

“Foggy: Palestine Solidarity, Cinema & the Archive” — Noor Gatih, Amy Gottlieb, Essa Grayeb, Mike Hoolboom, Hadi Moussally, Annie Sakkab, Lior Shamriz, and Elias Wakeem

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During a post-screening discussion of “Foggy: Palestine

Solidarity, Cinema & the Archive,” b.h. Yael (who cocurated the program alongside Marc Siegel, Lior Shamriz, and John Greyson) tells us of how the screened films ask “what *was* and what *is*” Palestinian freedom. Taken together, the films use oral history, performance, fabulation, deep looking, and elegy. “Foggy” not only looks into an archive caught between—after Mahmoud Darwish—Palestinian presence and the absence wrought by Zionism, but looks again from a queer angle. In doing so, the films describe an alternative archival practice of redoing, remaking, and restaging rather than filling in the faulty archive so shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and queerphobia.

“Foggy” opened with Hadi Moussally’s *Sultana’s Reign* (2023). A carefully stylized portrayal of New York – based Palestinian drag queen, the titular Sultana oscillates between mundanity and tragedy, and between her glory and longing. Sultana tells us about how she grew up, as a Cairo-born Palestinian living between Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon at the whims of political tragedies, only to land in New York City by 1996. The term “oral history” doesn’t do *Sultana’s Reign* justice. Scenes of her in full old-Hollywood drag lingering in Parisian cafes and épiceries, recounting her love for parties, Fairuz, and Egyptian divas feels more akin to hanging out with an old friend. We can also view *Sultana’s Reign* through the lens of performance. Sultana calls herself a performer “representing another aspect of the Middle East, another sexuality [...] [and her] complexity as a character.” With patient detail, Moussally documents Sultana’s nuances while she conveys a performance of gender and sexuality so often made absent. Sultana, then, doesn’t fill in an archive—she is one.

If *Sultana’s Reign* is an oral-history performance of a queer Palestinian abroad, Elias Wakeem’s *Homecoming Queenz* (2023) performs the archive of queer Palestinians living under Israeli occupation today. Relayed from the first-person perspective of a shaky hidden camera, Wakeem gives viewers intimate access to a drag quick change while seated in a descending airplane, before being confronted by border guards at Ben Gurion airport. Wakeem enacts a different kind of archival

practice—one that does not wait for queer Palestinian experiences to enter the archive, but performs an archive through the body, no matter the cost.

In *Even a Dog in Babylon* (2023), filmmaker Lior Shamriz stages a conversation between themselves and actor Myriam Ali-Ahmad. With the director playing director, actor playing actor, and viewer eavesdropping, we learn about the development of Shamriz's new film. Based on a letter from an ancient Babylonian king that asserts "even a dog in the city will be free," Shamriz speculates on a Palestine without occupation and a West Asia without colonialism—or rather, they speculate on the idea of making a speculative film on these matters. Metacinematically, Shamriz's subtly fabulous method puts the absence of a free West Asia in haut-relief.

If *Even a Dog in Babylon* is solidarity with Palestine, then Annie Sakkab's *The Poem We Sang* (2023) is resistance. The introduction to Sakkab's *The Poem We Sang* features the Palestinian director calling her film a "gift to Palestinians," rather than a documentary for an outside audience. The curatorial decision to screen resistance cinema to an audience of mostly non-Palestinians begs the question: why does how artists tell the story matter?

In the absence of family archives, Sakkab explores her family history from the Nakba to today via a plethora of found and documented imagery—primarily, contemporary and archival footage of Palestinians as well as original animation and photography. Sakkab's

process of archival fabulation stitches together a family portrait through the image of others. The personal, familial, and national intertwine not only in image but in sound—particularly in a recording of Sakkab's uncle describing his displacement from Jerusalem in 1948, and the poem "We Are a Proud Nation" (1925) by Khalil Al-Sakakini sung by the filmmaker.

How Sakkab tells the story matters distinctly—in the foggy absence, Sakkab refuses to fill in an archive to "prove" Palestinian trauma. Rather, she uses the many affordances of cinema to devise a different kind of archive completely.

Within absence, the protagonist of Iraqi Canadian filmmaker Noor Gatih's *Layla* (2021) daydreams. Set in a sterile interior common in this part of North America, a young woman imagines anonymous hands washing a pink dress. A close-up of another person pans from their chest to chin, with gold earrings and long dark hair falling past their shoulders. Gatih knowingly omits verbal language in her film, instead preferring a visual language. By fabricating an alternative reality in dream space, the quietness of Gatih's dreamer references, as she says in the post-screening discussion, the "silent presence of queerness" in many West Asian communities.

Excelling in the art of silence, Essa Grayeb's *My Whole Heart Is With You* (2022) looks deeply at political language. By cutting, layering, and looping pauses in former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1967 resignation speech, the film requires us to watch differently. Over nine minutes of entrancing repetition, cropped to only show microphones and Nasser's mouth, Grayeb creates an entirely new speech—one that drips, drones, and struggles for words. In a moment where many of us are at a loss for words, *My Whole Heart is With You* shows us that sometimes there are none.

Toronto-based filmmaker Mike Hoolboom has no trouble finding words. Using a method he calls "deep looking," in *Nazareth* (2023) Hoolboom asks, "Would it be possible to stop and look, to see for the first time what we have seen so often before?" Hoolboom uses an almost forensic approach as he deconstructs a black-and-white photograph from 1948 Nazareth, during the Nakba. In it, a local family stands facing the camera and toward a foreign soldier, or as Hoolboom calls him, "a kid who's dressed up as a soldier on the street." Unpacking the minute body language of those photographed—the step of a foot, lift of fingers, spreading of arms—Hoolboom asks us to pay attention to the ways occupation speaks through the body. Hoolboom asks us to see this photo in a new light, even as a "family portrait." Making an archive of a single photograph, *Nazareth* tells a story of presence and absence one detail at a time.

Dedicated to Amy Gottlieb—the Jewish anti-Zionist artist, activist, and educator who called Toronto home until her death in July 2023—the explicitly political stance of “Foggy” is also an homage to Gottlieb’s life’s work. Gottlieb’s contribution to “Foggy”—*Tempest in a Teapot* (1987)—is an elegy to her mother’s activism. Set to a triumphant symphonic score and narrated by the artist, Gottlieb peruses the archive her mother left behind. Included in this is a teapot her mother brought back from a trip to Soviet Russia, and what appear to be her ashes, which the artist lays out decoratively on a dark blue sheet. An elegy for a woman whose radical activities attracted even the attention of the FBI, Gottlieb’s film is an homage to the freedom fighters we’ve lost. Now that Gottlieb herself has passed, we’re left not only to ask “what *was* and what *is*?” but more crucially, when the fog clears, what *will be*?

“Foggy: Palestine Solidarity, Cinema & the Archive” was screened on 4 December 2023 at Cinema Politica, Montreal; Bachir/Yerex Screening Room, Toronto; and VIVO, Vancouver.

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