

Stories of Palestine Part Two: ♦ The World is With Us reviewed by Elayne Jude for Great North News Service

"These films seemed to have no affect, no feeling, no romance ...Just facts (sometimes) and the struggle, the guns." Serge le Peron, film-maker

The room is small, square, whitewashed, windowless. Thirty or so posters pinned, unframed, to the walls, mostly A3, mostly black and white. Trestle tables and plastic chairs line the walls and divide up the space. On each table, two or three hulking 1970s tv sets, with big 1970s headphones attached, running period footage; tanks, soldiers, crowds, camps, children, explosions, English subtitles, mostly in black and white. The odd dial up telephone and analogue radios complete the picture.

It's a bunker. It's the graphic and cinematic art of Palestinian Revolution, 1968-1980, first at the Barbican and now at the East End's Rich Mix arts centre, courtesy of the Palestine Film Foundation. The presentation is purposeful, intended to evoke, not a gallery, but the rough and ready circumstances of this work's original home.

I get this urge to count.

36 posters. 25 of them feature guns (the AK-47). Four of them feature women. Seven of them feature doves. The women and the doves overlap in three. The men and the doves overlap in none.

11 tv sets playing. Luggage tags identify the titles of the films they are running. Because the Roots Never Die. Scenes From the Occupation of Gaza. Palestinian Victims. There's a sameness in the imagery I see, and no stop or rewind button, no way to tell which film I'm in or whether it's at the beginning or the end. I faithfully try on the headsets and listen to the narratives, mostly in Arabic, sometimes in Italian, one in a very didactic Received Pronunciation.

The stories, often narrated by Palestinian children, run together; the men came; they took my father away; my mother screamed; they took my mother behind a wall and shot her; my sister hid; the men came back. The children are often very young, their recall imperfect, whether because of trauma or the infantile inability fully to distinguish fact and dream, to be sure of where and when. I do not doubt the atrocities. But I never am quite sure what I am viewing, fiction or art or purported documentary. There is no way to know. The effect is both nightmarish and numbing. I long to escape, and feel dutybound to stay and witness.

Phrases and faces stand out; the stilted vocabulary of revolutionary socialism is easy to tune out on a conscious level but persists, a hectoring background lecture; quaint, anachronistic, robotic; I wonder how easily it ever fell on human ears. Around the end of the period covered by this show, I was a member of the Socialist Workers Party and every man jack of them (and they were mostly men, young men) had a chequered keffiyeh in his revolutionary wardrobe (and a Bobby Sands poster on his wall). Did we speak like this ? Were we able to listen to others speak like this ?

I am arrested, in an Italian Communist party-sponsored film, by an Arab doctor speaking of the creation of the Palestinian Red Crescent. The Crescent set up, with the help of Fatah, a medical supply depot in Amman, providing direct help to their own people. The children of these camps were meant to die young, he says, matter of fact. It was part of the plan. The United Nations, the relief agencies of the West, are pervaded, he says, by the spirit of charity. Fatah has provided this aid as the people's right and entitlement.

It's a good point, summing up an attitude of persistent ignorance and condescension about the refugees camps, which are in fact settlements or townships populated by arguably, historically, the most cultured people in the Middle East. I recall a story related to me by a Parliamentarian (female, non-white, well-travelled) about a party of ingenue MPS (female, white, Labour) offered an opportunity to visit a 'camp', Oh but we'd love to, they gush (how cool would that be ?); and on getting there; Oh ! but they can read and write !

But I cannot see how the flat and dated didacticism of this poster art, while portraying an historical moment, can help to expand out perceptions. It reinforces the dominant image of the

Kalashnikov, the young male streetfighter, the raised fist.

The films might be more nuanced; in intent, at least. This is film-maker Serge Le Peron, founder of the collective Groupe Cinema Vincennes: "As of the early 1970s, the movies we had on the European Left on Palestine were often hard militant works...just full of Kalashnikovs. That wasn't our point of view...Such films seemed to have no affect, no feeling, no romance, just facts (sometimes) and the struggle, the guns. Instead of the outer image of a fighter or hero, we wanted to look at what he was thinking, what moved him. This is a traditional dramaturgical question after all; why does the character do what he does; As Jean Renoir said: 'tout le monde a ces raisons' (everyone has their reasons) - this is the drama of the world."

The Barbican, to its credit, has run many of the films over a week or two, and hosted the exhibition itself, although for a puzzlingly short time - just three days. Are they ashamed? This is probably the only decent way to see and think about this buried archive.

Nick Danes, co-director of the exhibition, on why he thinks it's so difficult for this work now to find a public platform:

"I think the failure of the Palestinian political leadership, the PA ministries, and also the wealthy philanthropic elites who exert such a grip over the cultural field in Palestine today needs to be thought about in terms of what these films actually show and recall. The revolutionary films... were unwavering in affirming the moral imperative of establishing, at any cost, a pluralistic democratic state for all its citizens in Palestine."

"I think their lack of visibility is thus partly explained by... what they can reveal by way of relief about the erosion and betrayal of revolutionary political ideals by those currently exercising political power over the way the past is recorded and interpreted ♦ whether power exerted in the form of cultural philanthropy, mainstream scholarship, or direct administration. And herein perhaps lies some of the subversive power, and relevance of revisiting these films and posters today ♦ not simply for what they show us about then, but for what they tell us about now." (Nick Denes, Middle East Monitor, 11 May 2014)

Another difficulty is the remoteness of this material, in time and most of all in affect.

It's heartening that 5 Broken Cameras (discussed in part one), a far more human and sophisticated work than the partial glimpses of Palestinian cinema I've seen in this show has had widespread cinematic distribution (the BBC broadcast it earlier this year and made it available on iPlayer). Empathy is the cornerstone and lifeblood of political engagement.

Back in the real world, Emad Burnat, the Palestinian director of the film, arrived in the US for the Academy Awards for which his work had been nominated, was held in custody at LAX with his family because US Customs couldn't believe that a Palestinian could be nominated for an Oscar.

'The World Is With Us: Global Film and Poster Art from the Palestinian Revolution, 1968-1980'

Rich Mix, Bethnal Green Road, until June 14 2014

<http://www.richmix.org.uk/whats-on/festival/the-world-is-with-us-global-film-and-poster-art-from-the-palestinian-revolution-1968-1980/>

<http://palestinefilmfoundation.org>

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