PLO Cultural Activism: Mediating Liberation aesthetics in revolutionary contexts

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Abstract

This paper addresses the PLO's cultural activism, in other words, its investment in diverse spheres of popular culture, at the beginning of the revolutionary period 1968- 1982 in its history. Drawing on archival research of the main spheres of the PLO's cultural output, it traces how the PLO strategized popular culture to enhance its image, create a new visibility for the Palestinians and mediate a Palestinian-centric liberation aesthetic rooted in real experiences of, and participation in, the Palestinian revolution. As such, the PLO's cultural activism combined an agential understanding of what it means to be Palestinian with popular armed struggle, language and image to conjure power in grassroots action, turn attention to the Palestinians themselves and evoke enduring affective identifications with the organization despite various setbacks and the passage of time. The argument is not intended to romanticize the role of the PLO or popular culture in a golden age of liberation politics. Rather it underlines the role of mediated aesthetics in political struggles, addressing it not as an epiphenomenal or causal sequence, but as a key component, of revolutionary processes

Keywords; PLO, aesthetic revolution; cultural activism; media; Palestinians

Introduction

The Palestine Liberation Organization has been extensively studied in the social sciences and humanities particularly in relation to its emergence, its structures and organization, its leaders, strategies and objectives, the conflict with Israel, its relations with the Arab world and the wider international community[1] and its role in building Palestinians' social spaces and institutions. Much of the literature, however, remains largely dominated by the regional framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict, international and regional politics, geo-political considerations, diplomacy and terrorism with little systemic analysis of the dynamics of popular mobilization and communicative practices that ran hand in hand with the organization's emergence and political evolution.

Drawing on original archival research of the main spheres of the PLO's cultural production as well as interviews with PLO and Arab media personnel, this essay addresses these dynamics by tracing the PLO's cultural activism – its investment in and attention to diverse communicative platforms and various cultural genres to mobilize a Palestinian-centric revolutionary aesthetic in language and image, mediate a new visibility for the Palestinian

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[1] See Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Helena Cobham, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1987) and Paul Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

people and help transform the organization into the most potent contemporary social and political movement in the Arab world, particularly in the early revolutionary period between 1968 and 1974. These practices not only helped attract recruits to the revolution and the PLO ranks, but also redefined Palestinians' popular imagery and self-identification while locating it in actual lived experiences and conditions of displacement and loss of the homeland as well as within global struggles against imperialism and injustice. With the PLO becoming a local, regional and global symbol for a diversity of projects in cultural and political rebellion, activists, intellectuals, cultural producers and artists from the Arab World and beyond gravitated to its aesthetic concerns and impulse, composing a vibrant field of political and cultural innovation and contributing to the production of a revolutionary vocabulary in diverse spaces.

Conceptually, my approach is underpinned by two inter-related propositions; the first draws on French intellectual Jacques Ranciere's articulation of aesthetics as bound up in politics, and therefore, as always in dialogue with, as well as in opposition to, broader social forces, political processes and modalities of power[2]. In this sense, politics, as Ranciere suggests, is "the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world…. a way of framing … a specific sphere of experience"[3] enacted and performed through aesthetic expression in different cultural genres and platforms. The second proposition sees that all revolutionary processes write their own scripts and, therefore, their media are also part of these processes. As such, all revolutionary (liberation and/or transformative) processes are essentially communicative processes that demand the articulation of competing ideologies, the circulation of information, the exhortations to participation and the mobilization of popular culture in order to achieve their potential. These two propositions underline that aesthetics and communication cannot be seen as arbitrary or as epiphenomenal to revolutionary processes, but rather as central elements of popular strategies intended to produce a revolutionary response and crucial to an informed comprehension of the PLO's enduring appeal. These propositions were understood by PLO leaders who strategized a Palestinian-centric revolutionary aesthetic mediated in language and image as an affective modality of the visual and the political and as a tool to mobilize Palestinians behind it.

Transformative histories

In 1968, new political and ideological forces swept through Europe and other parts of the world, fuelled partly by popular outrage over the Vietnam War, liberation movements in different countries of the Global South as well as local grievances and localized protests against repressive regimes and colonial rule. In the Arab World, it was the Palestinian revolution that served as the crucible for political and ideological transformations across the Arab World as well as a resource for cultural creativity and artistic innovation in media, film, artwork, graphic art, poster art, music and performance and other cultural forms and platforms.

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[2] Jacques Ranciere. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2010).
[3] ibid, 152.

Historically speaking, the period 1968-1982 witnessed an unprecedented itinerancy as thousands of Palestinians were forced to move from one country to the next when various Palestinian factions (and the Palestinian people) fell afoul of one Arab regime after another. The period also marked a shift in the locus of regional power as then powerful Arab states, such as Egypt and Syria, suffered a serious setback to pan-Arab ideologies and nationalist tendencies following the defeat in 1967 and Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which turned regional and global attention to the Palestinians who until then had remained subordinated to the strategic considerations of Arab regimes and the violence Israel perpetrated against them. Within a few months of the defeat, the Palestinian National Movement had developed a degree of leadership, organization and mass support superior to earlier grassroots Palestinian resistance movements that emerged during the British Palestine Mandate in the early 20th century and to other political movements in the Arab world. It also developed a modest military capability against Israeli targets, while posing significant political and military challenges to the authority of Arab regimes in the confrontation zone with Israel, namely Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. These challenges would precipitate a grievous setback to the growing national movement in 1970 when the Palestinian guerrillas were ousted from their Jordanian bases after what is known as Black September, and other setbacks from the mid-1970s when Palestinian guerrillas were drawn into the Lebanese civil war which began in 1975 and which culminated in the ouster of the PLO from Lebanon in 1982 following the Israeli invasion and occupation of south Lebanon.

In 1969, emboldened by the surge in popular support following the battle of Karama that took place in Jordan, Palestinians guerrilla groups formally took control of the PLO which had operated largely as a quasi-independent organization since its foundation by the Arab League in 1964. This takeover, as Yezid Sayigh argued, provided the institutionalized and structural frameworks for the construction of a new political vocabulary that would legitimize and sustain PLO state-building processes along the lines of state-building processes undertaken by Arab states following the end of colonial rule. As he wrote, the political arena the takeover created "defined objectives and strategies around which the broad constituency [of the liberation movement] could be mobilized and organized, and provided the channels through which mass participation in national politics would take place."[4] The move also marked the transition of control of power from a traditionally-established Palestinian middle-class structure to a class of petit bourgeois activists and guerrilla leaders whose experiences had been conditioned primarily by the exodus and living in exile and who used cultural platforms to make visible revolutionary practices and to rebuild the Palestinians' sociological space – social networks, value systems and norms, and cultural symbols.[5]

From the outset, the PLO, dominated by the three largest guerrilla factions, Fatah, the Palestine Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), emphasized the role of armed struggle in achieving liberation. Fatah, the largest political group with significant manpower, finances and

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[4] Sayigh, Armed Struggle, 669.

[5] Ibid.

support, was the most vocal and persistent in its support behind the transformation of armed struggle into a full-scale popular form of military mobilization. According to its vision, liberation (of the homeland and the Palestinian people) would need to through two main stages of mobilization, the first stage was envisaged as a phase of political mobilization during which the Palestinian masses would be contained and redirected towards armed struggle; and the second was a phase of revolutionary explosion when armed struggle would constitute the ultimate liberation and transformation of the masses.[6] The takeover by the guerrilla factions of the PLO in 1969, however, transformed the nature of conventional popular mobilization as it involved a continuous process of strategic mobilization combining top-down and bottom-up practices which evolved, and were nurtured, by organized and non-organized structures and spaces, including popular organizations connected to the PLO. These included grassroots organizations and unions, such as the General Union of Palestinian Workers, the General Union of Palestinian Women, the General Union of Palestinian Teachers, the Palestine Red Crescent Society and the General Union of Palestinian Students, the oldest organization first conceived in 1950 by Palestinian students at Cairo University, including Yasser Arafat and worked in tandem with PLO institutions, such as the PLO Executive Committee, chaired by Fatah leader and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat until his death and which included representatives from various guerrilla groups and independents, the Central Council, the Palestine Liberation Army, the Palestine National Council which, in principle, was the PLO's highest decision-making authority, which controlled several departments, including the information and planning departments.[7] Along with popular mobilization, the guerrilla groups developed military mobilization campaigns aimed at recruiting young Palestinians into commando units run by the various parties and engaged in resource mobilization through the PLO financial organs like the Palestine National Fund, supplemented by appeals to wealthy Palestinians and fund-raising activities. These practices were carried out in parallel with vibrant and lively theoretical discussions on the subject. Every major Palestinian group and movement produced an extensive literature on comparative mobilization campaigns, methods, functions and purposes.

The PLO's culture work

The PLO's popular mobilization campaigns and communicative practices underpinned what Chamberlin has called the PLO's global offensive[8] against Israeli imperialism, which arguably helped render Palestine as a metaphor for global struggles over human rights, racism and oppression. The campaign also underpinned the PLO's populist local and regional offensive in the Palestinian camps in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, in the Occupied Territories and in the wider Arab world intended to recruit support and re-inscribe the

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[6]Faris Giacaman. 2013. "Political Representation and Armed Struggle," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XLIII, 1, 29 and 24-38.

[7] For further details about the evolution of the PLO's formal structures and institutions, see Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*.

[8] See Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive,* 2012.

Palestinians as central actors in the revolutionary process and as the ultimate participants in the revolution.[9]

These campaigns and practices did not evolve organically, but had to be devised, worked on and executed by PLO elites and institutions as well as diverse cultural workers and volunteers who recognized the importance of constructing a political discourse in language and image that is accessible to ordinary people and that articulates their sense of self, already-felt grievances and existential concerns. As such, any analysis of the PLO's cultural activism must take into account the methods, tools and practices it deployed to recruit support and build the image of the Palestinians as well as the dynamics between agency and structure that could only evolve within organized structural and institutional arrangements and within particular conditions of organized practice. Nowhere were these dynamics more visible than in the repetitive and constant mediation of the revolutionary vocabulary, aims and development in news, slogans, commentaries, language, image, poetry, song, poster art and cartoons that helped it acquire its impetus and saw it emerge as a social force in the region, and a political force globally.

The mediation of the revolution in aesthetic forms and genres was a central component of the PLO's cultural activism strategy, which saw it pour funds and invest in manpower in different spheres of popular culture, attracting Palestinian, Arab and international intellectual and cultural capital and volunteers[10] and engaging them in a dialogic process shaped by constant communicative interactions with the intended recipients of this strategy. This interaction was apparent in the appeals and calls for participation in the revolution and in the mobilization of opinion in diverse platforms. As the PLO expanded in structure, institutions, finances and manpower, its cultural activism strategy would see a seemingly unmanaged or unsupervised explosion in cultural and artistic output in the early 1970s, unleashing what Lebanese novelist and intellectual Elias Khoury has labelled a 'veritable revolutionary intellectual awakening[11] most visibly evident in the PLO's formal and institutionalized popular cultural spheres.

These spheres encompassed a broad range of diverse communicative and cultural platforms, from print, such as the periodical *Filastin al-Thawra* launched as the official PLO paper in 1971 and other guerrilla print media, to news media, such as the PLO-controlled Palestinian news agency (WAFA), to radio, such as the PLO radio *Sawt al-Assifa*, to film, such as the many films about the revolution produced and distributed by the Palestinian Film Unit, to PLO art institutions, such as the Plastics Arts Union, and other cultural organizations responsible for the production of thousands of political posters, performance works and theatre. All these spheres operated under the management and directorship of PLO's Unified Information Unit formed in 1971 to disseminate the PLO's vision and ideology and mobilize the masses through making inroads in the Palestinians' cultural realm, thus functioning holistically and in dialogue with each other and with their intended

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[9] For primary material on the Palestinian revolution, based on oral histories and wide-ranging interviews, see www.

[10] See Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and Search for a State.* 1997.

[11] Elias Khoury, personal interview with author, Beirut, 15 May 2015.

audiences, while documenting Palestinian lives and conditions, disseminating news reports, commentaries, images, poems, stories and songs related to the Palestinians, publishing memoirs of key Palestinian figures, personal memories of Palestinian homes and personal and collective accounts of heroic acts of struggle. In addition, these spheres brought news and comments about revolutionary and liberation movements elsewhere, familiarizing their audiences with revolutionary thought and practices elsewhere. However, while the Unified Information Unit managed to bring together the different Palestinian factions for a couple of years following its formation, these factions soon would begin producing their own media in order to underline differences in ideologies, political visions and targets amongst the various guerrilla groups.

Transformation of the revolution's media

Even before the expansion of the PLO, Palestinian guerrillas and other activist groups had begun to produce what might be called 'small media' – amateurish newspapers, leaflets, flyers, short documents and communiqués as well as poster art and vernacular photos of Palestinians and Palestinian homes and villages. Before 1969, much of the stock of mediated cultural resources was produced underground, shared between friends and circulated to small groups in the refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, functioning, albeit in limited ways, as technologies or channels of communication for the production and dissemination of new imagined solidarities, what Benedict Anderson has famously termed 'imagined communities.'[12]

The pre-1969 period also witnessed the emergence of a powerful aesthetic genre - poster art and political posters produced by the Palestine Liberation Army, Palestinian artists' collectives, solidarity organizations, student unions, political fronts and professional associations. In 1964, the PLO appointed Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout (who later came to be known as the artist of the revolution) and put him in charge of production of experimental political poster art, which would evolve in the 1970s (when the PLO was based in Lebanon) into creative visual symbolic sites of struggle that would later be appropriated as tools for resistance by other groups and revolutionary movements, such as the Lebanese political party Hizbullah and the Iranian Islamic revolutionaries.

The Palestinian guerrillas' use of print started small, as underground scattered ventures proposed by the same people who began thinking about the revolution and planning its route, including the founders of Fatah, Fatah Leader Yasser Arafat and his close aides. An example of these products was Fatah's *Hisad al-Assifa* which published underground and which started using visuals - a combination of crude images and photographs – as well as news reports to disseminate the fledgling movement's ideology, thus functioning as a multi-media platform in which form and content were in constant dialogue. *Hisad al-Assifa* published news stories of early guerrilla operations against Israel, together with the names of guerrilla fighters and martyrs along with crude hand-drawings of their portraits and artistic renderings of revolutionary symbols drawn in charcoal. An

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[12] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1983.

example of such aesthetic renderings is a charcoal image of a *fedayee* with his head wrapped in a Palestinian *kuffiyeh* and gripping a Kalashnikov gently embracing his mother drawn wearing the traditional Palestinian dress with the caption, *"The Palestinians*: *1948 Refugees – 1965 Revolutionaries."*

Around the same time, the newspaper *Filastinuna* appeared in 1959 as the first Fatah media to publish openly in Beirut though without a licence. Billing itself as the mouthpiece of Fatah, it continued to appear regularly for five years and played a key role in disseminating Fatah's ideology and aims.[13] The paper, like many underground mobilizational media, engaged in mnemonic practices, the social invocation of past events, people and places, to summon the dispersed Palestinians as a national agentive collective and mobilize them behind the ideology of armed struggle. At the same time, it   published news about post-colonial liberation struggles elsewhere as well as news about guerrilla activities and ideologies, charting a linear narrative between the story of dispossession and the story of liberation while publicizing the aims of the revolution. As Khaled al-Hassan, one of the founders of Fatah, noted: "We [in Kuwait] were the only ones who managed to have a magazine called *filastinuna*. …. through this magazine, we became known before the others…. and we became the core of the PLO group through the P.O. Box of this magazine. And then we managed to see each other, and finally, in 1962, we had a conference in Kuwait and the whole world was united in Fatah."[14]

Hand in hand with making inroads into the media realm, the PLO sought journalists, writers, artists and designers to compose poetry, music, media, commentaries and poster art and actively appropriated the aesthetics and language of world liberation movements in order to legitimize its aims and projects. Using various communicative practices, such as populist campaigns in radio and print media, leaflets, speeches, school visits as well as performative practices (songs and dances), PLO elites not only managed to construct an image of the group as a Palestinian populist revolutionary movement, but also to re-signify 'what it means to be Palestinian' within the discursive frames and images of revolution, resistance, political mobilization and armed struggle rather than through existential frames of dispossession and statelessness.

Instrumentalizing culture

By the mid-1970s, the socially-constructed image of the newly transformed Palestinian subject, more than any other revolutionary trope or icon, dominated the Palestinians' expanding aesthetic universe. This newly-constructed subject was repeatedly rendered in language and image as the *real Palestinian* – the steadfast, struggling and resistant Palestinian - who would replace the *fallah* (peasant) subject as the primary archetype of the nation. The transformation from the until then dominant representations of the Palestinians as powerless, pitiful and stateless refugees that appeared in Western media and in UNRWA publications to representations of the Palestinians as active participants in a   national

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[13] Ghazi al-Khalili, 'Sahafat al-Muqawama fi 'Ashar Sanawat,' (The Resistance Media in ten years), *Shuun Filastiniyya*, 1975, volume 41/42,484-514.

[14] Khaled al-Hassan cited in Cobham, *The Palestinian Liberation Organization*, 24.

liberation movement did not happen instantly nor was it a causal outcome of the revolution. Rather, it was the intended outcome of the PLO's intervention in popular culture intended to call up a new Palestinian collective identity as a political identity through placing rhetorical emphasis on "the Palestinian personality; the Palestinian people, the Palestinian nation."

In the camps, and as the revolution gained momentum, many people stopped calling themselves refugees, preferring the term militants, activists or revolutionaries, while refugee camps became, as Julie Peteet wrote, '… the places of an authentic Palestinian identity rooted in the land, struggle and suffering .. [and where] those now in the camps were imagined as being somehow *more 'Palestinian*,' (own emphasis added) and more authentic in their capacity to represent key components of collective identity."[15] The agential subjectivities created through years of organized and popular mobilization in the 1960s and early 1970s continued to be sustained through different practices in art work, media, films as well as through commemorative practices and individual and collective memories.

Various studies have identified how PLO elites, like other movement leaders, strategized particular socio-historical contexts to appeal to potential followers and provoke large-scale popular mobilization, highlighting both rational and opportunistic decision-making processes behind political action. The battle of Karama in March 1968 was one of the most important events that gave the PLO the perfect opportunity to publicize its ideological break with pan-Arab ideology and Palestinian elite thinking in the previous two decades. While the declared victory was more symbolic than strategic, the battle was appropriated as shorthand for guerrilla heroics and as a narrative framework that would help unleash a powerful aesthetic imaginary that underlined the centrality of armed struggle for liberation and the symbolic transformation of the Palestinians through their participation in armed struggle. As such, armed struggle was constructed as the agent of transformation. As Fatah leader Khalil al-Wazir commented,

> a central, comprehensive and multi-dimensional process… Its sum total embodied the various facets and activities of the Palestinian people as a whole, whether these facets and activities are political, social, economic, military, or cultural. …This is how we have proceeded to rebuild our people and reassert its national identity, in order to achieve […] aims of return and liberation of the land. We understood [armed struggle] as an integrated process involving three dimensions: organization, production and combat.[16]

Nowhere was the language of armed struggle more powerfully mediated than in the PLO's expanding cultural spheres, particularly in its newspapers and periodicals, which would turn into rich discursive and visual archives for a liberation aesthetics that not only articulated what it means to be Palestinian, but also defined the ways in which the Palestinian revolution was represented, talked about, practiced and felt by the target subjects in diverse ways, providing legitimacy to the PLO and boosting its appeal. Indeed, while

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[15] Julie Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair, Palestinian Refugee Camps (*Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 2003), 141-47.

[16] Cited in Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, 668.

risking not taking seriously the power dimension of the PLO itself, it is nevertheless important to underline that structures have legitimacy as long as they are endowed with legitimacy.

Some PLO media officials, such as Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, one of the longest serving editors at *Filastin al-Thawra* and later a political adviser to Arafat, would claim that the PLO media, in particular, 'transformed the PLO into a modern revolutionary movement'[17]. But it was also the PLO's institutionalization of these spheres that transformed the ways the media was used and consumed. The institutionalization process was formalized in 1972, when the Palestine National Council approved the establishment of a PLO-managed Unified Information Unit to bring together all guerrillas cultural output under one umbrella and avert a "state of confusion and divisions within the resistance."[18] *Filastin al-Thawra* would thus replace *Fatah*, which functioned as the mouthpiece of the PLO between 1970 and 1972. The periodical, which was distributed without charge to the guerrilla fighters in Beirut and was smuggled into the occupied territories, continued to publish weekly until June 1976 when it started publishing daily following the siege of Tal-Al-Zaatar camp, but publication was irregular during the height of the Lebanese civil war. The paper ceased publication in Beirut during the Israeli siege. [19]

As the PLO enhanced its armed and political power base in Lebanon, the 1970s would witness an exponential rise in cultural spaces which attracted writers, artists, intellectuals, poets and novelists from the Arab world, including Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, the PLO official poet Muin Bseisso, novelist and intellectual Ghassan Kanafani, Majed Sharara (both were later assassinated by Israeli forces) and Hassan al-Batal. By the mid-1970s, the PLO had formalized a large structure for cultural and artistic production, providing a collective workplace, equipped with the necessary tools and resources, and creating a new class of revolutionary intellectuals. By the end of the 1970s, the PLO was publishing 29 daily titles, representing 16.6 per cent of the total number, 18 weeklies, 13 bi-weeklies, 62 monthly publications (this was the largest category of Palestinian serials and included *shu'un filastiniya*), 16 quarters and 21 annuals.[20] The PLO also established research centres, including the Palestine Research Centre (PRC) in 1965 in Beirut, which was to become the major platform for archiving, publishing and distributing knowledge about Palestine and its culture until its destruction by Israel in 1982. Featuring regular contributions by prominent writers and intellectuals, such as the historian Anis Sayigh and the intellectual/poet Mahmoud Darwish, the PRC published over 400 monographs, pamphlets and maps in Arabic, English, French and Spanish, as well as the quarterly periodical *Shu'um Filastiniya* (Palestinian Affairs) between 1965 and 1982.

Liberation Aesthetics

During the first few years of publication, *Filastin al-Thawra* was central to the construction and dissemination of the PLO's liberation aesthetic, constantly paying attention to the

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[17] Ahmed Abdel-Rahman. Personal interview with author, Ramallah, 17 October 2014.

[18] *Filastin al-Thawra*, 28 June 1972: 1

[19] Hassan al-Batal. Personal Interview with author. Ramallah, 19 October 2014.

[20] See Issam el-Dine Farag. *Alwathifa al-ittisaliya li. Munathamat al-tahrir al-filastiniya* (The communicative role of the PLO,) part one. (Cairo: Markez al-Mahroussa, 2000).

relation between content and form in order to communicate the revolution's potential. This was evident from the first issue when the periodical used a full-page poster of *Kufiyah*-clad guerrilla fighters raising the Palestinian flag in a formation that replicated the contours of the map of historic Palestine, underlining the aesthetic concerns of the revolution and its substance in its early years – the liberation of Palestine through armed struggle. These concerns were reiterated in the main editorial, which engaged in a dialogue with the image, thus constituting a model for a dialogic process of communication that is inclusive and effective in particular contexts but that is also intended to call up the intended recipients as a national collective. While the poster art showed how liberation could be achieved (that is through the actions of the Fedayeen), the main editorial underlined that the role of communication in the revolutionary process. As it stated,

> 'The publication of *Filastin al-Thawra* is an important step in the route to liberation…. It is the embodiment of the continuous efforts (of the revolution) and the long struggle to achieve national unity… [it] is an expression of the thinking of the revolution, its unified stand towards national liberation…. today, we appear to our masses and readers to show our commitment to the unity of the Palestinian endeavour and the unity of the revolutionary work…so we can connect the people with the revolutionary will.'[21]

Subsequent editorials were written in a hybrid rhetorical-conversational style intended to interpellate the readers as participants while underlining the certainty of the armed struggle. Putting aside the ideological undertones of the political vocabulary and the imagery and its intention to construct a homogenous national consciousness, the archival research of the periodical over the period under review showed how the PLO leaders and cultural workers (producers) understood that aesthetics was bound up in politics and how they used images, poster art, adverts, stories and reports on Palestinians and Palestinian activities to materialize an aesthetic phenomenon that would be a forerunner of the hybrid aesthetics and iconography seen in the language and images of the Iranian revolutionaries in 1979 and Hizbullah since the mid-1980s. To summon the scattered Palestinians as a national collective, the periodical featured regular columns, such as the column under the title: "*We are with you.*" The use of the pronoun 'you' in addressing the intended audience was intended to construct and call up a collective 'imagined community' of Palestinians as agents. Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community hinges on the dissemination of a vernacular language spread through the medium of print, but its success also hinges on how this imagination is constructed and talked about and which existential contexts it responds to. Such a mode of interpellation differs from the Althusserian structuralist concept of ideologies 'interpolating' identities because it suggests the inclusion of subjects in the social invocation of nationalist ideologies, and constituted a powerful language that served to summon the intended audiences in the years under review. Another regular column that discussed revolutionary news and the political situation came under the regular headline

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[21] *Filastin al-thawra*, 18 June 1972: 1

"*Issues of the struggle*" while a third, under the headline "*Lest we Forget*", provided brief biographies and images of martyrs, prisoners and descriptions of villages in Palestine, some of which had been lost or destroyed, functioning as a 'site of memory'[22] and for the production of memory as a tool of political struggle.

The early issues of *Filastin al-Thawra* regularly published a column titled "*Diary of a refugee*", which later ran as a regular section titled "*The Refugees Write*", composed of statements or poems from readers identified by name and place of residence, thereby tracing a concrete and intimate geography of Palestinians in exile and constructing an agential understanding of what it means to be Palestinians through making public personal narratives and experiences that until then were told in whispers for fear of political reprisal from the security forces of host countries. The periodical also was involved in commemorative practices in which main events, such as the launch of the Palestinian Revolution, the 'Black September' battles in Jordan, the Nakba of 1948, Land Day and other important dates were remembered in different ways. Several pieces reported on the Palestinians in Israel—their living conditions as well as their cultural and political activities. But a large chunk of each issue was devoted to making visible ordinary Palestinians' experiences told through personal stories, memories, events as well as short stories and poems. Indeed, the construction of ordinary Palestinians as agents in their liberation was a dominant and constant theme that came across clearly in the interweaving of content and form (language and image) to the extent that Palestinians were invoked as both subjects and agents of the revolution, most evident in the conflation of phrases such as 'Palestinian people', the 'Palestinian revolution' and the 'Palestinian personality' that served to perhaps momentarily collapse differentiations along gender and class lines and that would inform imaginations of what it means to be Palestinian.

With the expansion in its power base in Lebanon in the early 1970s, the PLO institutionalized broadcasting in 1975 by establishing its official radio *Sawt Filastin* (the voice of Palestine) in Beirut to disseminate news of the revolution, songs of the revolution and coordinate with print to provide a seamless, continuous flow of revolutionary discourse. Like print media, guerrilla radio had often been underground, such as in 1970 and just before the outbreak of war between the guerrillas and Jordanian armed forces, an underground radio station called *Zamam 105* began broadcasting from Amman. Its key function was to pass on coded messages during the Jordanian-Palestinian clashes, and to use songs to mobilise support. Another mobile radio station called S*awt al-Asifa* also played a role in keeping spirits high during that time. Radio broadcasting moved to the southern Syrian city of *Daraa* in August 1970, supported by funding and technical know-how from China, but the station was closed by Syrian authorities in 1973.

Visual aesthetics

An important element of the revolutionary momentum as a movement bringing together diverse forces was its fluidity in terms of its formal definition, which was evident in its practices and its appropriation of the aesthetics of Marxist, Maoist and other vocabularies and adapting some of the experiences of Vietnamese, Chinese, Algerian or Cuban liberation

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[22] Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoires (*London: Routledge, 1996).

movements. As such, the movement in its early years can be defined by its relatively 'open' politics of practice[23] that sought legitimacy through grassroots support for liberation, or, as Sharabi wrote, "through the struggle by the Palestinians. As the movement gains knowledge of its enemy, it gains knowledge of itself and it gains knowledge of itself as it struggles."[24] It was in this openness that revolutionary aesthetic expression and experimentation flourished and expanded in different forms and genres controlled by the PLO; in artistic and cultural activities, in the formation of an arts and national culture agency, the association for theatre and Palestinians popular art, the Palestinian folk dance troupe; photography; plastic arts; graphic arts (which was in charge of the production of posters, emblems, book covers, post cards, etc.); exhibition branch and a research centre.

The revolutionary aesthetic was evident even before the PLO was taken over by the guerrilla factions and most visible in the early publications of Fatah when militants began taking photographs of military operations, publish them in the newspaper *Filastinuna* and distribute them in the camps.[25] Later on, Fatah established a special photography unit to take images of the revolution and the martyrs until the battle of Karama which initiated a push towards establishing a film section.[26] In 1968, Fatah founded the Palestine Film Unit, which was also propelled by activist film-makers intent on expressing the revolution in new aesthetic forms. In its first five years, the unit made over a dozen films which reflected the ideological and existential contexts within which they were produced.[27]

In 1972, the PLO expanded its control of cultural institutions by setting up the Palestinian Film Institute under the management of the PLO Unified Information Unit in order to produce revolutionary films to mobilize and recruit support through a 'popular cinema in which people find themselves in the process of making history."[28] Up to 1982, when the PLO was forced out of its Lebanese base following the Israeli invasion, the unit produced more than 30 documentaries and co-produced several documentaries with a number of cinema groups from Germany, France, the UK, Argentina and others. These documentaries often focused on ordinary lives of Palestinians in refugee camps and the lives of the guerrillas as they trained in various camps. They were screened in schools, universities and cultural centres and distributed through the PLO offices abroad. One example of these early films was the *Palestinian Right (1968, o*ne of the first cinematic attempts to give agency to the Palestinians as militants, and *With Soul, With Blood* (1971) which provided a complex visual and written narrative of the Black September events. Within a few years and following the move to Lebanon, a diverse avant-garde of film-makers turned to the revolution for inspiration, experimenting with new cinematic language

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[23] See Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010/2013).

[24] Hisham Sharabi. Liberation or Setttlement: The Dialectics of Palestinian Struggle. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 2 (2), 1970, 33-49.

[25] Hassan abu Ghneimah. *Palestine and the Cinematic Eye*, (Damascus, Arab Writers' Union publications, 1991).

[26] Ibid.

[27] See Adnan Mdeinat, "The Palestinian Cinema" in T*he Palestinian Encyclopedia*, (Beirut: Institute of Palestine Studies, 1990).

[28] ibid.

in order to translate the revolutionary rhetoric into vernaculars capable of mobilizing different audiences in diverse spaces – in Germany, France, Holland, Cuba, Italy, Argentina, Japan, the UK, the US and elsewhere.[29] With time, guerrilla and Palestinian film would become one of the boldest in Arab visual cultural history during that period, providing an affective venue for visual thinking that, as Jonathan Fineberg writes,

'had the ability to bypass the conscious control of language in articulating experience and to tap directly into the language of primary process—that uncensored cauldron of repressed memory, body experience, and metonymic logic. [T]he ineffable, the unspeakable, and the inspirational are at the heart of the visual arts. [T]he fluid communication art provides between the unconscious and consciousness helps the individual (both artist and viewer) to regroup psychologically in response to the relentless pressure of change and conflict in the world.[30]

Film worked closely, and in dialogue, with poster art throughout the period, helping visualize the transformations the revolution promised. Some Palestinian and international film-makers drawn to the revolution cited directly from poster art, with some designs featuring in productions at home and further afield. Poster art would become one of the most widely distributed and produced visual art forms the PLO institutionalized under its Unified Information Office since 1971. International artists were commissioned through international competitions, while prominent Arab artists contributed to the design of political posters, providing distinctive aesthetic standards in line with the thriving movement of political activism through art among local and international cultural producers of that period. Political posters were important tools for mobilizing the masses in the camps and elsewhere in the early and mid-1960s, and by the 1970s became the most widely distributed communicative form in Lebanon at the beginning of the civil war in 1975. As in other media spaces and spheres, Palestine and the Palestinians (symbolised in different ways) were the central narrative frameworks produced and evoked in diverse ways. Poster art was prolific in Lebanon where posters appeared in Beirut urging a unified Arab struggle for the liberation of Palestine filled the streets from the late 1960s onward. Many prominent Arab artists ardently contributed to the design of political posters and advanced distinctive aesthetic standards. This was in line with a thriving movement of political activism through art and music among cultural producers of that period.

Liberation aesthetic; Aesthetic Revolution

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[29] One example of such films was '*JRA/PFLP Declaration of World War*' by Japanese filmmaker Masaos Adachi and Koji Wakamatsu. The film demonstrates commitment to using film as a tool for interrogating and making sense of the socio-political world being constituted by the Palestinian militant left.[29]

[30] Jonathan Feinberg. *Modern Art at the Border of Mind and Brain,* 2015: 73-76

The Palestinian Revolution ended with the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982 and the subsequent departure of the PLO from Lebanon. The fundamental difference in the relationship between the organization and the Palestinian people was starkly illustrated shortly after the PLO's departure through the massacre of Sabra and Shatila in September 1982. By leaving Lebanon the PLO committed Palestinians in Lebanon to the care and protection of the United States and Israel who failed to live up to their obligations. More generally, the departure of the PLO from Lebanon resulted in political fragmentation in addition to geographical dispersal. Meanwhile, the tensions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip continued to rise, eventually culminating in the first intifada (uprising) in 1987, a sustained, and in its first years nonviolent, uprising that eventually led to the Oslo Accords and the creation of the Palestinian Authority.

The PLO, as its history shows, was a flawed organization that did not fulfil all the conditions for revolutionary transformation and that did not achieve its stated goal, liberation. With time, it increasingly began to function more like a political system with statist features than a revolutionary movement, failing to develop a clear strategy for liberation and unable to make the necessary moves to become a fully recognized player in the Arab-Israeli conflict during the 1970s. However, the PLO managed, most visibly in the period under discussion, to construct the Palestinian revolution as an *aesthetic revolution* through the articulation of a powerful aesthetics of liberation in print media, language, poetry, image, poster art, photography, cartoons, slogans and insignia that responded to the Palestinians' historical marginalization and through which the revolution made itself seen, felt, heard and responded to.

Attention to the PLO's cultural activism offers a number of lessons. First, the PLO's cultural activism marks an important and little studied chapter in the wider cultural histories of Arab and world revolutionary or transformative processes as well as the (his)-stories of non-state actors, arguably providing a model of activism on which more recent movements, such as Hezbollah and Hamas and more recently the short-lived Arab uprisings, would structure their own politics of resistance/subversion/revolution. Second, like all liberation and revolutionary movements, the PLO was actively involved in communicating and articulating its own narrative of revolution and in exhortations to participation and the production of subjectivities and identities. Third, aesthetics is bound up in politics and, as such, as not a causal outcome, but as central to revolutionary and transformative processes. Fourth, a study of the PLO's cultural practices offers a critical perspective on the role of popular culture in mobilization and popular protest even before the digital era – this perspective does not suggest adopting a technologically-deterministic approach in understanding socio-political change. Rather, it underlines the dynamics of culture and politics and agency and structure while also complicating arguments about individual agency in times of continuous crisis and flux. Finally, the PLO's cultural activism is a good example of the radical potential of aesthetics before the digital age, enriching our understandings and readings of Arab cultural histories as being dynamic and contested while situating contemporary cultural politics within longer histories of struggle.

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