
Decolonization, Disenchantment, and Arab Feminist Genealogies of Worldmaking

ABSTRACT This article analyzes the intersection of Third Worldist materialism and decolonial epistemologies in the Arab world by focusing on Lebanese filmmaker Heiny Srour's decolonial feminist cinema in the transitional period of the 1970s to 1990s. It proposes to read Srour's disenchanted critique of masculine Third World nationalisms and Western feminism as a practice of worldmaking that is grounded *within* colonial-patriarchal modernity. Using Srour's own trajectory as an entry point into larger debates, the article reflects on what affiliation to third cinema means for crafting a cinema of liberation that reconfigures gender relations. Srour's *Leila and the Wolves* (1984) exemplifies such an expansive praxis of third cinema by combining a feminist historiography that centers oral tales, myth, and genealogies with a commitment to the armed struggle. The article concludes that Srour's decolonial feminist cinema functions as a pedagogical tool to build cross-gender coalitions necessary for the persistence of the anticolonial struggle. **KEYWORDS** decolonization, disenchantment, Heiny Srour, historiography, myth, third cinema, Third Worldism, worldmaking, Palestine, Lebanon

FEMINIST DISENCHANTMENT AS WORLDMAKING

“My generation has failed. *Leila and the Wolves* (1984) is a disillusioned film.”¹ Lebanese Jewish filmmaker Heiny Srour pronounces those words in a recent interview, more than thirty-five years after her film on women's resistance in the liberation struggles in Lebanon and Palestine came out. At the time of the film's production in the late 1970s and early 1980s, disenchantment constituted a widely shared feeling in the Arab world. Some, like Tunisian filmmaker and critic Nouri Bouzid, examine this period from the perspective of Arab cinema's broad civilizational reckoning following the 1967 Arab defeat against Israel, which produced a social realist style celebrating wounded masculinity.² A less culturalist analysis, in contrast, points to the immense pressure imperialist countries and policies placed on the political project of a united Third World. This tricontinental project, and

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the paralleling socialist ideology of Pan-Arabism established in the 1950s, gradually gave way to the postcolonial era of neoliberal structural adjustment programs, national debt, and entrenched inequality. Amid the Lebanese civil war and the Western dismantling of South-South anti-imperialist economies, the ongoing struggle for the liberation of Palestine to which Srour was committed faced increased challenges. Yet, we must distinguish disillusionment from despair, as Srour added: “But I remain faithful to the cause of justice in spite of immense political disappointments.”³

Disenchantment establishes the context as well as the impulse for the present study. As an ambivalent feeling of excessive hope met with historical betrayal, it asks us to reckon with the frictions between revolutionary projects of the past, disappointments in the present, and the mitigated legacies of militant histories that continue to organize present projects. By accounting for a disenchanted history that is inscribed within cinematic forms and film infrastructures, we may start considering the fraught relationships between historical projects of decolonization carried out through liberation struggles, and the contemporary reorganization of anticolonial politics around epistemological analyses of persisting coloniality. The question of women’s liberation epitomizes contemporary disenchantments because militants’ and filmmakers’ praxis of Third Worldism effectively undermined gender differences despite the project’s feminist aspirations. A decolonial approach to “post-Third-Worldist feminist” cinema in the Arab context foregrounds the hopes mobilized around the decolonization of culture, its gendered limitations, and its persisting radical possibilities.

A term coined by Ella Shohat, to whom this article is deeply indebted, “post-Third-Worldist feminist” cinema articulates the seeming paradox of feminist disenchantment from the mid-1970s to the 1990s. Third World women filmmakers like Sarah Maldoror in Angola, Sara Gómez in Cuba, and Heiny Srour in Lebanon showed deep commitment to the anticolonial struggle by recognizing the interlocking of gender, colonial, and capitalist violence. At the same time, they proposed a critique that addressed both the masculine expression of Third Worldist nationalism and Western feminism. For Shohat, these filmmakers’ search for alternative herstories through the reconfiguration of documentary truth and mainstream fiction importantly characterizes the “decline of the Third Worldist euphoria” in the 1970s.⁴ Whereas Shohat then turns to the 1990s postcolonial feminist critique of the nationalist discourse, I dwell on this supposed moment of decline when post-

Third-Worldist feminist filmmakers actively re-evaluate the cinematic forms of liberation.

This article examines examples of 1970s–1990s Arab feminist films’ disenchanted critique as a practice of worldmaking, with a dominant focus on Heiny Srour, whose words opened the introduction. Whereas this transitional period marks a generalization of the discourse of “the end of militant cinema” in the West, this is the moment when Arab women like Heiny Srour, Selma Baccar, Atteyat el-Abnoudy, Nabeeha Lotfi, Jocelyne Saab, and Assia Djebar, followed later by Arab Lotfi, start complementing the discourses of male-dominated anticolonial cinema through their own filmic practice.⁵ These women’s films distinctly retain the imagination and praxis of a multifaceted project of Third World liberation as well as its potential to survive, inspire, and be transformed not *despite* but *because* of the critical apprehension of its limitations. If we consider, like Matthew Croombs, that the shifting category of militant cinema constitutes a “method rather than a stable genre or mode” which “necessitates permanent invention,” we may better appreciate how these women filmmakers’ disillusionment in the face of persisting patriarchy drove them to reimagine liberation struggles through formal and political critiques of anticolonial cinema’s gender representations and material practices.⁶

What does a feminist anticolonial critique look like in cinema? What kinds of worlds does it build and how? Whereas anticolonial militant practices like third cinema predominantly mobilize documentary aesthetics and guerilla modes of production to resist colonization, decolonial feminists emphasize nonlinear narratives and plural epistemologies. By focusing on the work of Heiny Srour, I endeavor to forge an understanding of one possible form of feminist anticolonial cinema that develops through international solidarity and investigates the possible coalitions between men and women within the anticolonial struggle, at a moment of historical transition. To this end, I mobilize “worldmaking” as a term that emerges and expands at the intersection of Third Worldist economic and geopolitical transformations, and decolonial feminist commitment to the plurality of epistemic worlds.

My argument navigates the tension between historical continuities and ruptures intrinsic to disenchantment by re-articulating the relationship between historical projects of decolonization and later decolonial feminist approaches, which materialize in Srour’s “post-Third-Worldist” praxis. On the one hand, by advocating for the continued potential of Third Worldist worldmaking, Srour aligns with recent scholarship on the legacies of militant

cinema that resists the urge to categorize the post-1968 decolonization era as a failure whose ideologies and film practices have been forsaken.⁷ On the other, her decolonial feminist critique acknowledges the persistence of patriarchal modernity and the necessity to adapt gendered epistemologies of the revolution in the ongoing struggle for liberation.

As an academic school of thought committed to deconstructing and refusing the enduring colonial epistemologies developed with modernity, the dominant strand of decolonial theory represented by Walter D. Mignolo deems the theoretical and political projects of decolonization and decoloniality incompatible for two reasons: first, Third Worldist decolonization movements maintained a continued fascination with colonial modernity and the nation-state; second, the two are seen to unfold successively in time, with the decolonial option and its refusal of modernity arising in the 1990s as a necessary response to, and a consequence of, the supposed failure of the decolonization project.⁸ Yet, like Mignolo, who insists on the persistence of coloniality after formal independence, earlier Third Worldist leaders like Frantz Fanon and Walter Rodney recognized that colonial logics continue to organize postcolonial lives and that liberation remains incomplete under neocolonial forms of imperialism.⁹ In turn, Arab feminist thinkers like Egyptian medical doctor Nawal El Saadawi insisted that the resulting class inequalities also held gendered implications.¹⁰ Thus, a post-Third-Worldist feminism that anchors the fight against patriarchy as central to the ongoing revolutionary struggle and its material conditions—which emerged in the 1970s Third World and from within imperialist spaces such as the US—remains committed to decolonization through praxes that also inform decolonial thought.¹¹

Considering the frameworks of decoloniality and decolonization together further raises geopolitical issues. In contrast with a vision that sees “coloniality” as a universal postcolonial condition, this article focuses on the Arab world, the modern and class-bound political conflict in Lebanon, and the persistence of anticolonial Palestinian resistance until today. In the specificity of this context, the decolonial refusal of modernity’s epistemologies must account for the materialist interventions of modernist Third World liberation. For Palestinians, the Nakba (catastrophe) constitutes an ongoing process because the Israeli state’s very foundation lies in Palestinians’ enduring material dispossession and in their cultural and physical erasure through ethnic cleansing. Placing the Arab world and Palestinian resistance at the center means reconsidering the continued intersections of decolonial praxis and the legacies of the Third Worldist decolonization struggle.

I am particularly interested in how Srour's feminist critique poses the question of women's liberation *within* colonial-patriarchal modernity rather than focusing on radically open—sometimes ahistorical—futures outside of oppressive mechanisms. The Arab and post-Third-Worldist cinematic lens on decolonial feminism illuminates the multifaceted interpersonal and geopolitical conditions of possibility for building new worlds out of the materiality of their histories. Like her character Leila in her second film *Leila wal Dhiab/Leila and the Wolves*, Srour's films and her theorizations of political cinema in interviews and articles travel to build solidarities against colonialism, within the Arab world, and between women and men. The ambition of Srour's feminist cinematic worldmaking takes shape within and in response to the contradictions that precipitated the decline of socialist Third Worldism, the armed struggle, and guerilla cinema in the long sixties. It envisions a cinematic praxis of liberation through grounded historicity, affiliations, and genealogies of solidarity that continues to challenge colonial modernity.

WORLDMAKING AND CINEMA'S INFRASTRUCTURES OF COALITION

I start by considering the historical context of Third Worldist filmmaking infrastructures within which post-Third-Worldist feminist Arab filmmakers articulate their various projects of worldmaking through coalitional and geopolitical interventions. Cinema's representational power "makes worlds." The infrastructures that enable films' production and their circulation also reflect an imaginary of what those filmic universes and their audience should look like.¹² Third Worldist filmmakers and film organizers subordinated cinema's capacity to "make worlds" to the political project of a New International Economic Order that challenged imperialist influence. In doing so, they articulated the material reality of filmmaking with film's capacity to produce meaning in the service of shared imaginaries and communities, while emphasizing geopolitical projects of solidarity across borders. Decolonial feminist worldmaking practices in turn seek to breach social fragmentations within oppressed communities—what María Lugones after Audre Lorde calls "non-dominant differences"—and to develop interpersonal coalitions across gender that honor the plurality of epistemic worlds.¹³ Heiny Srour was adamant about positioning herself vis-à-vis those two distinct levels of struggle:

Imperialism and a non-feminist national liberation movement . . . are not the same to me. I denounce the first as an implacable enemy, and I criticize

the latter as a comrade concerned with a healthy resolution of what is today called “the contradictions within the people.”¹⁴

This double framework invites us to think of how an anticolonial and decolonial transformation of the world order through cinema necessarily relies on a reorganization of gender politics and solidarities.

The period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s in the Arab world presented an opportunity for Third Worldist filmmakers to contemplate the modalities of building decolonized worlds through the mobilization of film infrastructures. The persisting imaginary of the anticolonial struggle then coexisted in historical tension with the making of postcolonial film economies (in Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt) that aimed to promote the decolonization of culture and challenge imperialist networks of influence. This historical moment demanded that postcolonial national cinemas renegotiate their representations of the decolonized subject born in the process of the anti-imperialist struggle into one that would stand for the independent nation.¹⁵ Amid the residual images of earlier anticolonial struggles, the continued armed struggle for the liberation of Palestine (1968–1982) gradually arose in the late 1970s as an anachronistic project with declining international support.

The overlapping of distinct “stages” of liberation derived from a “unilinear, univocal, and unillogical, understanding of history” of modern progress that also produced social groups atomized along gender lines.¹⁶ Post-Third-Worldist feminist filmmakers lamented that nationalist discourses often considered women’s liberation as a lesser priority to be addressed after independence.¹⁷ In the context of Palestinian resistance, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), active in Lebanon after 1971, created the conditions for women’s emancipation through literacy campaigns, healthcare facilities, and educational and vocational training programs, while Palestinian women formed their own organizations that expanded social and economic programs.¹⁸ Yet, in Julie Peteet’s words, the PLO “never did adopt a decisive stance on the question of gender equality.” While some parties like the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) started articulating class and gender in the 1970s, the dominant party Fateh continued to subordinate gender to the nationalist cause.¹⁹

The continued hierarchy between the epistemic categories of men and women in struggle risked abstracting women from revolutionary time. In an edited collection dedicated to Palestinian revolutionary cinema, Srour

comments on how Arab men's progressist fiction films like Borhane Alaouié's *Kafir Kassem* (1968), Youssef Chahine's *Al-Asfour/The Sparrow* (1972), or Tewfiq Saleh's *Al-Makhdu'un/The Dupes* (1973) turned Palestinian women into symbolic representations that often rehearsed patriarchal gender roles such as passive women or mothers.²⁰ If, as Teshome Gabriel insists, Third World cinemas of decolonization in theory assumed that "the liberation of women from stereotypical roles presuppose[d] . . . that men must also be liberated from their confining macho roles," then in practice, films and related political activities often fell short of addressing colonization and patriarchy as co-constitutive.²¹

In the 1970s and 1980s, Heiny Srour among other Arab female filmmakers sought to reinscribe women into historical time at the interpersonal and geopolitical levels. Like many, Srour's approach to the term "feminism" was hesitant; she has simultaneously claimed that her take was resolutely feminist²² and that "women's liberation is a luxury for those who are still alive."²³ This apparent paradox resulted from her attempt at reclaiming women's liberation from its coopted universalist definition in colonial empires. In the 1920s, Arab women's unions had faced a similar challenge when they tried coordinating with European feminist networks. The latter's denial of colonialism led to the decline of such coalitional politics with Western feminism before their reformulation around human rights in the 1970s.²⁴

The United Nations' International Women's Year in 1975, which launched a series of initiatives known as the "UN Decade of Women," yielded the gradual integration of Third World women's struggle into the overarching and universalist category of human rights. This rhetoric appealed differently to Arab women filmmakers. It motivated, for example, the production of Tunisian filmmaker Selma Baccar's *Fatma 75* (1976), which set to "demystify . . . 'the miracle of the Tunisian woman's emancipation,'" attributed to first Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba's modernizing Code of Personal Status (1956).²⁵ To do so, the film centers women-led centuries of struggles and decades of demands for reforms, illustrated through the combination of theatrical reenactments and archival pictures, newspapers, and official declarations. Baccar's critique, added to a scene that explicitly portrays a sex education class, led the Tunisian government to ban the film for thirty years. Yet, *Fatma* also positions the 1970s state school system and reforms as the strategic sites where women's rights claims can be realized. Symptomatic of the civic vocabulary of emancipation, the film wrestles with

the renewed forms of patriarchal modernity that consolidate around Tunisia's self-proclaimed state feminism.

In contrast, Srour remained committed to a cinematic grammar of liberation informed by her own association with the Marxist-Leninist DFLP, and by a longer history of transnational feminist networks developed within Pan-Arab and Afro-Asian solidarity movements since the late 1930s. Symptomatically, Arab feminists like El Saadawi defended the idea that “legal and political rights for women can be of value only if backed by a popular revolutionary movement.”²⁶ By essentially articulating national liberation, class struggle, and gender equality, this Arab decolonial feminism invites us to examine, not solely how woman can be *included* in the project of decolonization as the rhetoric of rights suggests, but how thinking of decolonization through women brings about *total liberation for all*. In the words of Algerian sociologist and film critic Mouny Berrah, “woman’s situation is not a specific entity isolated from the evolution of the economic, sociopolitical, and ideological situation of the Arab world; the two situations are on the contrary indissolubly and dialectically inter-connected.”²⁷

The Marxist-infused conceptualization of Arab womanhood meant that feminist films needed not always center women; rather they built “spaces of shared visibility” that focused on social marginalization thanks to documentary’s reliance on cheaper and lighter technology.²⁸ While Egyptian documentary filmmaker Atteyat El-Abnoudy’s *Husan al-Tin/Horse of Mud* (1971) and *Sad Song of Touha* (1972) recorded the daily labor of the rural working class and destitute urban communities, Lebanese reporter Jocelyn Saab’s *Beirut, Never Again/Beyrouth, jamais plus* (1976) took stock of the destruction of Lebanon’s social life at the beginning of the civil war. At the same time, Lebanese filmmaker Nabeeha Lotfi’s *Li-Anna al-Judhur Lan Tamut/Because Roots Do Not Die* (1977) registered the continued dispossession and massacre of Palestinian women and children at the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp at the hands of Israel and its Lebanese Phalangist allies.

In the context of this essay, spaces of shared visibility do not merely delineate the metaphorical space of representation, but also the political and aesthetic communities to which women filmmakers sought to belong; the transnational, cross-gender, and cross-class coalitions they aspired to build or those they rejected; and the concrete cultural and film spaces where such coalitional effort could take shape, that is to say, the “complex forms of sociality [that] contribute to the infrastructure—material and immaterial—of collective life.”²⁹ As the next section illustrates, Srour’s first film, *Sa’at el-*

Tahrir Dakkat/The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived (1974), followed the funding and aesthetic strategies of militant third cinema as such a coalitional space for anti-imperialist and feminist praxis.

Third World cinema infrastructures did not generate a coordinated women practitioners' movement of its own, but they did provide a crucial stage to develop feminist ideas in the context of the anti-imperialist struggle. Arab female filmmakers, technicians, and cinephiles individually took advantage of such internationalist, socialist, Pan-Arab, and/or Pan-African film festivals and cine-clubs in Leipzig, Damascus, Beirut, and Carthage. Launched in 1966 postcolonial Tunisia, the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage (JCC) built on already-existing domestic cine-club and amateur networks that disseminated Arab and Third World films, from militant third cinema to social realist art cinema. The JCC soon turned into a hub for the development of transregional film federations, committees, and exhibition and distribution networks that crucially circulated the work of Third World and Arab women filmmakers, including Heiny Srour's *Leila and the Wolves*, Assia Djebar's *Nuba Nisa' Djebel Chenoua/The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (1977), and Selma Baccar's *Fatma 75*.

While those alternative film circuits proved increasingly mixed in terms of gender, their channels of production mainly rewarded male filmmakers. Between 1956 and 1979 in Tunisia, despite the state's feminist framework and the socialist nature of the national cinema's amateur-professional networks, only four out of sixty-two features were directed by women. Most women participated in the industry as technicians (editors especially) but did not access the resources to "approach cinema as an art or as a means of expression."³⁰ In the face of neocolonial economies' weakening of anti-imperialist Arab film infrastructures through unfair quotas and of the fragmentation of the production landscape along gender lines, women's claim to access the means of production was integral to reorganizing both gender and anti-imperialist relations.

Together with Egyptian film critic and historian Magda Wassef and Selma Baccar, Srour issued the manifesto "For the Self-Expression of Arab Women" (1978) in the Paris-based journal *Cinémarabe*. In it, they determine a correlation between the Arab bourgeois representation of women as sexual objects and women's economic dependence, which set the conditions for their near impossibility to express themselves through cinema. The manifesto concluded with a call to establish an assistance fund in the form of a \$2,500 yearly prize for the best script of a short film.³¹ Albeit modest, the manifesto

and the proposed prize presented attempts to articulate a transnational female solidarity that took a material shape. On a global scale, women filmmakers' economic dependency mirrored that of the debt-ridden Third World. Srour, Bacchar, and Wassef's effort to restructure gender relations within the Arab filmmaking community consolidated Third Worldist film infrastructures' own geopolitical claims of independence.

The conditions for maintaining a guerilla-style mode of production waned with the depletion of wide-spread support for the armed struggle in solidarity with Palestine and the PLO's exile from Lebanon in 1982. Despite benefiting from the input of Syrian socialist filmmakers Mohamed Malas and Omar Amiralay, Palestinian nationalist painter, filmmaker, and former PLO Director of Arts and National Culture Isma'il Shammout, and the Lebanon-based Palestinian heritage organization Samed, the making of Srour's second film *Leila and the Wolves* proved paradoxically embedded in the European aid economy, which was profiting from the dismantling of the Third World's regionalist infrastructure. The shift toward human rights and the general transfer of decolonization politics to national development funds and international and humanitarian NGOs in the 1980s brought complications to the film's production, already jeopardized by the ongoing civil war in Lebanon. The composite financing of the film (Belgium, Holland, Sweden, Britain, Lebanon) demonstrates the hurdle of combining multiple European financing sources while supporting a cause as contentious as Palestine. For example, the British Film Institute (BFI) repeatedly threatened to pull out, claiming that the film proved irrelevant to the British public.³² The film's dependency on neocolonial European funding networks paradoxically served as evidence to the necessity of economic and cultural liberation.

During this transitional period from the late 1970s to the 1990s, some Arab feminist films—like Arab Lotfi's intimate interviews of Palestinian women freedom fighters in *Abki ya 'Asfour/Tell Your Tale, Little Bird* (1993) or Srour's *Rising Above: Women of Vietnam* (1995)—migrated to Western television, a move that prefigured the wider integration of Third World films into European film festivals. Amid this expansion of Western markets into the Third World and the reformulation of the strategies and aims of decolonization around human and women's rights, Srour's decolonial feminist cinema proposed a militant cinema that integrated coalitional politics and persisting anticolonialism.

AFFILIATIONS AND FRAGMENTATIONS

From *The Hour of the Revolution Has Arrived* (1974) to *Leila and the Wolves* (1984) and *Rising Above: Women of Vietnam* (1995), Heiny Srour has consistently positioned her search for women's representability—their historicity as liberated subjects—within the materialist ideology of third cinema's world-making. Affiliations, as Sara Saljoughi remarks, are intentional.³³ Rather than expressing her individual commitment to a specific canon of militant cinema, Srour's intentional affiliation led her, as Lugones puts it, to “try to understand with, and in the midst of others . . . [while accounting for] the difficulties as well as the concrete possibilities of moving [with people].”³⁴ Srour investigated the possibility for third cinema to constitute a site of cross-gender coalitions, thus widening its horizon of intervention. Her mode of affiliation emphasized the need to constantly redefine the meaning of oppression that underpins dynamic political movements and film styles. As this section explains, women's affiliation to third cinema has been subject to debate among (Arab) feminist scholars, writers, and filmmakers, as some have understood the movement to uphold and perpetuate the colonial fragmentation of gender through the very forms of its commitment to anticolonialism—its dominant aesthetics of guerilla filmmaking.

The manifesto that launched the revolutionary Latin American movement turned tricontinental; Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *Hacia un Tercer Cine/Towards a Third Cinema* (1969) introduced a film praxis that would transform the society's social relations by establishing a novel, alternative, and mass-oriented mode of production, distribution, and exhibition. Predominantly focused on issues of class and imperialism rather than gender, such new modes of production would not reform but fight the systems of commercial and auteur cinemas. Film would constitute a determining factor to achieve decolonization in parallel with the armed struggle, as suggested by the analogy of “the camera as a gun” that greatly inspired Palestinian revolutionary cinema. Evolving in circles where Palestinian guerilla films were screened in Beirut and writing as a contributor to the Third Worldist journal *Afrique-Asie*, which published in 1973 a summary of third cinema's program, Srour was well acquainted with the movement's tenets.³⁵ She had been particularly struck by Fernando Solanas's landmark film *La hora de los hornos/The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), which led her to believe that cinema could happen “in secrecy and despite harsh censorship”—a situation akin to Lebanon.³⁶

Strour's conviction that cinema constituted "the most powerful, complete, and total means of expressing what you want" coincided with the promise of third cinema's transformative capacities through film language and praxis.³⁷ Film offered a site of political intervention where women could "change men's laws . . . and say to hell with your rules and play different games."³⁸ Third cinema's emphasis on democratizing processes of production especially opened the possibility for a reorganization of gender relations as well as social classes through both the abolition of capitalist class hierarchies in the Marxist view, and the possible communication between distinct gendered worlds.

Production set an important stage for coalition-building. This became evident in the making of Strour's first film, *The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived* (1974), which most readily illustrated Solanas and Getino's manifesto. Partly financed by the Democratic Republic of Yemen's Ministry of Culture and a collective fund to which UK-based Arab students predominantly contributed, the film adopts a combination of guerilla filmmaking and didactic articulation of archival footage. Under the protection of the Dhofar rebels and accompanied by her cameraman and sound technician, Strour famously walked across 800 kilometers of desert under enemy fire with the aim of documenting the struggle of the Marxist and Arab nationalist Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG) in the face of British and US imperialist takeover of Oman's natural resources.

The PFLOAG's commitment to women's liberation as key to victory, which contrasted with Strour's own lived experience and testimonies of the Palestinian and Algerian resistance, piqued her interest. Not only did the Popular Front recognize the multiple oppressions of Arab women at the hands of colonial powers and patriarchy, but they also restructured society around the nationalization of resources, abolition of slavery, and women's access to education as well as military and political responsibilities. Strour documents the new gendered division of labor in her intimate portrayal of everyday life in the fighters' camps, organized around teams of mixed genders, classes, ages, and regional origins.

By Strour's own admission, however, the film partly failed to reinscribe woman as a subject in revolutionary history due to the social relations within her own crew. Despite her directives to highlight the feminine features of the female soldiers' faces by using close-ups, the French male technicians favored medium shots that conflated the short-haired women with the rest of their male comrades, thus erasing their singularity and their very presence as women.³⁹ Often, the voice over commentary becomes crucial to identifying

women in the crowd. The film's material conditions of production, including the European men's sexism, their lack of trust in Srour's directions, and their orientalist assumptions about (Arab) gender roles, reproduced the trope of the male freedom fighter instead of offering—and enacting—an expansive vision of the new society in the making.

The film's partial focus on women promised to further clarify what cinematic forms women's liberation from both colonialism and patriarchy should take in the Arab world and beyond. It also brings into focus debates around the representation of the female freedom fighter. In Palestinian revolutionary cinema, the iconography of the *fida'i* (freedom fighter, masculine) became the expression of a new liberated subjectivity that replaced the official image of the helpless Palestinian refugee circulated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).⁴⁰ The symbol's dominant masculinization spanned traditional poetry, posters, painting, as well as cinema, from the Palestine Film Unit (PFU)'s guerilla productions to Lebanese fiction and commercial films like Gary Garabedian's *Kulluna Fida'iyyun/We Are All Freedom Fighters* (1969). Such representations tended to undermine the numerous female fighters who enthusiastically joined the struggle and whose contribution was often either not recognized on the ground or reduced to the symbolisms of "superwoman," "fertile mother," or "national honor," which helped maintain heteropatriarchal social formations.⁴¹ Yet, women fighters' representation in Palestinian political posters and magazines, like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)-backed *al-Hadaf*, gradually increased with the reorganization of gender dynamics. Significantly, the PFU was co-founded by a woman, Sulafa Jadallah.

The matter was however not simply one of producing a "truthful" representation of women in the armed struggle, but also how a just and equal relationality between genders within solidarity groups could be engineered through a cinema of liberation and the broader decolonization of culture. In other words, what would be a representation that does not merely acknowledge women's "inclusion" in the struggle alongside men—either using similar forms of struggle or their own vernacular modes of resistance—but rather would transform intersubjective relations in struggle in a way that supplements onscreen representation? What *are* women's modes of inhabiting anticolonial history and film representations? How are women's liberated subjectivities born in the process of making anticolonial films?

By continuously contrasting representation and representability, Srour points to what Lugones calls the tension between subjectification, which

fragments social relations into colonial categories of gender, and active subjectivity. She defines the latter as the “minimal sense of agency required for the oppressing <– > resisting relation being an active one, without appeal to the maximal sense of agency of the modern subject.”⁴² In other words, the women fighters whose pictures figured in Western newspapers and Third Worldist magazines risked being tokenized and propped up as evidence for the movements’ unwavering commitment to gender equality. Gesturing at female icons like the Palestinian Leila Khaled, famous for hijacking a TWA plane heading to Israel in 1969, Srour lamented that “these women are made to be symbols to compensate with reality. I respect them. They are brave, but I’m saying that these women are being used.”⁴³ Here, the category of gender was privileged over restructuring relations between men and women during the struggle.

Srour’s later television film *Rising Above: Women of Vietnam* (1995) grapples with those questions as it investigates what happened to the female Vietcong fighters turned into icons. The documentary displays the archival footage and pictures that made those young women famous during the anticolonial wars against France and the United States and the honors they received. In stark contrast, testimonies by lesser-known women fighters showed that the exemplification of a few individuals obscured the contributions of the masses of women and justified their lack of compensation after the war. As if to mimic the disenchantment of its argument, the film’s form as a conventional televisual documentary constructed around talking heads and funded by various UN agencies and national development funds traces a lineage from third cinema’s revolutionary period to the remnants of its imaginary in the neoliberal era.

Whereas *Rising Above*’s brief incursion in Vietnam helps us map out a women’s cartography of the Third Worldist struggle, the scholarly feminist critique of tokenization often took the Algerian war of independence (1954–1962) as a precedent. In fact, postcolonial Algeria supplied a blueprint for the failure of women’s liberation by way of the revolution. This debate partly grounded Srour’s thinking, as she demonstrates in her review of Algerian polemicist Fadéla M’Rabet’s key text, *Les Algériennes* (1967).⁴⁴ In this context, Gillo Pontecorvo’s canonical agit-prop militant film *La Battaglia di Algeri/The Battle of Algiers* (Italy/Algeria, 1966)—a posteriori celebrated as an emblem of third cinema—emerges as a point of debate in feminist literature and cinema. In particular, the scene where the *moudjahidates* (Algerian female freedom fighters) dress as European women to carry out their attack in

French settlers' cafés problematizes the mechanisms through which Algerian women seized their own liberation through the struggle.

Here, the role of women in revolution is no longer tethered to the traditional iconography of the armed freedom fighter. The scene presents an opportunity to examine third cinema's approach to women's revolutionary consciousness from a renewed perspective. For example, enthralled by the power of the *moudjahidates'* action, Arab Lotfi included the scene in the opening of *Maraa' Jamila/Jamila's Mirror* (1993), a shorter version of the feature *Tell Your Tale*, dedicated to Palestinian women freedom fighters. Whereas Lotfi saw the liberatory potential of Pontecorvo's treatment, feminist scholar Ranjana Khanna instead argues that third cinema's search for a national image inclusive of women is destined to failure. Further, women put third cinema's system of representation into crisis.⁴⁵ In her analysis, the guerilla film movement cannot represent the trauma that women have experienced at the hands of both the colonizer and the male colonized because, as a political strategy, third cinema insists on violence at its means of operation. Instead of assisting women's access to representability, *The Battle of Algiers* exemplifies how third cinema weaponizes the representation of revolutionary Algerian women and reduces it to an unstable, self-reflexive, and reified system of reference.

In Khanna's view, whether they mimic Western women or carry weapons under their *haïk*, Algerian women and their representations as liberated subjects always constitute a foil directed at the French soldiers. They stand in as mirrors for the colonizer's desires and stereotypes. Third cinema thus deploys great symbolic violence against those women, who remain simple metaphors abstracted from history, created by their male leaders and the filmmaker for the sake of the guerilla mission and the film.⁴⁶ Khanna argues that third cinema prolongs the colonial reason, and as such, its "violence is inadequate in formulating new nation-states, unless they are to be celebrated for engendering new ethnic and gender violence of their own."⁴⁷

Leading from this conclusion, Khanna introduces Algerian filmmaker, writer, and poet Assia Djebar's film *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua* (1977) as the instigator of a new decolonial cinematic form, which she coins "fourth cinema," that would accommodate women's coming to consciousness. Structured around the five movements of the traditional Arabo-Andalusian music of the Nouba, the film follows everyday relationships within a community of women, fifteen years after independence. The narrator travels across the villages of Mount Chenoua and collects songs, local

histories, traumatic memories of the war and the departed loved ones, and anticolonial modes of resistance passed from one generation of women to the next.

Khanna does not present fourth cinema as arriving chronologically “after” third cinema; instead, she proposes this practice as a supplementary stage in the developing ideological consciousness of cultural decolonization. The film combines documentary and fiction to introduce what Reda Bensmaïa calls a “working hypothesis . . . that enables the filmmaker to imagine the ‘fiction of a world’ in which the male gaze and the ascendancy of men have for the time being suspended.”⁴⁸ While the film is dedicated to Yaminai Oudai, a heroin of the independence war known as Zoulikha, it reworks the epistemological foundations of what liberation means by focusing on producing intersubjective relations *beyond* the armed struggle. The latter in 1970s Algeria mostly inspired sclerotic representations of heroes (the main protagonist’s husband in *Nouba* is, tellingly, invalid and a silent observer throughout) endorsed by the postcolonial, authoritarian one-party regime, and, ironically, encouraged by Algeria’s national television that produced the film (and later disavowed it). Rather than merely providing a gendered reading of liberation, fourth cinema here constructs its own cosmology—the making of a decolonized world and space where women can express themselves.

Nouba was received with reservations in Algeria and at the JCC. Driven by a materialist feminism that articulates gender with the class and nationalist struggles, Algerian film critic Mouny Berrah interpreted it as “a film made by a woman for women” that failed to serve the feminist cause but instead proposed an interesting ethnographic practice.⁴⁹ What prompted her critique may be that the intersubjective (ethnographic) relations under scrutiny existed outside of the affiliation to a clearly identifiable political project of gender and political liberation. Berrah’s disappointment was partly shared by the Algerian female audience. Algerian feminist writer Wassyla Tamzali observed the outrage of Algerian women spectators when watching Djebar’s personalized take on the national struggle. But, in contrast with Berrah, Tamzali described this sentiment as “dogmatic” and a “manifestation . . . of the totalitarianism [Algeria] was sinking into.”⁵⁰ The stakes between decolonial fourth cinema and the affiliation to third cinema lie in the sort of cosmology that gets created, which in turn shapes the relation to geopolitical struggles seen as either persisting and relevant or outdated and defeated.

Srouf’s second film, *Leila and the Wolves* (1984), proves in many ways similar to *Nouba*’s feminine cosmology, its recourse to folk songs, and its

narrative structured around women's physical and poetic travels across memories—which also figure in *Fatma* 75. In addition, *Leila*, our main focus in the remainder of this essay, proposes a cinema of liberation that places the emphasis on women's coalition across borders and with men. However, instead of rejecting third cinema and the armed struggle as fundamentally incompatible with women's historicization and realization, Srour draws a double genealogy: one that places woman's armed resistance and the "silent, unglamorous sacrifices of the women in Lebanon [and Palestine]" within a regional history of anticolonialism, and another that recuperates third cinema to the benefit of women's cosmology.⁵¹

Whereas Khanna's conception of fourth cinema relied on a narrow understanding of third cinema as irreducibly violent and masculine, Solanas and Getino's suggestion, which *Leila* takes seriously, is that "any militant form of expression is valid, and it would be absurd to lay down a set of aesthetic work norms."⁵² Third cinema scholars like Teshome Gabriel, Robert Stam, and Mike Wayne have in turn insisted on the hybridity and great malleability of the movement.⁵³ *Leila* embraces this multifaceted logic as part of its evaluation of the movement's affordances to help realize both women's and collective freedom. The film challenges third cinema's engagement with the present moment of revolutionary action and its commitment to documentary as the main repository for historical truth. Embracing the structure of the oral tale, *Leila* develops a historical critique and draws a political consciousness that engage at once with nonlinear mythological narratives, folk songs, and anticolonial politics.

The circulation of Srour's films through the porous networks of revolutionary films and socially conscious art cinema reflects her expansive affiliation to third cinema. While the more directly militant *Hour of Liberation* was selected at the prestigious art cinema Cannes Film festival, *Leila and the Wolves* won the Hany Jawhariyya Prize at the JCC. Named after the Palestinian guerilla filmmaker recently killed on the frontline, the latter prize situated the film in the lineage of militant cinema. Srour's inscription within these contrasting networks allowed her to build a rich cinematic and political grammar suitable to address the multidimensional issue of gender. That Srour continues to situate herself within third cinema despite some deviations from its canonical understanding as guerilla filmmaking, speaks to her persisting (yet critical) ideological commitment and emotional attachment to Third World liberation and coalition.

GENEALOGIES OF ACTUAL WORLDS

While the vocabulary of affiliation provides a hermeneutics to position filmmakers within aesthetics and political debates of cross-gender coalitions, genealogy highlights the sort of worlds that may emerge through creative affiliations, their historical structure, and the form that their critique takes.⁵⁴ *Leila and the Wolves* forges decolonial feminist worlds by building genealogies in representation and in practice. Following M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Arab feminist genealogies represent “[not] a frozen or embodied inheritance of domination and resistance, but an interested, conscious thinking and rethinking of history and historicity, a rethinking which has women’s autonomy and self-determination at its core.”⁵⁵ The film’s *longue-durée* narrative demonstrates that women’s participation in the armed struggle has both structured national liberation and the construction of women’s historical consciousness. Historicizing women’s participation in the armed struggle in turn warrants a reorganization of the tools of third cinema and its dialectics to assert their continued relevance in the 1970s and 1980s.

Srouf’s cinema of liberation experiments with myth-based historiography to establish connections between distinct epistemic worlds across time, space, and gendered groups—what Lugones calls “world-travelling,” the realization and negotiation of the plurality of epistemic worlds that enrich the construction of collectivities.⁵⁶ Grounded in the geopolitical space of *Bilad as-Sham* (the shared historical space of the Levant), the historical and geographical lineages the film traces restore interrupted friendships between and amongst Palestinian and Lebanese women. Anchored in the *longue-durée*, the strategy of world travel reasserts the continued necessity to fight for Palestinian, gender, and class solidarity in Lebanon despite and alongside widespread disenchantment. By doing so, the film builds “actual” relationships grounded in history rather than utopian, hypothetical, or possible worlds, which “are not historical, but logical entities.”⁵⁷ The film thus relies on a back-and-forth between critical historiography and the travel across historical, gendered, generational, and geographical worlds that are mutually constitutive. Doing so establishes a decolonial feminist praxis that poses the conditions for the work of anticolonial solidarity and coalition building.

Leila retells the gendered collective memory of the Palestinian liberation struggle by adopting a nonlinear trajectory punctuated by Leila’s travels and returns to different historical moments. The present where the film begins and ends is Leila’s bourgeois house in 1982 Lebanon, a period marked by

Israel's bombing of Beirut and the pro-Israel far-right Lebanese Christian militias' massacre at the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut's suburbs. The secondary present starts right before the Lebanese civil war in 1975, when Leila, then a student in London, is setting up an exhibition of photographs representing the evolution of the Palestinian struggle over the years. The lack of female representation in the pictures selected by her boyfriend Rafiq motivates Leila's revisionist history and jumpstarts the succession of stories that Leila witnesses within this secondary narrative arc. In it, Palestinian women across age and class throw boiling water on British soldiers in 1920s Jerusalem; manufacture bullets out of residues from old British weapons during the 1936 Great Revolt; transport weapons under the guise of popular rituals; take up arms to stop the 1948 massacre by the hands of Zionist militias at Deir-Yassin; or, still, undergo army training in a refugee camp in 1975 Lebanon. As an infrastructure of resistance, women also ensure the continuity of the fight against colonialism both within and beyond the armed struggle, in an expansive understanding of guerilla warfare.

Strour's view of decolonial feminist liberation weaves together myths and history through collective memory, which is crucial to building "actual worlds." In this respect, the film echoes Palestinian refugees' contemporaneous work of reviving their traditional folklore as part of the project of "cultural reconstruction" in Lebanese camps.⁵⁸ Explicitly drawing from the endlessly mutable structure of the regional oral popular folktale *Alf Layla wa Layla/One Thousand and One Nights*, the film juxtaposes historical footage, dream-like sequences, and fictional reenactments of historical events. Because women's histories of resistance are often nested in popular memory and folklore, we may confuse them with the crafting of possible, utopian worlds. Myths neither need be opposed to processes of historicization, nor do they necessarily point to nostalgic engagements with the precolonial past. They may instead enable historical critiques of actual, grounded relations that examine how women's historicity takes shape in the collision between gendered and generational worlds.

Following this logic of historiography through myth, Leila playfully guides the spectator across diverse geographies and time periods wherein mirrors, windows, photographs, folk songs, and voice-overs function as magical portals enabling her travels. Leila does not seek a unity that would erase differences but instead explores each historical tableau as interconnected epistemic worlds that carry transgenerational knowledge. Following Lugones, our guide inhabits grounded constructions of life and social spaces with distinct social

norms and interpersonal codes. Those tableaux sometimes represent Leila's own projection into a disenchanted future where the civil war never ends and gender norms don't change (for example, when she humorously masquerades as a grandmother). At other times, these tableaux expose the contradictions of women's historical conditions that drive their continued fight for liberation. For instance, while in the late 1970s women acquire more visibility in the armed struggle, they are still expected to perform all domestic duties. The movement from one world to the other provides tools to analyze networks of social relations as well as their historical trajectories.

A recurring scene with a dreamy aesthetics punctuates the film's narrative to analyze the contemporaneous reorganization of women's oppression. Despite the apparent ahistoricity of the sequence, the women sitting in a semicircle at the beach, entirely veiled, herald the Islamic revivalism of the 1980s that emerges in response to continued colonization, its violent erasure of traditions, Arab neoliberal regimes' instrumentalization of political Islam against leftist mobilization, and the neoliberal restructuring of the region's economy experienced as a threat to local cultures. This contrapuntal strategy dear to third cinema creates a dynamic of rupture and continuity between the ceaselessly renewed struggle that inspires hope and the perspective of imminent danger to social relations in struggle. Positioning Leila in a world where the nationalist and democratic, mostly secular, armed struggle might soon be replaced by other forms of (predominantly religious and cultural) resistance, this sequence represents the film's most obvious iteration of disenchantment. Yet, considered in the *longue-durée* of the narrative, this sequence both produces a critique and reformulates the conditions of possibility for liberation by historicizing women's struggle.

The hybrid historiography through myth both counters colonial models of storytelling and allows the emergence of the multiple worlds of women into historicity. Srour reminds us that

those of us from the Third World have to reject the idea of film narration based on nineteenth century western bourgeois novel with its commitment to harmony. Our societies have been too lacerated and fractured by colonial power to fit into those neat scenarios. We have enormous gaps in our societies and film has to recognize this.⁵⁹

Rather than filling those gaps, the film exploits fragmentation to create a narrative mosaic⁶⁰ that celebrates "the manyness of the past."⁶¹ Special tools are required to retrieve and uncover women's stories and their diverse modes

of resistance that remain underexplored in official history. Leila's travels do the work of an anticolonial archeologist—she “excavates” collective memory.⁶² To put it differently, those worlds are there, and the multiple histories they suggest threaten the respective masculine and colonial narratives of unity and totality.

In its apprehension of fragmentation, Srour's historiography through myth recognizes the several modes of authority involved in constructing histories. Alongside staged poetic and folkloric reenactments, *Leila* includes footage from Mai Masri and Jean Chamoun's *Tabt al-Anqadh/Under the Rubble* (1983), which documents the shared Palestinian and Lebanese suffering during the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982. *Leila*'s mosaic form and its combination of different regimes of truth also utilizes folk stories and aesthetics as a way of deconstructing colonial narratives. Srour insists that “it's dangerous, politically, not to distinguish between the forces of oppression and the forces of liberation in terms of image and sound.”⁶³ Reproducing a visual strategy tested in *The Hour of Liberation*, *Leila* opposes the temporality of the colonial archival footage, tainted in blue, with the tableaux of women's resistance that compose most of the film. By doing so, the film reasserts how colonialism and anticolonial patriarchy operate on two distinct ontological planes, which necessitate different responses and engagements: while colonial temporality is ostracized and marked as such, feminist solidarity and the drive toward coalition between women and with men belong to the same project of liberation.

Srour's decolonial engagement with myths parallels their gradual integration into canons of third cinema. In the late 1960s, Solanas and Getino formulated myth as a feature of spectacular commercial cinema that “veils everything behind a screen of images and appearance.”⁶⁴ For them, myths' fantastic nature contrasted with third cinema's political demand for revolutionary transparency and immediate representation of the “naked reality.”⁶⁵ In 1974 at the occasion of the release of *The Hour of Liberation*, Srour similarly strongly argued that “our enemy is a cinema that turns its back on historical emergencies, taking refuge in a mythical past through a contemplative approach that is nothing but a flight from the present.”⁶⁶ *Leila* proves, however, that a film can respond to historical emergencies and examine the reproductions of historical contradictions that sustain oppressions in the present, precisely by drawing on myths. After all, the titular wolves, conjured in the protagonist's grandmother's tale, represent the very real threat of colonialism.

The theory of third cinema began to incorporate folklore as a form of critique after the initial focus on guerilla filmmaking. As famously theorized in his book on Third World cinema aesthetics in 1982, Teshome Gabriel initially drew a distinction between stages of consciousness that roughly paralleled second cinema (art and auteur cinema) and third cinema. Whereas then, he categorized folklore alongside the heroic past and nostalgia for childhood as symptomatic of the second stage of consciousness, where the content is decolonized but not the form,⁶⁷ in a piece written in 1989, he establishes a direct continuity between the folkloric logic, which “makes the memory of events accessible through some form of mythification,” and third cinema.⁶⁸ The folkloric logic constructs the past as a site of struggle that is necessarily political, wherein the narrative functions as “a mode of relation in popular memory” between storytellers and audiences.⁶⁹ At the intersection of decolonial feminist worlds and third cinema’s worldmaking, *Leila*’s genealogy of feminist anticolonial struggles introduces women’s liberation both as a mode of relation and a form of critique.

The decolonial folkloric logic of *Leila*’s temporality jars against the rupture-oriented temporality of revolution centered in guerilla cinema. The film’s narrative spans decades and generations, in contrast with what Françoise Vergès describes as the masculine imaginary of liberation embedded in the insurrectional moment.⁷⁰ Yet, the film’s commitment to *longue-durée* presents a site where decolonial and anticolonial understandings of historicity intersect, highlighting the elasticity of third cinema. On the one hand, third cinema’s dialectics show history’s production mechanisms by displaying processes, changes, and contradictions over long periods of time that are deeply integrated into transnational logics of neocolonial capital.⁷¹ On the other, decolonial (feminist) thought conceptualizes ontology through deep historicity; to “be” is to recognize one’s own interdependence as essentially built through a people’s historical consciousness.⁷² Through those two complementary lenses, the worlds that *Leila* brings in dialogue are deeply grounded in power relations and rooted in interpersonal histories—in other words, *inhabited*.

The interdependence of the worlds of women across time and geographies brings together many planes of storytelling to illuminate the “modes of relation in popular memory”: the narrative structure of the *Nights*, the tales as a cultural object, the folk songs performed in the film, and the film’s mode of production. Whereas the storyteller figure of *Leila* (“night” in Arabic—one

among a thousand others) draws us into layers of lived geopolitics and into the world of her grandmother, Srour owes her engagement with storytelling to her own illiterate grandparents who transmitted to her a rich Arab Jewish musical heritage of which the *Nights* oral tales were part.⁷³ At the same time, *Leila* crafts a time-space that revives the *Nights*' oral and textual histories of South-South circulation. Before its translation into French and English in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its subsequent appropriations across the arts until today, the tales formed part of a shared heritage between the Arab world, Persia, and South Asia from the ninth century onwards, which points to foundational historical cartographies.

The film's combined focus on Lebanon and Palestine further maps out decolonial geographies of lost spaces that Palestinian and Lebanese women used to share beyond exile, before they were separated by colonial borders and the political divisions of the Lebanese civil war. As if responding to the folk tale of "the land of the olive groves" delivered by Leila's grandmother toward the beginning, Leila's journeys across what are now Lebanon and Palestine/Israel restore the integrity of a land that has continued to inhabit people's imagination since the European partition of *Bilad as-Sham* at the beginning of the twentieth century. The structure of the *Nights* not only allows for time travel; it also spatializes the Arab cultural genealogies that enduring colonialism has uprooted and erased. What the film builds, then, is not a desire for the "precolonial" or a "possible world," but rather for a world that preserves the fullness of social relations built for multiple decades and centuries, which persist in and pervade modern anticolonial relations.

Beyond onscreen representations, a commitment to decolonial historiography structures the material aspects of *Leila*'s production. Ongoing colonial fragmentation and border violence prevented Srour from shooting on location in occupied Palestine. As a result, the production relocated to the Syrian hamlets of Maaloula, Tleilin, and Jamiliye, whose landscapes are reminiscent of the Jordan Valley. This identification of Palestine with Syria signifies the interdependence of Syria and Palestine, both historically and in the very practical process of filmmaking: Srour needs Syria to figure Palestine, and that is made possible by their shared history indexed in the landscape and the architecture. Leila's journeys reconstruct *Bilad as-Sham* as the shared world that it already is. Srour's decolonial and feminist cinema of liberation rearticulates the imbricated layers that make up the modes of relation in popular memory—the tales' narrative structure, their cultural history, and

the film's production—and thus reconnects the film's aesthetic forms with the extra-diegetic, multigenerational, and transnational collectivities that it addresses.

DECOLONIAL FEMINIST PRAXIS AS PEDAGOGY

The “actual worlds” of Srour's decolonial feminist cinema foreground a set of relations in struggle rooted in historical genealogies and intentional affiliations. Insisting on travelling between epistemic worlds does not threaten the narrative of unity that drives Third Worldist nationalisms. Instead, rearticulating differences within unity allows for a dynamic form of solidarity in constant reconfiguration, which takes shape in cinema through the push and pull between formal aesthetics, the historicization of representations, and the material worlds that are thereby reconstituted.

At the intersection of the formal and material relations that consolidate popular memory, pedagogy presents a crucial site to radically alter internal power relations and geopolitical patriarchal structures. By inviting spectators to perform the sort of epistemic world travelling that Leila executes in the film, cinematic pedagogy may strengthen coalitions not only amongst women, but also between men and women across borders in the spirit of international solidarity. The audience's theorizing of their own positionality through watching and discussing constitutes a praxis in itself—“a lived transformation of the social” integrated within mass mobilization as one way to assist the protracted revolutionary work.⁷⁴

Revolutionary pedagogy's politics of identification of both third cinema and decolonial feminist cinema do not merely rely on audiences' emotional attachment to the characters, as would be the case in auteur and commercial cinema. Affective engagement may support political commitment, but it also remains independent from it.⁷⁵ In other words, emotions do not constitute praxis in and of themselves; they do not alone rework assumptions in a way that brings political consciousness. The complexities of what Terri Ginsberg calls “affective alliances,” after Laura Podalsky, are very visible in the later film *Tell Your Tale, Little Bird* (1993) by Arab Lotfi. The televisual yet intimate documentary showcases the reunion of Palestinian women freedom fighters at the house of icon Leila Khaled decades after their revolutionary interventions. An interpersonal apparatus *par excellence*, the individual and collective interviews conjure the embodied memory of those women who endured

torture and rape in Israeli prisons. While the spectator may empathize with the feelings of pain and humiliation on display, Ginsberg argues,

the solidarity ties [that the film] forges across the women's respective differences are . . . the result of a difficult and protracted revolutionary struggle rooted in an emancipatory hope that is theorized, tested, and revised, destabilized and retheorized, collectively, through changing times and circumstances, including those from which the spectator may find herself—her social subjectivity—likewise in need of liberation.⁷⁶

To put it differently, world travelling binds subjects into coalitions by superseding the experience of shared feelings (empathy) and by insisting instead on the practice and recognition of our mutual interdependence—how our fates are interlinked and our freedoms indivisible.

Srouf's folkloric logic similarly builds relations of interdependence. Following Gabriel, storytelling shares the responsibility of constructing meaning between the filmmaker and the spectators, who both “play a double role as performers and creators.”⁷⁷ *Leila* experiments with this interchangeability between the characters within the narrative and with the audience. The film calls on us to identify alternatively with Leila, our guide across time and space, and Rafiq, her companion whom she not only introduces to, but *writes into* the historical worlds of women. Like Shahrazad, Leila represents “the ultimate storyteller . . . and the ventriloquist who manipulates the varied voices of the characters whose stories she tells.”⁷⁸ She turns Rafiq either into a British collaborator who polices the parade of women carrying clandestine weapons in 1937 Palestine, or into an old man who worries about his young daughter joining the armed struggle in 1970s Lebanon. By successively addressing him directly in the narration and giving him a voice, Leila both teaches Rafiq a lesson, and inhabits his body and channels his voice through her ventriloquism.

By oscillating the focus between the two characters and their distinct epistemic worlds, the didactic exposé of creative historical tableaux that Leila and Rafiq inhabit differently repositions the spectator as “an agent of the historical process [who] sees in films the concrete realization of his/her/[their] political and material circumstances.”⁷⁹ If Rafiq's name, which translates as “comrade” in the Arabic Marxist vernacular, implicitly addresses the male segment of Palestinian solidarity's Arab and transnational audience, the film addresses all genders. It also has us think about our respective

responsibilities as witnesses and guides. What does it mean to travel across worlds with someone else, let them in, or follow them in?

Such questions are integral to distribution strategies. Partly assumed by the UK-based feminist company Cinema of Women, *Leila's* distribution was primarily organized around circles of Palestine solidarity rather than women's rights movements. As a guidebook for activists who would wish to program *Leila*, the press kit recommends speakers from Palestine solidarity organizations and suggests showing the film alongside the PLO units' revolutionary films and other independent Arab and Western productions on Palestine.⁸⁰ That this list includes some films that Srour criticized in her aforementioned 1977 article for their sexist female representations further illustrates *Leila's* potential for a double intervention against both colonial oppression and the persisting patriarchal structure of the anticolonial struggle.⁸¹

Post-Third-Worldist feminist cinema's focus on fragmentation does not necessarily imply relinquishing the Third World project and its cinematic translation as third cinema. Instead, women's disenchantment about the movement's persisting patriarchal discourse pushed some Arab feminist filmmakers to keep engaging with Third Worldist promises. Srour's decolonial feminist cinema repurposes the forms of (masculine) Third Worldism, its infrastructural and representational spaces of shared visibility, and its pedagogical potential so that discourses of unity account for multiple coalitional practices. By centering gendered epistemologies in the continued anticolonial struggle, cinema may create worlds that allow for permanent community self-critique. Decolonial feminist cinematic worlds enable both forging new social relations and excavating the historical foundations of the present for a transformed geopolitical world order. ■

VIVIANE SAGLIER is a UTSC postdoctoral fellow in the Department of English at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

NOTES

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