tear gas, Elfani changed the title to the witty *Laïcité Inch'Allah* (Secularism, God willing).[70]

This chapter focuses on Arab movements that reject religious government. However, it is necessary to distinguish among religious political parties. Parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, and Hamas have long advocated for the dispossessed, and in some cases have been duly elected and governed. The new Salafi fundamentalist militias expanding across Iraq and Syria, which profess religious devotion while they commit massacres, have little in common with these well-established parties.

What Went Wrong?

From a Communist point of view, the Arab independence movements were incomplete revolutions: they might have ejected the colonizers, deposed the monarchs, and redistributed some land, but they kept power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, the military foremost among them. The history of the Baath Party and Nasserism shows that revolutionary intentions were stymied by Cold War gridlock, government ineptitude and corruption, and a cascade of unfortunate events. Arab totalitarian governments based their ideologies on socialism but crushed the left. Meanwhile, in the early 1970s the PFLP, Fatah dissidents, and their comrades in global militant left abandoned guerrilla fighting for hijackings and terrorist attacks directed at Israel, which retaliated against Lebanese civilians. And as we've seen, secular liberation ideology gradually gave way to a religious ideology that conflated the oppressed with Muslims and was realized in the rise of Islamic militant organizations.

Furthermore, some of the films I've discussed convey an uneasy feeling of blind obedience that agents have when carrying out missions whose reasons they cannot know: El Hadi in *Fidaï*, Tribak in *Wanted!*, the historical and fictional characters in the martyr videos. They each had to strategically accept the organization's lack of

transparency and democracy and have complete confidence in their leaders. Multiplied, this attitude invests leaders with unchecked power.

Indeed, governments based on permanent revolution are famously antidemocratic, in a betrayal of the Marxist ideals on which they are supposedly founded. When the spirit of revolution hardens into ideology, it instills more suffering than it relieves.

Samir Kassir condemned the culture of resistance and martyrdom—"if there can be no victory, then at least there can be the consolation of bloodletting—others' blood, obviously, but ours as well." In what amounts to a feminist critique, Kassir also argued that the resistance culture cannot envisage everyday heroism.[71]

The men who joined militias, fought, and died, heroically or not, left big holes in their families and left their wives with heavy responsibilities. Ahmad Ghossein's *My Father Is Still a Communist: Intimate Secrets to Be Published* (2011) revolves around the absence of his father, who left to work in Saudi Arabia for years. It is composed of his mother's audio letters, but not his father's replies, and family photographs into which Ghossein belatedly inserts pictures of his father. [figure 5.16] It revives Ghossein's childhood fantasy that his father was really a Communist fighter, a wishfulness that tells a certain truth. After the 1982 Israeli invasion, the family's life in southern

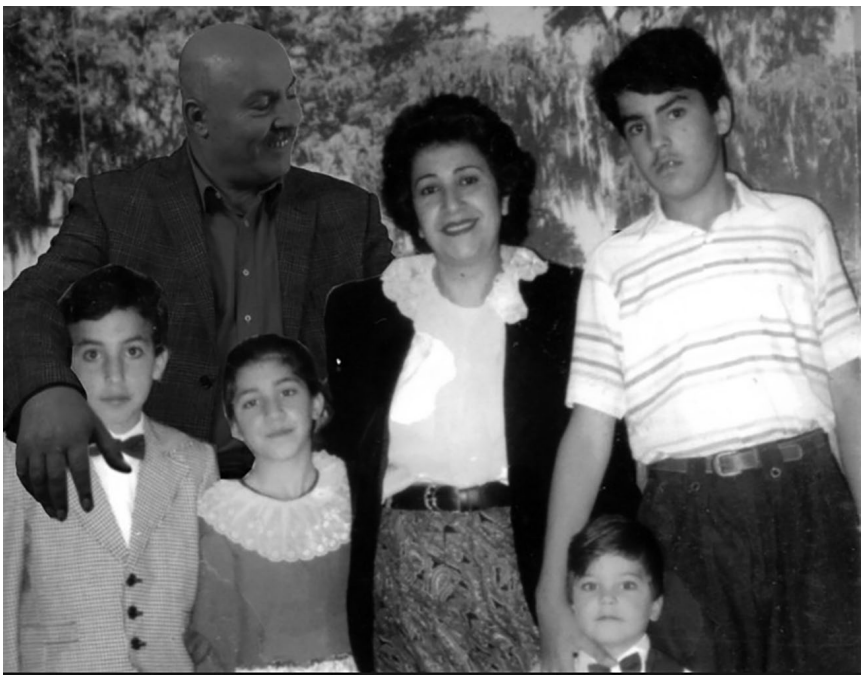

Figure 5.16
Ahmad Ghossein, *My Father Is Still a Communist: Intimate Secrets to Be Published* (2011)

Lebanon was precarious, as his mother's audio letters to her husband reiterate. The father's decision to emigrate in order to provide for his family, rather than become a fighting hero and possibly a martyr, was responsible but not glamorous.

Ghossein's video honors both parents for their everyday sacrifices. It proposes a feminist critique of the attention given to dramatic armed struggle, at the expense of more modest and continuous actions that a revolution also needs, such as education, health care, and looking after families—jobs that fall to women, along with earning a living, when their husbands become martyrs. Unarmed resistance, the everyday heroism of people who fight oppression without resorting to weapons, is the quieter inheritance of the last century's radical thought.

Performing Communism Back into Existence

The Communist ideal of self-determination and freedom from oppression for those with the least power has never been realized in practice. Yet it remains a worthy ideal. Its realization seems an unachievable dream now that global capitalism constitutes the nearly uncontested hegemony of our time, and, in the Arab world, religious fundamentalism is the loudest voice of dissent. The revolutions of 2011 are still raw. At present they have resolved in a new military dictatorship in Egypt and bloody anarchy in Libya and Syria. Muslim political organizations, not Communist parties, are the fulcrum of the new conflicts.

And yet the spirit of the secular left moved through the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain. The very existence of all the films noted in this chapter indicates a larger context of critical reassessment. Many voices are reviving those old-fashioned notions of the secular left, which I persist in attributing to a historical inheritance from Marxist thought and not only a desire for Western-style democracy. In addition, a few films seek by sheer persistence and force of will to revive Communism and the organized secular left that rose from it.

Students have always played a role in left uprisings in the Arab world as elsewhere. Students led the Egyptian demonstrations against the military government in 1954.[72] In the 1970s student uprisings shook Egypt again, Morocco, as we've seen, and Lebanon. Young people from around the region (including Aïda Kaouk, the mild-mannered activist from Aleppo about whom I write in the Introduction) came to Beirut for their studies, particularly to the American University in Beirut, an elite institution with a tradition of dissent. The repudiation of state-scale politics after 1967, sympathy with the Palestinian struggle, and the spirit of May 1968 imported to Lebanon by educated Francophones, galvanized an extraordinarily vigorous student movement from 1968 to 1975.[73]

74: Reconstitution of a Struggle (2012) by siblings Rania and Rafed Rafei meticulously reconstructs the thirty-seven-day student occupation of the administrative offices of

the American University of Beirut. It is a beautiful film, the characters bathed in light, the camerawork expressive, the performances passionate (an end title states that the actors are all activists and that the dialogue was improvised). Six students form the core of the strike, and much of the film is devoted to their vigorous arguments about the complicity of their U.S.-funded institution in imperialism, the tactics of the strike, the connection between the student strike against tuition increases and the political tumult in the region, and the manner of their own political organization. It also captures their shifting intimacies and the pleasurable decadence of defacing the president's office with graffiti and a picture of Che.

At different points, each character responds to an interviewer about his or her reasons for becoming an activist, goals in the struggle, and feelings. Listening to them all, one can speculate what position they will take in the coming civil war. Yusef, the leader, is basically a bureaucrat. Rima, though she looks like a hippie with her big Afro, is a hardliner with an antidemocratic streak. The Palestinian student, Iyad, shown haloed in front of a window, is a romantic attracted to the idea of a suicide mission. The sweet and spacey Fawaz will probably do drugs and drop out. The principled and pragmatic Ghassan ("Enough with your indoctrinated, preconceived ideas. All those students followed us and are guarding the gates and we need to find a solution") will likely become a dedicated revolutionary. Alia, who quit the strike in protest of its undemocratic organization ("Solidarity needs support and coordination. Where is the support and coordination when you betray your voters?"), will become a feminist activist. The film ends on day 37 in the dim early morning with a sudden commotion that shuts off the camera: a voice-over states that on April 14, 1974, eight hundred security guards broke in and beat the students with rifle butts.

In a scene at the end of day nine, Rima wakes and walks outside in the dark. A poem in voice-over says:

In a fleeting moment of silence

that seemed to change the course of events

voices cried out Occupy! Occupy!

Some kept wondering about the nature of that moment

Lost glances meet

A student turns to his fellow student

A student clutches the hand of her fellow student's hand

A breeze blows a frill on a dress

A throat cries out:

Occupy! Occupy!

—bridging the student movement of the 1970s with the Occupy movement of the 2010s and also indicating the delicate, slightly erotic sensation, the feathery breeze that brushes your neck when a political commitment becomes irreversible.

With *The Sheikh Imam Project* (2014; subtitled "or, How to Play Arabic Music on a Large German Instrument") Gheith Al-Amine devotes himself single-handedly, mind and body, to reviving the tradition of left dissent. Sheikh Imam was a blind Egyptian singer with Sufi leanings who from the 1960s, in collaboration with the poet Ahmad Fuad Negm, created popular songs that attacked corruption, mocked politicians, and called for democracy. They became the protest songs of workers and students. Sheikh Imam was imprisoned multiple times under both Nasser and Sadat and died poor. Al-Amine chose a song Sheikh Imam made with the radical poet Naguib Sorour, "Why does the sea laugh?"

Al-Amine performs the video in one take—the nineteenth. As the short video begins, a video plays , on a mobile phone set above a piano keyboard, of Sheikh Imam in fez and dark glasses plucking his oud. [figure 5.17] The phone's screen is small and the sound is tinny; one has to squint with eyes and ears to make it out. Al-Amine's right hand plays the piano in faithful mimicry of the sound of Sheikh Imam's oud. Recording and piano continue as the camera pans up and to the right, then travels leftward, to show the Arabic lyrics of the song neatly printed across the top of the wall, which is cheerfully lit with Christmas lights. Now a raspy voice is belting out the song; the camera halts at a video monitor where Al-Amine in silhouette is singing lustily against a background of video snow. It calls to mind Joan Jonas's classic *Vertical Roll* (1972) in which the performing artist moves from inside the video monitor to outside. As he

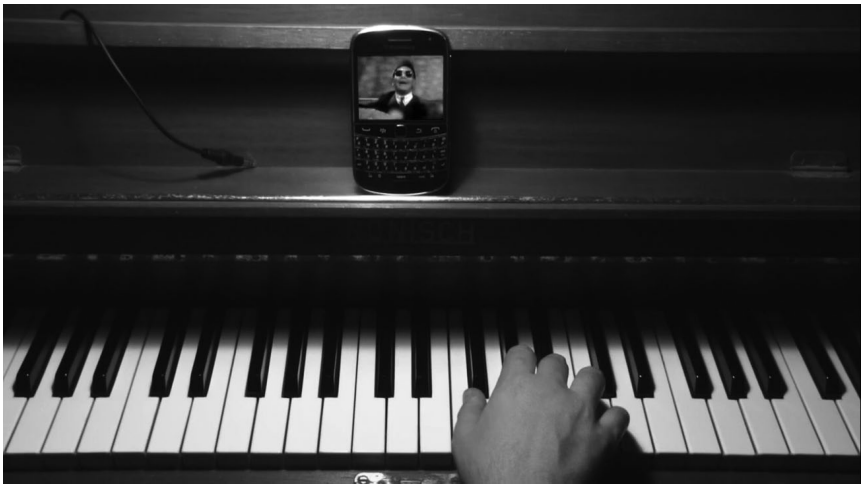

Figure 5.17
Gheith al-Amine, *The Sheikh Imam Project* (2014)

continues, the camera pans rightward to show the lyrics in English: "Why does the sea laugh as I sway, wandering down to fill the urns. The sea is mad, doesn't laugh; the story itself is not for laughs. The sea's words never dim, and our pain has never dulled." It's an allegory for the suffering and persistence of the Egyptian left as it survives underground and continues to bury its dead.

The Sheikh Imam Project is moving on several levels. There is a painful sense of what is lost in transmission: the loss of Sheikh Imam, the loss of the left ideals for which he suffered, and the loss of his music, now available only in low-fidelity recordings like the one Al-Amine reproduces. Now listeners have to use their imaginations to reconstruct an approximation of the song and its political ideals. But even though the transmission is distorted, it's possible to reconstruct the original and mentally amplify the sound of Sheikh Imam singing. *The Sheikh Imam Project* gives people in the present equal measures of hope and responsibility to rebuild those political ideals. Al-Amine's strong, raspy voice is uplifting and encouraging. A feeling of irony and nostalgia remains, the old-fashioned TV snow commenting on the obsolescence of the medium. But the liveness of Al-Amine's singing is so affecting, and the fact that the whole video was made in a single, nineteenth take adds to a feeling of worthwhile struggle, not only to pay homage to Sheikh Imam but to make his sounds and ideals live. The video leaves a viewer feeling hopeful and elated, and aware that a lot of work remains to be done.