

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Locating the Lost Archive of Arab Cinema

INTRODUCTION

LOCATING THE LOST ARCHIVE OF ARAB CINEMA

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ABSTRACT | This brief introduction outlines the motivations for this special issue on finding the lost archives of Arab cinema, briefly sketching out the contention that the specific circumstances of cinema production and preservation in the Arab world need to be taken into account in addition to the extant scholarship and theorization of the archive from the Global North. It also introduces the essays at the core of the special issue.

The tongue-in-cheek French translation of this special issue's title, "à la recherche des archives perdues du cinéma Arabe" is, of course, a nod to Proust's epic search for lost time. And like that series of novels, our special issue begins with an absent and perhaps longed-for material and sensorial object: both film itself, as well as the archive.

The archival turn in scholarship has brought with it fascinating and enduring debates about the relationship between archive, power, and narration. Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida's explorations of the roots of the archive highlight the archive as both a figurative site of power, law, and governmentality, as well as a literal site that occupies a certain place within a city or a nation. Historians have worried about the archival fetish in historiography, as well as the narratives that cannot be found within archives that Michel-Rolph Trouillot called the "evidentiary silences"; the narratives of the powerless, the disenfranchised, those left out of history.

Yet all of these readings of the archive and power and state formation – while indubitably convincing and significant – fail to account for the compounded problem at the heart of this special issue: the problem of writing the history – or even the present – of (Arab) cinema in the absence of sites that can be understood as archives, in the traditional sense. For, in addition to the usual problems of environmental preservation, material degradation, and taste formation that plague film archives across the world, in most of the Arab Middle East, the problems are even more basic: a lack of resources, of investment, of space, and of expertise to salvage, collect, and maintain this cinematic history, as well as its attendant paratexts: film magazines, posters, movie theater print material. In countries like Egypt and Morocco which do have national archives for cinema, access is notoriously difficult for researchers; in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, conflict has made already scant or non-existent collections degrade faster than most researchers can keep up – even if there were anything to keep up with, originally. It is here that the work of small preservation groups and teams is immeasurably valuable, even as it exacerbates the detachment of the state from the preservation of cultural memory. And it is here that a theorization of the Arab archive – and its absences – is needed, as well as a methodology for rethinking how to do this work.

In that spirit, this issue is meant as an initial collection of essays that propose a new methodology for approaching Arab cinema in its many absences. Far from being a collective lament of belatedness that inadvertently replicates colonial arguments and stereotypes and relegates history and the making of archives to the cultural centers of power in the global North, it is instead a celebration of the ingenuities of filmmakers, scholars, archivists, and collectors, who have continued to work on this tangible intangible heritage of Arab cinema despite all the myriad challenges. Some of their work is, in fact, on the page

(or the screen) before you, as each presents a new and creative approach to studying cinema and film in the (inadvertent or forced) absence of institutional archives. Claire Cooley turns to the guerrilla and somewhat ad-hoc archive of YouTube to unearth the feminist cinema and almost-silenced history of Bahiga Hafez, an early pioneer of film in Egypt. Claire Launchbury, Marilyn Matar, and Max Silverman discuss the efforts of Jocelyne Saab and Hady Zaccak as cine-archivists, filmmakers who produced documentaries on Lebanese cinema, using extant material available to them at the time. Malika Gueddin takes on a history of cinema in the Maghreb region, from colonialism to post-independence, while Sarah Dornhof's study of the Bouanani family archive in Rabat is both an account of another cine-archivist and the narrative of the formation of a family archive in the absence of state interest and resources in Morocco. This cluster of articles in the issue critically foregrounds archiving methods as artistic practice while raising important questions about access, memory, loss, and absence.

Yet, at the same time, while a figuring image, claims of absence can sometimes become a detriment to research in new directions, and the next cluster of articles in the issue demonstrates a methodology of working through the absent archive. In conversation with new scholarship and filmmaking about Palestinian cinema, yet pushing back against claims of archival absence, Hugo Darroman traces and unpacks one strand of the complicated history of Palestinian cinema in the 1970s, using material from the collaboration between the two PCI's (the Palestine Cinema Initiative and the Italian Communist Party) and uses that to read the film *Tall el-Zaatar* (1977). Pelle Valentin Olsen writes about cinema-going in 1940s Baghdad, and the complex gender politics enabled by the cinema as a public site of leisure. Olsen's work captures how, in the complete absence of archival access, a scholar can retrace occluded histories of film through novel sources: literal novels, short stories, and memoirs of Baghdadis who wove the cinema – and their love of film – into their work.

One such person, whose ruminations on memory and the material object carried through his filmed oeuvre, including in such films as *Beirut al-Liqa'a* (*Beyrouth, la Rencontre*, 1981), left us as this issue was going into print. Borhan Alaouié (1941-2021) will be remembered extensively in a future special issue of *Regards* dedicated to his work. Alaouié is not only a member of a filmmaking generation who, like Jocelyne Saab and Randa Chahhal and others, was deeply involved in documenting the Lebanese civil war – and whose images of Beirut during that war are some of the most defining visual memories of that conflict – but also a director whose meditations on memory and materiality endure in his work, which itself embodies so many of the challenges at the heart of this issue. Alaouié's films were rare objects, almost unavailable for viewing, until they were resurrected by the independent Lebanese NGO Nadi Lekol el-Nas, which has in the past decade, undertaken a critically important restoration and recirculation project of the films of several influential Lebanese directors, including Maroun

Baghdadi and Alaouié. Watching Alaouié's early 1980s film recently, with its unflinching eye on a Beirut that is simultaneously abandoned, yet overcrowded, where the streets are littered with uncollected trash, and where people eat their meals by candlelight in the absence of electricity while others ponder the dilemma of migration, is uncanny and heartbreaking for its resonances with Lebanon's present today, almost 40 years later. But Alaouié's film about two closely connected friends who love each other, but have not seen each other in almost two years, is also about a complicated relationship to recording and memory. In many ways, it is a film about documentation, from its slow pans on black and white photographs to its many minutes filming characters taping their memories. In its concluding minutes, Haidar, one of the film's protagonists who has spent the night recording his thoughts for a woman he has not seen in a few years, has an epiphany while talking to one of his former students. Once a memory is shared, he notes, it can never be forgotten. Haidar's response is to destroy the cassettes onto which he has inscribed his memories; Alaouié films the tape being ripped up and then getting run over by one car after the other on a busy Beirut street, Haidar's record of his life made for Zeina literally being destroyed with every rotation of a rubber tire. The willful and deliberate erasure of the material conditions of a shared past is an apt symbol of the complicated relationship humans have to memory, remembrance, and recording – embedded, of course, as this issue shows, in notions of power, space, and access. The camera films all of this with little affect, and no drama, merely recording the destruction of this materialized memory. Whether destroyed or retained, the material artifacts of memory remain to haunt us, and, in archives absent or present, they force us to think carefully and critically about the relationship between memory, power, and materiality.

It would be remiss to end this brief introduction without acknowledging the tremendous difficulty of laboring under pandemic conditions, when travel and access became even further curtailed even for those with the privileges of movement across borders and institutions. In some ways, it renders the problematic of this special issue of *Regards* even more pertinent, and the work produced even more timely, demonstrating the ways of working around the problems of absence with skill and creativity. I thank profusely the authors for their grace under deadlines and for their contributions, and the many reviewers for their incisive critiques. I extend an especial and enormous amount of gratitude to Toufic El Khoury for working tirelessly under increasingly dire circumstances as the situation in Lebanon continues to deteriorate.

NOTICE BIOGRAPHIQUE

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