

RE-WRITING HISTORY ON SCREEN: ANNEMARIE JACIR'S *SALT OF THIS SEA*

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Abstract: This article examines how the award winning film *Salt of This Sea* (2008) responds to dominant gendered representations of Arab and Palestinian identity. The choice of this film is based on its significance as a contemporary cinematic text that aims to present alternative portrayals to those prevalent in the media. Furthermore, Annemarie Jacir is the first Palestinian female filmmaker to make a full-length feature film. The film puts a courageous female character (Soraya—played by Suheir Hammad) at the center of its narrative. It refreshingly departs from inflicting a male gaze on the lead female actor. *Salt of This Sea* responds to the dominant construction of Arab and Muslim women as passive with the portrayal of a determined heroine. In regard to portrayals of masculinity, the film attempts to challenge the core stereotype of Palestinian men as violent. Overall, the film is part of a movement to re-write a collective history, but it depicts dimensions of Palestinian history that are seldom shown in the mainstream media.

Keywords: Annemarie Jacir, Palestinian cinema, gender, femininity, masculinity, Arab identity

Introduction

How is Annemarie Jacir's film *Salt of This Sea* situated vis-à-vis historical and contemporary dominant images and discourses of Palestinian identity? Released in 2008, the film stars Suheir Hammad in the role of Soraya, a Brooklyn-born woman of Palestinian parentage who heads to Palestine for the first time in her life. When her dream of "return" to her homeland is finally fulfilled, she is confronted with the daily realities of living under occupation. Through this journey, she also begins to understand her own privilege as an American citizen when she enters into relationships with Palestinians living in Ramallah and, particularly, through her romantic involvement with Emad (Saleh Bakri), a Palestinian from the refugee camps who dreams of moving to Canada. The plot revolves around Soraya's decision to recuperate the money belonging to her grandfather, whose bank savings were frozen when he was exiled in 1948. However, she does not define this as theft; she clearly states that she is taking back what belongs to her

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family. With the help of her two new “friends,” Emad and Marwan (Riyad Ideis), Soraya plans a “robbery,” and, subsequently, they all escape to the sea with her grandfather’s savings.

Salt of This Sea presents a unique case study for several reasons. First, it is the first full-length feature film made by a female Palestinian director, Annemarie Jacir. Prior to Jacir, as Hillauer writes in her *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* in 2005, “to date, not a single Palestinian woman has directed a full-length feature film. In their works, the female directors examine Palestinian history, their own exile, and political conditions in their homeland” (200). A number of female Palestinian documentary filmmakers, including Mai Masri, Lina Makboul, Helga Tawil-Souri, and Nabiha Lutfi, were producing work before *Salt of This Sea* was made. However, it was not until the latter film in 2008 that a female Palestinian filmmaker created her own fictional media texts to challenge dominant constructions.¹

Jacir’s film is interesting if only for being the first Palestine-set feature film with a fictional narrative directed by a female director from the region. Furthermore, as she herself points out, *every* Palestinian film that is made is an exceptional event, considering the existing difficulties, including lack of funding, technicians, and permits to enter certain areas for Palestinian film crews, among many other obstacles (Mullenneaux, 2010). Suffice to say, it took Jacir five years to find support and funding for this film, and she refers to its making as a “miracle” (Mullenneaux, 2010), since it emerged out of a context of tremendous hostility—including death threats, as mentioned in Jacir’s (2006) essay on the *Dreams of a Nation* project.² Not only was it difficult for her to make this film, but it also suffered a limited distribution and was not readily available the first couple of years after its release. The hostility toward this type of work poses urgent questions regarding the conditions of emergence and sustainability of these types of interventions.

Despite its hard-fought creation and lack of accessibility through commercial channels, *Salt of This Sea* has been bestowed with many awards and was officially selected for the 2008 edition of the Cannes Film Festival; thus, it could further be described as being popular in particular “interpretive communities” (Fish, 1980).³ To date, it has been screened at more than 100 film festivals, and as of December 14, 2015, the *Salt of This Sea* Facebook fan page has accumulated 10,869 Likes. It has had a theatrical release in eight countries and has been sold to more than 35 territories. As well, it has played in French theaters for four consecutive months.

Looking at Palestinian Cinema from a Gender Perspective

My analytical approach is tailored to the particularities of Palestinian cinema, with a particular attention to Jacir’s treatment of gender in her film. The study of

indigenous Palestinian representations raises a different set of questions from the study of Arab representations, in general, or of “third world” productions in particular. Shafik (2005) describes the very recent and difficult emergence of Palestinian cinema, which she argues is inseparable from the region’s historical turmoil:

Film in Palestine is a sad chapter in the history of film. It is inseparable from the history of the Palestinian people, a history characterized by war, expulsion, and diaspora. While European and Jewish circles had been familiar with films from the “Holy Land” since the beginning of the twentieth century, the region’s original inhabitants did not get to know the medium of film until much later. (202–203)

In comparing the struggle-filled journey of Palestinian films with that of American and European films about the region, Shafik relates how Jewish American and European filmmakers started shooting films in and on the country even prior to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Consequently, the first film on Palestine, *Ha-Seret Ha-Risbon shel Palestina* (1911), is also the first Zionist film, according to Shafik (2005: 203). It was not until the 1930s that a Palestinian, Salah al-Kaylani, ventured into documentary filmmaking. As for female directors, it was not until 2008 that Annemarie Jacir circulated the first full-length feature film. Prior to Jacir and as mentioned in the Introduction, a number of Palestinian women directed documentary films or became known for their cinematography and video installations.

In the following analysis of *Salt of This Sea*, I explore how Jacir particularly engages in acts of reclaiming Palestinian history and situate her work as undertaking a feminist “archeological method” (Stillman, 2007) of intervention. Because Palestinian history has been silenced in hegemonic cinema, several filmmakers have endeavored to reclaim that history. Shohat ([1989] 2010) describes the notions of Palestinian in/visibility in cinema:

The iconography of Palestine and Israel is dominated by images of the land. In Zionist cinema, the barren desert allegorizes the absence and the future presence of the land’s true heirs—the Jewish people. In Palestinian representations, meanwhile, the land is imaged not as barren but as fertile and productive. (289)

Annemarie Jacir’s work, although only mentioned in passing in Shohat’s book on Israeli cinema, stands against this repertoire of images of presence/absence.

Reclaiming history, from a gender perspective, has meant in Stillman’s vocabulary deploying the archaeological method, which involves digging (i.e., searching for, bringing to light, unearthing) the lost and disappeared stories of

disenfranchised bodies. This persistent and proactive digging is a form of media activism, which Stillman describes as “feminist archaeology” that could lead to reclaiming a particular memory or showing the state’s failure to protect an endangered woman (2007: 498).⁴

Second, I examine the film’s responses to dominant gendered representations. I supplement my content analysis with a semi-structured interview with the filmmaker, designed to elicit information that was not readily available in the public domain by asking precise questions pertaining to my research inquiry. The intent was also for the interview to take the form of a “guided conversation” in which the interviewer and the interviewee share information. I utilized what Kirby and McKenna (1989) call “conceptual baggage,” which consisted of drawing from my own research questions to design and conduct the interview. Using the filmmaker’s respective experiences as a guide for the interview, I employed a combination of exploratory and specific approaches to formulate questions. Finally, in the concluding section I reflect on the conditions that made the emergence of this work possible.

In/Visibility: The Archaeological Method

The deployment of the archaeological method (Stillman, 2007) as a way to engage in feminist media activism is visible from the beginning of the film. *Salt of This Sea* opens with a type of historical footage⁵—which originates from the military archives in Jerusalem—showing soon-to-be Palestinian refugees being forced to leave from the port of Jaffa in 1948.⁶ Ginsburg (2002) discusses the use of footage as a means of providing visual evidence of indigenous existence, which serves to counteract against the erasure of indigenous stories and histories from dominant national narratives.

Bringing to light lost stories continues in one of the most important scenes of the film, which depicts the principal characters’ visit to Soraya’s family home in Jaffa. When the trio arrives at Soraya’s family home, Soraya asks the woman (Irit) who settled in her grandfather’s house to sell it to her. Irit replies that it will not be possible because the Jewish National Fund will not allow it. Soraya then proposes to Irit that she will convert to Judaism. Irit reminds her at this point that it will not work. The discussion, in English, continues as follows:

Soraya: This is my home. It was stolen from my family. So it’s for me to decide if you can stay. And you can

Irit: Are you serious?

Soraya: My father should have been raised in this house, not in a fucking camp

- Irit: You want to speak about history, the past. Let's forget it
- Soraya: Your past is my everyday, my right now. This is not your home
- Irit: It is now
- Soraya: You can stay if you admit all of this is stolen
- Irit: I can stay? This was your grandfather's home. They left
- Soraya: They were forced to. (Marwan tells Soraya to calm down)
- Soraya: They didn't wanna leave. My grandfather laid down this floor. What does that mean to you?
- Irit: She's crazy. I am extending a hand to you. I invited you to stay. I'm being friendly
- Soraya: Our windows, our doors, our fucking house. Admit it
- Iris: Get out of my house. (Soraya breaks a vase)
- Soraya: Recognize it.

Here the discovery of her grandfather's house and the reference to how he "laid down this floor" reaffirm that her family had been living there for generations. Through this heated discussion, Soraya asks Irit to recognize that this is not her home. When she says "this is my home," the reclaiming of this history is accomplished through the voice of a woman.

Another attempt to re-write history is illustrated in one of the scenes of the film that shows piles of furniture, which originally belonged to Palestinians, being sold in stores. This scene documents and archives their historical presence. We hear Arabic music in the background through the voice of Syrian singer Asmahan, which serves as a reminder of the indigene's concern with the "preservation" of culture. Asmahan died at the premature age of 26 in 1944 when her car crashed into the river Nile. While the driver managed to escape, Asmahan was trapped with her friend as they did not have a door on their side, and, consequently, they drowned.

The trio in *Salt of This Sea* also travels to Emad's village, Al-Dawayima. The name of the village has been changed. When they arrive there, Soraya proposes to Emad: "We could stay here." The two of them start to move in to a house in ruins; Emad cleans the floor, while Soraya places a sheet and a pillow to make a bed and tells Emad in Arabic, "Tomorrow I will buy a mattress." To the viewer, this plan to move to a house in ruins would seem unlikely, like a fantasy that the two of them would like to entertain for a moment. This scene serves also as a reference to their love story and the attraction that they feel for each other. The images of the ruins act as a subtle reference to the 1948 Al-Dawayima massacre, which is invoked when Soraya and Emad light a candle over the ruins in a moment that most directly speaks to a knowledgeable audience. This scene not only attempts to

undo efforts to erase history, but it also engages in bearing witness and producing a counter-memorial. As Montagner (2001) explains in her analysis of Internet media groups, activists' own coverage and accounts of events can lead to "taking care" of their own representation. Taking care of "her own" representation in the media led Jacir to formulate tactical responses to hegemonic discourses.

Responses to Dominant Gendered Representations

In responding to dominant representations, *Salt of This Sea* puts gender at the center of the narrative. For one, Soraya, a courageous female character, is the main protagonist. The film counters the dominant construction of Arab and Muslim women as passive victims in need of saving⁷ with the portrayal of a strong-minded heroine. In more than one instance, Soraya saves herself and Emad from getting arrested while they are in Al-Dawayima. In one instance, Soraya is purchasing some furnishing items from a store and Emad is smoking a cigarette outside. A police officer approaches him and is about to interrogate him, probably to check whether he is Palestinian. Soraya quickly joins Emad and starts speaking in Spanish. The police officer then walks away. In another instance, a Jewish Israeli history professor pokes his head in the entrance of the house/cave where Soraya and Emad are sleeping and tells them that they cannot stay there. Soraya then pretends that she is Jewish and manages to save them again:

- History professor: What are you doing here? [In Hebrew]
Soraya: Do you speak English?
History professor: Yes. You're not allowed to make camping here. It's a national park
Soraya: I didn't know that. We just stopped for the night
History professor: Where are you coming from?
Soraya: I'm from Brooklyn
History professor: Brooklyn?
Soraya: We're touring Israel
History professor: And who told you about this place?
Soraya: No one; we're going everywhere
History professor: Yeah. But why you come here?
Soraya: No special reason. It's really beautiful
History professor: Are you Jewish?

Soraya: Yes. (History professor smiles)

History professor: Come this is my students. I teach them history. You know, they can climb here in these ancient ruins, learn about their roots, how we turned this biblical land into life again.

The history professor calls his students to meet “someone” from Brooklyn. We subsequently see Emad and Soraya packing their belongings and leaving again. Soraya is hence depicted as the savior, in a direct challenge to the notion of passive women from the East. The film not only reverses well-known gender roles, but it also does not engage in objectifying the main female character. The camera work is carried out in such a way that it does not impose a male gaze on the spectators. As Mulvey ([1976] 1985) argues, the cinematic gaze has been typically constructed for male (heterosexual) audiences. The person who gazes at the objectified “other” is the subject, while that which is looked at is effectively rendered a “thing.” hooks (1996) further explains that “there’s power in looking” (197). When I interviewed Jacir, she stated that Soraya is not sexualized or objectified; she described Soraya’s character in the following way:

Soraya is not a Hollywood character. She’s not sexualized; she’s not simple. She’s not even sympathetic all the time. She’s very complicated. She’s a flawed character. People don’t always get her. They don’t always know what she’s doing ... And the way she’s filmed. I don’t believe in women’s cinema and men’s cinema, but I do believe that Hollywood trains people to film and portray women in a certain way and to portray men in another way. That’s definitely something that I am against and I don’t want to be doing.

The plot furthermore revolves around Soraya’s decision to reclaim her grandfather’s money. Hence, Soraya is a key player in the discursive work of redefining criminality in the occupied territories where basic rights, such as freedom of movement, are denied to Palestinians. As this is a central theme, the film depicts representations of the hidden violence inflicted on Palestinians on a regular basis. Destabilizing their portrayal as criminals in the mainstream media, *Salt of This Sea* instead shows Palestinian bodies as targeted, suffering, and needing to be rendered invisible inside Israel. Shedding light on everyday humiliations, this film also humanely depicts the main characters. Thus, it paints innovative discourses on these bodies as it rectifies an *absence* of representations (Stam and Spence, 1985). In depicting dimensions of their history and realities that are seldom shown in the dominant media, it attempts to reverse the Western commonsensical understanding of violence and criminality in the Middle East (e.g., the core stereotype of the violent Palestinian men).

Research shows that Arab and Middle Eastern men have been constructed as violent, oppressors of women, and religious extremists (Inhorn, 2012; Shaheen, 2001). Representations of Muslim masculinities have been confined to the realm of criminality and violence. As Karim (2000) demonstrates, these representations draw on stories of assassins, kidnappers, and hostages, relying on the core stereotype of the “violent man of Islam.” Razack (2008) similarly argues that the “dangerous” Muslim man is a central figure that represents the war on terror.⁸ These negative portrayals of Muslim men in the media have real consequences. As Razack (2008) explains, such portrayals serve to “cast out” patriarchal Muslims from the West via, e.g., deportations, evictions, etc. However, violence is an essential construct not only of Arab and Muslim masculinity but also of masculinity in general; Connell (1995), Katz (1995), and Consalvo (2003) demonstrate how violence is a defining marker of manhood. Connell (1995) further asserts that “violence is part of a system of domination, but it is at the same time a measure of its imperfection” (84). Indeed, violent men use force to assert their dominance over women and intimidate them. They have also used men on men violence to reinforce a hierarchical system of masculinity. In both cases, their need to resort to violence points to the shaky foundation of this system of domination which feminists have long challenged. In a departure from these iconic images of manhood, Jacir challenges the notion of an inherently violent Palestinian man. In the film, Emad is the epitome of the gentle man, who watches over the interests of Soraya, gets her a job as a server, refuses to take her money, and is most concerned throughout the film with her safety. After Soraya has a heated discussion with the Israeli woman who settled in her grandfather’s house, Emad does not lose his temper. He calmly approaches the car where Soraya is fumingly waiting for him and says,

Emad: You feel ok?

Soraya: I feel like shit

Emad: Marwan is staying. Why let them get to you? Make you crazy. As if you were under occupation

Soraya: It is an occupation

Emad: Not inside. Hey, mad girl. Let’s go see our country. I want to see Dawayima. With your accent and my look, we have it made. (smiling, and laughing with Soraya)

In this scene, Emad’s ability to utter calming words challenges any notion of an inherently violent Palestinian man—Emad is here able to control his emotions and advises Soraya to do the same. This particular dialogue, similarly to the other ones

mentioned in this analysis, deconstructs stereotypes in order to offer alternative portrayals of Palestinian identity.

Conditions of Emergence

Since the present analysis is concerned with the ways in which the first Palestinian female director circulated a full-length feature film, it is relevant to note a few characteristics of Annemarie Jacir's work in order to reflect both on the question of emergence and on the potential of her interventions to create change. In regard to the question of emergence, I note here that the first Palestinian female director to circulate a full-length feature film experienced a series of obstacles in the process of doing her work, as revealed during the interview I conducted with her and through researching the context of the film. In a previous interview with online film magazine *Eye for Film* (Hazzah, 2008), Jacir spoke about other attempts to censor and silence her speech:

When I lived in the US, I was threatened several times—both as a filmmaker, while showing my work, as well as a festival curator and promoter of Arab cinema. That includes death threats. I have also been censored and silenced many times. But that's the case for all Palestinian filmmakers I think—and all we can do is keep making films, art, and believing in what we do.

Jacir was also banned from entering the Palestinian territories and has not been able to go back after screening *Salt of This Sea* there; she has been living in Jordan since then.⁹ She spoke about how she could see the land right in front of her (from Jordan), but yet has not been able to get to it. This simultaneous closeness and inaccessibility inspired the theme of her new film, *When I Saw You*.

Jacir's explanation of what made *Salt of This Sea* "happen" consists of emphasizing the will of the filmmaker to produce the work. Although I had not expected this answer, as I had been thinking about artists, especially female artists, as located in a larger system (beyond individual talent and determination), Gertz and Khleifi (2011) provide a similar argument concerning the importance of the will of individual filmmakers in their discussion of the new Palestinian cinema in the 1980s. They argue that

all of these titles allude to the nature of the cinema that originated, developed, and gained international acclaim as a result of the efforts of individual filmmakers. These directors operated without the support of either Palestinian public institutions or private Palestinian production companies. (188)

Moreover, the difficulty of securing funding for *Salt of This Sea* raises critical issues for the emergence of such works. Jacir explained to Mullenneaux

(2010) that the financing of the film consisted of “a large number of European co-producers and small funders, each putting in a tiny amount to make this film happen. We never met our budget yet the film was made.” She also spoke of the difficulty of making this low-budget work when I interviewed her, although she mentioned the helpfulness of obtaining grants. The budget for *Salt of This Sea* was \$1.2 million, but she only managed to secure \$1 million (Hazzah, 2008). She had to resort to several sources of funding, which mostly consisted of small grants and financing through a co-production deal with Jacques Bidou & Associés (JBA), which was the largest producer. She relayed how the granting agencies also have their own requirements that need to be met and coordinated in relation to the artistic demands of the film; these requirements were tied to the locations of the post-production work, rental of equipment, or hiring the funding country’s citizens to work on the film. The budget for Jacir’s new film *When I Saw You* is even smaller than that for *Salt of This Sea*—about \$400,000 (Dammann, 2011).

Pointing to the potential of her interventions to create change, I argue that creating a physical archive relates to what Stillman (2007) categorizes as a feminist archaeological method, which involves digging for and bringing to light “lost” stories (or films in this case). Jacir states that one of the aims of the *Dreams of a Nation* project was to provide access to Palestinian films after the organizers had heard many stories of people who could not view these works. She has since converted the *Dreams of a Nation* project into a digital resource. In a similar vein, *Salt of This Sea* re-writes Palestinian history, in an effort to counter mainstream omissions of the passage of Palestinians on that land.

Jacir also mentioned that her film is based on reality, re-emphasizing the notion of *Salt of This Sea* as real. The content and style of Jacir’s film (and her body of artistic work, more broadly) are imbued with the idea of “real” content and “realistic” style, which is a defining characteristic of her oeuvre. Although she expresses reticence to label her style, specifically with respect to *Salt of This Sea*, this notion of presenting “real” material was a recurrent theme in the interview I conducted with her and echoed her previous description of *Salt of This Sea* as a “realistic” film in a 2008 interview with Ali Hazzah in *Eye for Film*.¹⁰

In my interview with the filmmaker, she described how *Salt of This Sea* was inspired by and is based on real events, such as an actual bank robbery in Bethlehem and the story of her friend’s father whose bank account was frozen after he became a refugee in 1948. As well, she includes everyday events like crossing checkpoints. She stated that *Salt of This Sea*, similar to *Like Twenty Impossibles*,¹¹ is a fiction film, “but everything is real; everything is true in it. There’s nothing created about the borders, the checkpoints, the nightmare of occupation.” This word association is interesting—e.g., truth/reality juxtaposed with a “nightmare,” a bad

dream that cannot be true, as in the recurrent denial of Palestinian experiences of everyday humiliation—what I understand as “constructed mad speech.”

Drawing from hooks’ (1989) notion of “talking back,” which she defines as these forms of responding to structures of domination that move the speaker from an object to a subject position, I situate certain acts of talking back as constructed “mad” speech based on the argument that hegemonic culture often attempts to construct a particular type of speech as mad in order to contain it while this type of talk is not always literally insane. My understanding of hegemonic culture includes how it attempts to delegitimize the logic of the margins by attempting to render it unintelligible. In *Salt of This Sea*, Jacir aims to accentuate a Palestinian truth that is at the same time caught in a cycle of denial.

With respect to *Salt of This Sea*, the core of this struggle appears to be over the real (i.e., meaning). Within the circular movement of culture, this intervention relies on re-writing history, re-centering gender, and archiving, thereby using an archaeological feminist method. Therefore, this film intervenes tactically in its attempt to re-write history (by using, e.g., historical footage—here also an effort to archive Palestinian existence and culture). In addition, it centers on gender in its narrative to provide an alternative portrayal of Arab femininity. Dominant portrayals of Arab femininity have focused primarily on the image of the oppressed Arab woman in need of saving (Abu-Lughod, 2002) and on its exotic counterpart: the sexual object and belly dancer (Shaheen, 2001; Yeğenoğlu, 1998). The veiled Muslim woman (read oppressed) represents a central figure in this dominant discourse.¹² In contrast, Jacir’s film departs from this model and offers an alternative view of Arab femininity, one in which the lead character is a determined woman in search for justice. The film also challenges the notion of an inherently violent Arab masculinity, in its portrayals of gentle Palestinian men. Further, the film does not seek to replace negative stereotypes with positive images, as illustrated in its condemnation of the Palestinian and Ramallah elite. The reverse tendency to promote “positive images” on the screen can lead to essentialism and to reductionist simplifications. Stam and Spence (1985) reason that “a cinema dominated by positive images, characterized by a bending-over-backwards-not-to-be-racist attitude, might ultimately betray a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection” (639). Similarly, Hall (1997) argues that it is not a matter of replacing negative images with positive ones but to strive for diversity in representation.

Concluding Remarks

In *Salt of This Sea*, Annemarie Jacir deploys a feminist archaeological method (Stillman, 2007) of intervention. The film attempts to undo efforts to erase history;

it tries to affirm Palestinian existence and document their passage through that land. The film places a determined heroine at the center of its narrative in opposition to more common representations, including the infamous figure of the oppressed veiled female in need of saving. It also attempts to reverse the understanding of criminality in the Middle East and to challenge the notion of an inherently violent Arab man.

Although emerging from a position of marginality, this film achieved considerable popularity among specific interpretive communities for whom it has attempted to alleviate certain socio-political stresses and provide mental nourishment through tactics of playfulness, as demonstrated by the characters in several scenes. Such scenes include the planned robbery of the bank, the crossing into Jerusalem and then traveling on to Jaffa, and the journey on the road, which highlights their life on the run and emphasizes the notion of escaping from a burdensome reality. However, as Entman (2003) and Said ([1978] 1994) remind us, a single or a few divergent stories are not sufficient to fully destabilize well-established and naturalized discourses. These interventions are inevitably open to containment and co-optation. I would argue, nonetheless, that these interventions are still necessary because they create noise; they disturb the tranquility of the status quo.

Salt of This Sea communicates this understanding of its potential to create change, particularly through the “unhappy” but hopeful ending; Emad is arrested, while Marwan has an affair with the Israeli woman who settled in Soraya’s family home and stays in Jaffa, thus appearing to “normalise” his relationship with the settler. Soraya, meanwhile, is forced to return to USA, but as she is leaving, she says, “I am from here ... Palestine.” Jacir said that this was the only ending she could envision for this film considering the existing situation, but she also added, “I have to be hopeful.”

Because it attempts to maintain a female indigenous voice above the surface of the water, this intervention encourages a reflection on the role of culture to shake, move, and perhaps even transform what appears to be stagnant. *When I Saw You*, Jacir’s follow-up to *Salt of This Sea*, underwent a different process. This latest film takes place in 1960s Jordan and addresses the topic of Palestinian refugees and refugee camps in Arab countries. Jacir sees it as a film about “the stupidity of borders,” as she declared in my interview with her. When I asked her why she produced this new film with a smaller budget, she said,

But there’s no other way to do it unless you want to sit. I didn’t want to wait ten years to be able to make my next film. There are many ... great independent filmmakers; sometimes 10-to-15 years pass between each of their films.

She spoke about her decision to go ahead with the new film, in spite of the recent precarious financial situation of independent cinema.

Salt of This Sea's scale of intervention is dependent on the potential of the film to create an archive of lost stories, redefine gender portrayals, create noise, and disturb the construction of a particular speech as mad. However, some scholars contend that mainstream cinema (most notably, Hollywood) can easily co-opt independent cinema. For example, in his study of American independent cinema, Newman (2009) argues that the mainstreaming of indie cultural texts occurs when they are transformed into unusual and exotic products or brands for consumption. I have, however, been interested in the popular dimension of the selected case study which, though popular, offers alternative visions. Some artistic practices suggest that these categories might not always work in opposition to each other, as in the music of Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, who had been during her lifetime, and until now, a very popular alternative cultural icon in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Independent cinema, as exemplified by Jacir's oeuvre, can also be alternative, as revealed by the content of her productions, the tactics she deploys, and the conditions of emergence that influence her work.

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Notes

1. It is also important to note here that Palestinian Sulafa Jadallah is the first female cinematographer in the Arab world. Further, Mona Hatoum is equally renowned for her video installations. Additional information can be found in Ginsburg and Lippard (2010).
2. In New York, Jacir co-founded with Professor Hamid Dabashi the *Dreams of a Nation* project, for which she was the chief curator. This project aims to provide support for Palestinian filmmaking, access to Palestinian films and a digital archive of Palestinian cinema. Furthermore, the *Dreams of a Nation* official website articulates the mission of the project within the larger framework of self-representational art, as only films made by Palestinians are included. *Dreams of a Nation* was envisioned as an "intervention" based on a dissatisfaction with the existing portrayals of Palestinians in the dominant mediascape.
3. Other awards and distinctions include Best Screenplay at the Dubai International Film Festival and the Cinema in Motion Prize, as well as four awards at the San Sebastian Film Festival.
4. Stillman (2007) proposes three methods for analyzing feminist media activism: the diagnostic, the theatrical, and the archaeological. A diagnostic approach presents a cultural vocabulary for unpacking media stereotypes, through the acts of naming and shaming. According to Stillman, a theatrical approach revives marginalized bodies through storytelling.
5. This tactic is also included in *Like Twenty Impossibles*, in which Jacir relies on the use of documentary footage.
6. This information is derived from Mullenneaux's interview with Jacir (2010).

7. For example, see Abu-Lughod (2002).
8. The other figures being the “imperilled” Muslim woman and the “civilized” European.
9. In a *Gulf News* interview conducted by Richard Holledge (2011), Jacir explains, “I have not been banned because of my filmmaking but because there is a silent Israeli policy which, in a random way, is excluding thousands of people.”
10. Extracted from <http://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/feature.php?id=593>
11. Prior to releasing *Salt of This Sea* (2008), she directed the first Palestinian short film to be selected for the official competition selection at Cannes International Film Festival. Tellingly titled “*Like Twenty Impossible*,” this short film speaks of the extreme difficulties encountered in the making of such films and the apparent “impossibility” of their materialization. In spite of considerable resistance to the release of this film, *Like Twenty Impossible* won several awards at international festivals. Jacir was named one of the “25 new faces of independent filmmaking” by *Filmmaker Magazine* in 2004.
12. In a previously published article, I synthesized the main findings of the literature on Arab women’s representation in regard to the dominant tropes of Arab and Muslim femininity (see Oumlil, 2013).

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