

Governing the Visible

Kamal Aljafari's Cinema and the Politics of Visibility in Palestine

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As the cliché goes, truth is the first casualty of war. Today, perhaps nowhere does the phrase feel more painfully apt than in Palestine. Palestinians are deprived not only of the means of resistance, but also of records of violence—and even of the means by which such violence can be recorded. The structure runs deeper still. What has long been governed is not merely the record of violence, but the very conditions under which something comes to count as a record, and some testimony acquires authority over others. The testimony of Palestinians themselves is often less readily accepted as “credible fact” than the self-criticism of progressive Israelis or accounts validated by Western expert institutions. The problem lies not in the competence of individual speakers, but in the structural asymmetry that determines who is authorized to speak for whom.

This asymmetry reaches beyond words into images. Palestinian filmmaker Kamal Aljafari, born in Ramla in present-day Israel, does not so much “film” Palestine as reclaim a Palestine that has already been filmed. In doing so, he renders visible the structures of settler-colonial dispossession and erasure. From his early films, which quietly observe family and home, to his later interventions into Israeli feature films, propaganda footage, and confiscated archives, Aljafari has excavated fragments of political rupture and repression lodged within disparate spaces and images.

In his films, buildings are never mere scenery. They emerge as historical bodies, bearing the traces of those who built them, lived in them, and left. Without reenacting the Nakba—or the subsequent cycles of expulsion and destruction—head-on, Aljafari exposes the traces left in buildings and the relations of power inscribed in urban space. In this way, past expulsions reveal themselves as processes that continue in the present tense.

The origins of this method can be found in *The Roof* (2006). Moving between documentary observation and personal recollection, the film follows members of Aljafari’s family living in Ramla and Jaffa. Both his paternal and maternal families lost their homes in 1948 and were moved into houses from which other Palestinians had

departed. The “roof” of the title refers to the unfinished upper floor of the house into which his family moved. There, the home to which one should return and the home one actually inhabits do not coincide. Dwelling itself comes to harbor the absence of another. The film’s voiceover distills this condition into a single line: “My parents live on the first floor and the past lives above them.”

Alongside its images of the city and the home, the film weaves in the conversations and testimonies of family members and neighbors. In their words, the expulsions of 1948 appear not as a finished past, but as a force that still presses upon the present. People speak of what followed expulsion; the buildings hold that time in silence. The city and the house are not static monuments to the past. They are historical bodies in which time, severed by expulsion and resettlement, has sedimented within the spaces of everyday life. What *The Roof* shows is less a recollection of a lost homeland than a present that endures as the afterlife of the past. Voice gives meaning to the wound; the wound gives voice a place.

What this early work makes clear is that, for Aljafari, making visible means neither reconstructing events head-on nor merely amassing testimony. It means bringing voice and wall, memory and void, into relation, so that the past still at work in the present can emerge between them. In his later work, this method moves from architectural space into the cinematic frame itself.

Two concepts offer a useful way into Aljafari’s work: “cinematic occupation” and “cinematic justice.” Cinematic occupation names the process by which Palestinian cities and landscapes are used as locations for Israeli films, exotic backdrops, or sets for war and crime narratives, while the Palestinians who inhabit those spaces are relegated to the background, anonymized, or erased. Cinematic justice, in turn, re-edits existing images in order to return marginalized people and places to the center. It may not directly deliver legal or political justice, but it can at least redistribute position, scale, and visibility within the image.

In *Recollection* (2015), Aljafari digitally removes the leading actors from Israeli and American feature films shot in Jaffa between the 1960s and the 1990s. In their absence,

buildings and Palestinians—local residents and passersby alike—emerge from the background and come into focus. Rather than filming another Palestine somewhere outside dominant cinema, the film releases the Palestine already lodged within its frames.

The removal of the principal actors is not merely an act of destruction or violence. It exposes the hierarchy between protagonist and background that had long passed as natural, and redistributes visibility within the frame. Palestinians in Jaffa had not only been expelled from the material city; in the fictions subsequently filmed there, they were again pushed into the rear of the image, deprived of names and stories. By emptying the center of the frame, *Recollection* reverses this double expulsion. Where the actors vanish, the city itself emerges as a historical subject.

If *Recollection* overturns the hierarchy between protagonist and background within the cinematic frame, *A Fidai Film* (2024) intervenes in the systems of ownership, classification, and access that surround the image. The film takes as its point of departure Palestinian visual materials seized and dispersed during Israel's 1982 invasion of Beirut. Aljafari brings together images of disparate provenance—pre-1948 records, Israeli propaganda, feature films, and fragments of confiscated footage—to construct a counter-archive of dispossessed and dispersed visual memory.

Among these materials are Hebrew captions added by the Israeli military for purposes of intelligence analysis. Even footage of people harvesting oranges in Qalandiya in 1957 was identified in the military archive as footage of “terrorists.” What transforms ordinary people going about their lives into threats is not the image itself, but the institution that classifies and explains it.

Aljafari blots out some explanatory captions and other on-screen text with strokes of red, while also tinting and repeating the footage and reconstructing its sound. In doing so, he reweaves damaged materials into another history without effacing their wounds. This red intervention extends beyond military captions to the scratches of deteriorated film and even the sea itself. Red signifies blood, wounds, and recurring destruction; at the same time, it draws images of the past into the present and displaces the meanings attached to them. This is not an attempt to restore the materials to their original state. It

is an act of sabotage directed at the authority to determine who may name an image, under what interpretation it will be preserved, and who will be permitted to see it.

The “fidā’ī” of the title—a liberation fighter who stakes his life for the cause—names the method of the film itself: to disrupt from within the relations of ownership and structures of meaning embedded in existing images. Here, cinematic justice expands from the redistribution of visibility within the frame into a struggle over the ownership, classification, and interpretation of images.

Political science and area studies often approach images as propaganda, vehicles of persuasion, or evidence. Yet Aljafari’s work shows that images do not merely represent politics. They also operate as institutions that distribute visibility. In *The Roof*, it is architectural space; in *Recollection*, the cinematic frame; in *A Fidai Film*, the archive. Each becomes an apparatus that determines who will be recognized as a historical subject and who will be treated as an absence, a background, or a threat.

To film, edit, classify, preserve, and release an image is never a neutral technical act. Through what is collected, how it is named, and who is permitted to see it, these practices draw the boundary between the historical subject and the object of security scrutiny. They are institutions—and practices of rule—that edit the distinctions between inhabitant and threat, memory and intelligence, history and oblivion.

If truth is the first casualty of war, Aljafari does not answer by offering another “true image.” What he reveals instead is that an image is never merely a record. It is an institution of visibility, one that decides who will count as a subject and who will be processed as background or threat. In Palestine, what is governed is not only what can be seen, but who has the authority to see and who may determine what an image means.

Aljafari’s cinematic justice cannot, by itself, reclaim land or bring occupation and discrimination to an end. It is no substitute for political justice. Yet from within the image, it can cut into the unequal order of visibility that precedes justice itself. What Aljafari reclaims is not only images of the past. It is the right of Palestinians to see, name, and tell their own lives as their own history.

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