

What It Means to Make Films Out of Archives

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Kamal Aljafari is one of today's most internationally acclaimed makers of artful, cinematically ambitious documentary—the kind sometimes called "creative documentary." In the documentary sections of festivals abroad, beginning with the Berlin International Film Festival, it is almost rarer not to hear his name than to hear it.

Novelty of subject matter alone could never build a track record like this. Many other filmmakers have set out to depict the realities of Palestine. What makes Aljafari exceptional is that he has invented a method all his own for bringing a film into being out of archival footage. He is that rare filmmaker who refuses to leave previously shot material as mere evidentiary record, instead reweaving it into new narratives that challenge conventional accounts of history.

To make a film out of archives, however, can mean many things; a whole range of methodologies exists. In what follows, I want to take up two Aljafari films made through contrasting approaches.

Paradiso, XXXI, 108

Every shot that makes up *Paradiso, XXXI, 108* (hereafter *Paradiso*) is breathtakingly beautiful. At first glance, nothing ugly seems to appear on screen at all. If that is so, then what is this vague unease we feel while watching? The film is built from footage once shot by the Israeli army for propaganda purposes, which Aljafari has re-edited. What, in the original material, did he alter, and how, to produce this sense of wrongness?

The first thing to catch the eye is the soldiers' extremely red skin. Compared against the original archival material, it is clear that Aljafari has boldly altered the color of human flesh. And, as if to complement it, the deep green of the uniforms. This color combination, emphasized at key moments, is echoed in the coloring of the recurring title cards.

Then, as the film nears its end, the valiant background music gives way to "Silent Night," famous as a Christmas carol. Under blue moonlight, the soldiers drift off to sleep. Men as guileless as children, whom one can scarcely believe are engaged in war day and night,

lie there sleeping. Dawn breaks; beyond the airfield, smoke from bombing hangs in the air, while behind it one hears the sound of cheerful chatter. Images that were never meant to go together intertwine, and the sense of unease reaches its peak.

As other critics have noted, the film depicts acts of war yet never once shows the enemy. The commander reports "I detect no enemy" while repeatedly shelling the far reaches of the desert. The gap between the innocence of playing at war and the fact that the tools being used are real weapons with the power to kill amplifies the disquiet. This film secured its precarious beauty precisely by continually erasing the victims of war from the frame.

Its surface is utterly placid—perhaps, in fact, there is nothing wrong at all. Aljafari made the choice to keep the victims hidden to the very end, and to go on showing the self-absorbed perpetrators lost in their game of war. Viewers who have noticed the unreadable yet beautiful wrongness embedded in *Paradiso* will find themselves unable not to think of the beings deleted from the screen, and to imagine their outlines.

An Unusual Summer

Ordinarily, anyone setting out to make a film tries to capture high-resolution, beautiful images. Splurging on expensive equipment, assembling a crowd of specialists—the list of labors undertaken in pursuit of a beautiful image goes on without end. Measured against that conventional wisdom of image-making, *An Unusual Summer* is an aberrant work. From beginning to end, the screen shows nothing but low-resolution surveillance-camera footage shot in the 2000s.

Having imposed on himself the constraint of using footage that is hardly beautiful by any stretch, and shot from a single fixed vantage point throughout, Aljafari carried out two strategies to make the film succeed. The first is the crafting of a sonic world. The sound of a car door closing, the noise of an exhaust pipe, driving rain and thunderclaps, the chirping of birds. The fast-forwarded, repeated walking of a neighbor is given a light-footed tread, and a locally magnified plastic bag rustles back to life with a tactile, crinkling noise. Sound carefully honed so as not to destroy the nuances of the original footage tells the everyday life of Ramla with the utmost eloquence. Some viewers may

feel an almost animation-like pleasure in the exquisite slippage that lurks between movement and sound.

The second strategy is the close-ups inserted throughout, and the direction of the gaze they achieve. Through Aljafari's deft manipulation, we gradually come to realize that hidden within this seemingly unremarkable fixed shot are, in fact, four little stages. The eye goes first to the parking lot at the center. This surveillance camera was, after all, installed to catch whoever had been smashing car windows. Expecting that figure to appear, the viewer's eyes drift over the parking lot. But as departing figures, the green of the trees, and the shadow of the house falling across the road are magnified and displayed, we gradually open our eyes to the very environment surrounding the parking lot. It is, first, the road in front of the house where a great many passersby come and go; beyond it, the open thoroughfare; and, across the parking lot, the neighboring house standing quietly. Combined with the meticulously constructed sonic world, the banal surveillance footage is transformed into a fine film that captures the everyday life of a Ramla that once surely existed.

That the search for the culprit is not the film's true aim is clear. As if toying with viewers who expect a mystery to unfold, Aljafari shifts the footage's chronology, lovingly portrays a neighbor's peculiar routines, and lets time crawl forward. In its portrayal of the slackened everyday life—forever adjacent to tension—that flows among the Palestinians of Ramla, this film has no equal. Palestinians have long been beings observed through the lens of surveillance cameras. Much of that footage, surely, has been used and discarded at will, to identify culprits in ways convenient to Israel. Using that same kind of material, Aljafari succeeds in depicting the quality of the time that flows through a homeland—time that undeniably exists yet has been treated as though it does not.

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