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Filming Palestinian “banality”

The so called Palestinian question comes to media spotlight usually when something ‘extraordinary’ recent years have seen the Israeli invasion into Lebanon 2006, the brutal siege and onslaught on Gaza and more recently the attacks on the Gaza aid ships. However even the *ordinary* in Palestine is far from mundane and banal. Underneath the Israeli occupation and outwith the organised resistance a far more ‘normal’ life of ordinary Palestinians exist. However even these people have remarkable stories that deserve to be told and articulate voices that need to be heard.

This paper discusses and describes original footage shot and recorded over 21 days in and around Al Aroub refugee camp in the West Bank in March/April 2005. It attempts to) document Palestinian everyday life through a series of photographs that illustrated how ordinary Palestinians were living in the Al Aroub refugee camp. The film was shot by an all female crew of three as part of money raised by Art Council UK providing source material for a variety of outputs that include a multimedia ceramic installation, short documentaries for pod casting, web site and written papers analysing the material in amore academic format.

Whilst the whole premise of this work is looking for sameness, points of contact, empathy and the ability to embrace difference what can not be denied is that the, we - Western film makers who shot the footage are coming from a *different perspective*. In short we are filming and mediating the experiences of the ordinary Palestinians for a wider audience who wish to understand the humanity of this complex situation. We

suggest that we are trying to embrace this difference and inform a change in perception that may not occur if traditional forms of representation are not challenged. These mainstream representations clearly create a *vacuum* in our understanding and feelings of *affection* towards the Palestinian people.

Fundamental to the project and instigated on this trip was the planning and development of a production team, based at the refugee camp, so that the women and girls could continue to record the ‘ordinary and the everyday’ aspects of their lives.

The Al Aroub Project: Collected Stories from Palestine

Thus the starting point for this project is the premise, that due to the prevalent modes of representation: the sound bite, the short cut, lazy journalism and censorship to name but a few, our understanding of Palestinians is limited. It has been suggested that we (The West) see the Palestinians in certain contexts such as suicide bombers, angry stone throwing ‘youths’, inconsolable mothers crying over the body of their dead child, chanting crowds carrying a martyr’s corpse above the heads of a packed, jostling throng of fervent, crazed Arab men. Previous discussion has noted that the majority of these images are hand held, each shot very rarely lasting longer than 2 seconds. News stories are short and isolated; they are not placed in an historical context.

What seem to be missing in the forms of Western representation of Palestinians is the ordinary and the everyday, aspects of the day-to-day lives of this community.

Method

An all women team consisting of Palestinians and Westerners managed, arranged and recorded footage of life in the Al Aroub Camp. The Al Aroub refugee camp was set up in 1948 to hold Palestinian families that had been forcibly removed from their homes from the surrounding areas. What should be noted is that the Al Aroub camp is not an extraordinary circumstance for the Palestinian people.

Palestinian refugees constitute 37% of the population of the West Bank. In 1997, 542,642 refugees were living in the West Bank of whom 26% were living in the nineteen camps and 74% were living outside the camps (PCBS census 1997, UNRWA 1997). Nearly half the population (45%) is under 15 years of age - 17.5% are between 0-4 years of age and 27.5% are between 5-14 years of age. The fieldwork was carried out in the Hebron area.

www.forcedmigration.org/guides/llreport/llreport-6.htm

Working closely with Palestinian women and children from the Al Aroub Camp allowed access to their daily domestic routine that becomes extraordinary due to the circumstances of the Israeli occupation. This resulted in 14 hours of footage, covering many different stories from a wide group of contributors. Footage was shot over 21 days initially focusing on daily chores like cooking, sewing and the so called 'banality' of daily life.

This 'banality' was supervised by Israeli watch towers, concrete blocks and checkpoints. In short freedom of movement is severely restricted. Many people of the camp have not seen relatives in Gaza for years. The biggest shock to the crew, however, was to see the Wall being built by the Israeli authority, partitioning off large areas of land and giving greater control to the Israelis. We soon realised that we could not limit the recordings to the women in the camp but needed to try and capture a wider view of what was happening in the area for all Palestinians. Documenting the ordinary and the everyday detail over a protracted period of time, with the camera set on a tripod and shots held for a very long time is one of the constituent elements of our approach for this research.

BACKGROUND ON SUBJECTS

Over the course of filming a variety of subjects were recorded. However for the purposes of this paper we are going to concentrate on two examples.

The first example is a group of young male teenagers from the Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem. This group consisted of approximately 15 males aged between 12-16 whose residence was divided by the building of the “security wall.” This meant that for these teenagers, Israeli “security measures”, further disrupted their everyday existence. It should be noted that filming that day was scheduled to record cutaways of the Wall or security fence currently been constructed by the Israeli state (www.guardian.co.uk/israel/Story/0,2763,916222,00.html - 43k).

Figure 1 The Wall at Aida Refugee Camp : The Palestinian boys walking away after interview. (Notice graffiti on wall: “Wake Up to your Humanity”)



The decision to record the group of teenagers was spontaneous, the group out of curiosity collected around the camera.

Here the crew employed a static camera on a tripod with a fixed steady frame. This allowed the viewer to listen and look at these subjects speaking in Arabic over a protracted period of time with the voice of a female Palestinian translator (off camera).

One of the enlightening aspects of using this approach is that it allows subjects to share their experiences in a more personal manner. Very quickly the groups told of a friend who had just been shot in the neck hours earlier. The blood of their friend was still visible on their clothes. The group were quick to denounce the Wall.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic?

Translator: This wall - the Israelis had no right to build this wall.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: This land is for people - - - for Palestinian people and it's not an Israeli one.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: and this land was the only place where the people of the camp can come for a kind of stress relief.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: Usually children and youth of the camp are coming here, used to come here, because there were two playground here.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: and suddenly the Israelis came and put this wall.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: Also this was the only road or path or exit the - the people, the Palestinian people were able to come and be able to go to Jerusalem. Walking free or sneaking to Jerusalem, which is their right.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: As children in this camp, the only thing they can do to resist this (undecipherable word) as a result of seeing the Israelis coming and building this wall, is coming and throwing stones.

Question: What happens when they throw stones?
(from me in English)

Translator: Question repeated in Arabic

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: Sometimes they are having this err – teargas.

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: Sometimes err – sound bombs

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: Sometimes they are raiding the camp and coming inside the camp

Boy 1 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: and of course they will injure – injure people.

GENERAL CHATTER

Question: Where do they go now to play?
(from video crew in English)

Translator: Question repeated in Arabic

Boy 2 name: Speaks in Arabic

Translator: Now they don't play at all, they just sit at home.

Previous research argues that male Palestinians are normally represented in a negative manner (Said, 1978: Philo and Berry, 2004). As previously stated mainstream representation is usually focused with erratic shots allowing little room for empathy.

Previously these individuals could easily have been represented or written off as stone throwing youths, militants or terrorists. However the footage shows long clips of the kids talking, showing wounds and just passively gazing at the camera. The purpose of this style is to develop empathy with these kids. In short they are like teenagers everywhere but they are “playing” in a militarised zone.

The final footage of this sequence shows armed Wall security guards running towards us (the crew and the boys) and the sounds of the kids fleeing.

Example 2 “Fatima”

The second example shows a Palestinian woman wearing a hijab standing outside her home. This interview was pre-arranged by another Palestinian woman who was part of the crew. Once again a static camera was employed recording long takes with little interruption. “Fatima” spoke perfect English and needed little prompting to articulate and contextualise her story. She spoke for half an hour revealing personal experience of the occupation furthermore she linked this with wider social and political circumstances. Fatima addresses the audience with questions attempting to engage the viewer with her sense of exasperation.

Figure 2 “Fatima” Outside her home that may be taken by the Israelis to continue building the Wall.



F in English:

I might lose my house because I'm not allowed in anymore. I have a Blue ID ---- and Blue ID's are not allowed within, within, within the walls and this will be applied only from June off, June on, sorry. And from June I will have to apply for a permit to be able to visit my house or I have to live somewhere else – because I'm not allowed in.

Break in talk

F in English:

And of course all these mountains will be gone because the wall will just take the mountains out and if you see the villages there, there will be another wall for them so the wall, the mountains, this space, this area, what you see here is gonna be between two walls. One for us and one for them and the wall is outside for the Israeli's to use. Of course they didn't confiscate it but it's out of use, so officially it's ours but practically we

can't get there ---so (F shrugs)

Question from crew

In English: So you're cut off from everything on this side of the mountain (out of picture, points to mountain) and what about your sheep and

F: in English

nothing, it will be dead, the people will be dead not just the sheep, everything will be dead. This is the idea, the idea is American. If you know the reservations of the Red Indians? This is where it comes from, they put them in reservations, Through the, the – times go through, they vanish.

BREAK FROM TALKING

Either they leave which happens to many people because they, they want to live or they just kill each other or they just die from diseases, from whatever reason, they just vanish and this is the plan, to lock Palestinian within reservations and or ghettos or whatever it is and they will vanish by themselves and they will come back to the original Zionist idea 'a land without people to a people without land'. They just make it happen.

BREAK FROM TALKING

F: in English:

and unfortunately America is supporting them fully, Europe is silent and no one speaks until someone bomb himself up and I don't really know what this guy should do. I mean, ok, so he shouldn't bomb himself, what else?

What should he do? ---

Fatima challenges stereotypical representation of the Muslim women. The hijab that she wears is seen in the West as a symbol of her oppression and proof of her cultures "backwardness." Her arguments are presented in an articulated, clear and passionate yet controlled manner. Within her argument she manages to contextualise her own plight to the wider Palestinian cause. Women wearing headscarves have come to embody a dangerous other. Media representations of Muslim women have portrayed the binary positions of either hijab clad victim or perpetrator. The hijab or veil has come to signify

the oppression of Muslim women in Western media, where she remains ‘a woman without a voice’.

Too often the Palestinian voice has been represented *as male, militant and terrorist*. This silences the everyday experiences of ordinary Palestinians who are already living in a subjugated manner.

Being an all women crew enabled us to meet women and girls more easily than if men had been present in the crew. Personal histories were told in a relaxed easy environment, which enabled candid recollections of the women’s experiences and provided the space for jokes and general banter. Not that dissimilar to the crews experiences of family and friends gatherings here in the UK, in fact we would often find ourselves drawing comparisons in look, and humour to our own family members back in the UK.

The local women in the crew were invaluable, organising, facilitating and interpreting the stories, creating a sensitive and supportive environment, for the women to be interviewed and cutaways to be recorded. We would definitely not have got the material we did, if it had just been a crew of Western women with an interpreter from outside the area.

Many of the Palestinians we met and filmed had an indefatigable belief that talking about the unjust treatment they received, the detail of the day to day reality of their plight, to the ‘outside’ world, will eventually expand awareness and consciousness on a global scale, bringing about an end to their oppression, with a just and peaceful solution.

The pernicious daily oppression the Palestinians experience in all its forms, is difficult to bear witness to. The Palestinians we met told their truths with humility, (the seriousness of their stories did not lend itself to an over dramatisation of the situation). To listen to their stories, to witness and experience some of the same aggression from the Israeli authorities was at times, for the UK members of the crew, very overwhelming. We felt sadness and compassion but also fear, frustration and anger at the unjust and inhumane treatment meted out to us all as we filmed over these 21 days. It was quite a traumatising

experience and took 3 to 4 weeks to gain any sense of stability on our return. The crew was united in their view that 'the ordinary and everyday' culture of this West Bank community should be presented to the 'outside 'world.

In terms of the post-production stage and the various outputs the material will be used for, the Western team members are in the position of being the mediators of this story. The team is trying to strike a balance between the desire and need of the Palestinians to have their stories 'heard' and effective story telling for a Western audience taking into account the lack of knowledge of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, levels of acceptance and willingness to embrace a different perspective than orientalist/mainstream news and current affairs representation.