

## CONCLUSION

To me, film isn't about recording reality. It is about unveiling a world that is composed of many magical layers. It is the art of seeing through other people's eyes, discovering and bringing out the poetry in everyday life.

Mai Masri

In a time when news images of Palestinians, increasingly the work of the youth, are so ubiquitous, and the majority so male and so violent, reflections on Mai's work are particularly relevant. Her documentaries are set in the desperate struggles of the first and second Intifadas, Israel's occupations, and assaults on Lebanon, among prisoners, refugees, loss, and death. But with her focus on the stories of individual children and of women, and her choice of images and music, Mai creates out of all this pain a visual poetic canvas showing who Palestinians are. Her own poetic words above express her art.

Mai's confident choice of children, and women, as the central figures in her films is explained by her own description of her trilogy *Children of Fire*, *Children of Shatila*, *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*.<sup>1</sup> "These films are the antitheses of the stereotypes that dehumanize and dismiss the Palestinians as a people without legitimate right. The children hold the keys to the contrasting and converging elements of dream and reality. Their little stories of life and love – in the midst of destruction and despair – cut

through the frontiers separating them from their homeland and from the hearts and minds of people around the world.”

Mai constantly explores the relationship between historical memory, imagination, and identity in many of her films. She cites one embodiment of this as 13-year-old Issa in *Children of Shatila* who was suffering from loss of memory. “At night Issa would hear voices calling his name and he would see his dead relatives climbing out of the pictures hanging on the walls. He would talk to his uncle whose neck was slashed in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila. Were these just ordinary nightmares or the product of the surreal imagination of a traumatized child? Through his imaginary world and the stories of his grandmother about Palestine, I felt that Issa was trying to regain the memory he had lost once with the dispossession of his grandparents in 1948 and again with his car accident.”

Today’s dominant visual narrative of Palestinian victimhood and violence masks the rich inner world Mai’s cinematic poetry creates. And it is all the more precious in the current dark political context outside international law and established norms: the toll of weekly targeted death and mutilation of youth in the Great March on the Gaza border, and Gaza’s decade of siege economy; rampant settler violence in the West Bank especially against children and farms and livelihoods; Israel’s 2019 apartheid law<sup>2</sup> and an ever-expanding military in action against civilians; the US symbolic recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and recognition of the occupied Golan Heights as part of Israel with a new settlement to be built called Trump Heights, plus the onslaught on UNRWA’s funding to sustain Palestinian society. Apart from the saturation of images of violence, there are the images of Israeli/American power fed to the world: Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner smiling, impeccably dressed, opening the new US embassy in Jerusalem on the day of the greatest death toll in the Great March amid the smoke and dust on the Gaza border; three heavy-set white men on the occupied Golan Heights looking out over the hills like satisfied landlords—Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, and US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman.

### *Against the Dominant Narrative*

A contrast to these powerful, crude images of today, and a useful parallel to consider Mai’s work, is that of Syria’s foremost documentary *auteur*, the late Omar Amiralay. Mai knew Amiralay personally and they were

very much part of the same circle and part of an Arab culture of documentary film-making as an artistic form, before documentaries became part of mainstream news coverage. Mai deeply appreciated his work and spoke of her honour to serve on a jury with him at the Institut du Monde Arabe Festival in Paris some years back. They spent a lot of time together there, discussing films, she remembered.

The exquisite beauty of Amiralay's compositions, the lingering shots of nature, the loving use of darkness, leave the viewer indelible images. His varied chosen characters speak at length and at ease with him, revealing layers of individual lives in a pitiless demystification of a dominant political narrative of development, education, and elections. Films such as his banned 2003 film on the Tabqa dam on the Euphrates, *Flood in Baath County, Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974), and the short, *A Plate of Sardines, or the First Time I heard of Israel* (1997), made with Mohammad Malas,<sup>3</sup> weave together very complex stories with the clarity of a master storyteller. The words and the faces of participants, whose life narrative this is, are seen and heard with such focus that their perceptions offer the viewer's imagination unexpected journeys to women in the sparest of homes or pitiless group agricultural work in remote villages. Amiralay's films provide a deep societal context to the dominant victims and violent images of the years since.

For me, Mai's work in *War Generation* (1989), *Suspended Dreams* (1992), *Frontiers, Dreams and Fears* (2001), and *33 Days* (2007), in particular, has much of this quality. To make such films, with the invisible factors of their production and funding difficulties, the time invested in preparation, and the profound engagement of the team with the protagonists, are well described by Amiralay in 2008, when he was a lonely voice of resistance in his country's then unseen deep societal crisis. He died in February 2011, a month before the events in Daraa which were the prologue to the civil uprising that became the devastating long civil war.

Amiralay spoke of how, "in documentary, or nonfiction, we spent hours and hours talking to subjects, studying angles, familiarizing ourselves with stories and places, because when it came time to shoot we had only the space of a few takes. This time spent in proximity and profound engagement obviously translated to the final product. Not only did we as filmmakers become involved (if not embedded) in the story, but the ambiguities of each character or situation became tangible. With digital video, that imperative is nonexistent; filmmakers can film for as long as they want until they get what they deem satisfactory. The time invested without the

camera filming, that profound engagement, is practically lost. That discipline and rigour in approach is key to *auteur* cinema.”<sup>4</sup>

That profound engagement, discipline, and rigour of Mai’s work were referred to earlier in this book by her long-time collaborator Michele Tyan. As her frequent film editor, Michele is well placed to judge such qualities from close up. Another film-maker close to Mai’s work is Monica Maurer, a German veteran of the PCI who worked in Lebanon in the years before the PCI’s destruction in 1982 and a key figure, with artist Emily Jacir, in the preserving and digitalising of the rare Palestinian film archive remaining from that time and held in Rome.<sup>5</sup> Monica Maurer has done many film master classes with Mai, and speaking in Paris in 2018 at a showing of *3000 Nights* and a retrospective of Mai’s documentaries she said, “Mai is at the frontier between documentary and fiction translated into cinematic language, poetic and aesthetic.” Mai herself has often spoken of how her documentaries are constructed like fiction, so the transition to fiction in *3000 Nights*, was a natural continuation of all her previous work.

### *Palestinian Colleagues*

Mai’s career began almost in parallel with that of her colleague and friend Michel Khleifi whose childhood and youth in the Galilee under Israeli occupation in the 1950s and 1960s, cut off from the Arab world, could not have been more different from hers in Jordan, Lebanon, and California. Michel Khleifi described how in “a time of fear and isolation – indeed, of solitude,”<sup>6</sup> he discovered poetry and literature and with it “small windows to the world and the hope for freedom, which every person needs to humanise his or her daily life and to make it more bearable.” His vision of turning the 1970s PLO militant cinema upside down and showing Palestinian women in their private environment was expressed in his 1980 film *Fertile Memory* and *Wedding in Galilee* 1987. For Mai, “there is a strong connection in the way we both work...it was a huge shift from the 1970s films of revolution and militancy...Michel’s first film, looking at memory and identity linked to 1948, really set the foundation for our new phase of Palestinian cinema.”

Then came a prolific group of Palestinian film-makers which includes Elia Suleiman with his black comedies *Divine Intervention* (2002), *The Time That Remains* (2009), and most recent *It Must Be Heaven* (2018), Hany Abu-Assad with *Paradise Now* (1995), and *Omar* (2013),

Annemarie Jacir with *Salt of This Sea* (2008), *When I Saw You* (2012), and *Wajib* (2016)<sup>7</sup>; the prolific Rashid Masharawi from Shati camp in Gaza, who was the first Palestinian to raise the Palestinian flag at Cannes in 1976 with his film *Haifa*<sup>8</sup>; and the great actor Mohammad Bakri with *Jenin, Jenin* (2002).

To Mai, “Palestinian cinema has made a big leap in the past few years. Despite enormous obstacles, Palestinian films are being screened at major international film festivals such as Cannes, Toronto, Berlin, Venice, and are being commercially released in cities around the world. Palestinian filmmakers have managed to bring together the pieces of our fragmented reality and put Palestine on the cultural map. Prime examples are Hany Abu-Assad’s film *Paradise Now* which won the Gold Globe award and his film *Omar* which was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards.”

Hany Abu-Assad credits Mai for her place in his life. “When I saw her movie *Children of Fire*,<sup>9</sup> I was still living in Holland and was thirsty to see honest images that could represent us in world media, which often negatively represents us. Her images had an effect on me in the same way as water has on someone dying of thirst. I couldn’t believe that it was possible to make sincere, genuine Palestinian movies in this hostile environment of media land. She was a great example, and opened a door that was previously closed to us. A year later, I made my first short film, called *Paper House*. It’s a short fiction about young Palestinians, but was inspired by the spirit of her characters in this documentary.”

In our email correspondences he continued, “I followed Mai from the beginning, and seeing *3000 Nights* in Toronto Film Festival made her journey a completed arc.<sup>10</sup> From a sensitive and genuine documentary filmmaker she went on to be a fiction filmmaker who created a piece that almost felt as real as a documentary. One thing did not change in her journey — her passionate camera work, that makes you love the characters as they are. She is absolutely an *auteur* for me. In all her work you feel the depth and the tenderness that she creates around every subject she touches” (Fig. A.1).

### *Aesthetics and Symbols*

The aesthetics of Mai’s films are always a major preoccupation that comes early in her process. Not only does she have the images in mind before the script, but she is imagining the aesthetics in terms of light and colour



**Fig. A.1** Mai with Jury Award for *3000 Nights* at TheWIFTS, Los Angeles, 2015

very early in her long preparation process. For instance, in *3000 Nights* she was imagining the colours as signifying a “forbidden” zone of dark, dark prison clothes for prisoners and guards alike, and she worked with her French DOP on the role of shadows in the film. The dark corridors are menacing, with just the sounds of heavy boots or of doors clanging shut. Talking about the film once on a long walk by the sea in Beirut, she told me, “I wanted the audience to feel they too are in prison.” And she referred to the prison of *3000 Nights* as not only the literal Israeli

prison of Ramleh in the 1980s, but a symbol which resonates with all Palestinians. “Gaza is a prison...the occupation is a prison”.

But despite the very dark material of the context and content the symbols of hope are constant threads through all Mai’s films. This is in the poignant image of the solitary Khadija in the prison yard in South Lebanon tending a tiny solitary plant in the dust<sup>11</sup>; or Wadad, the heroine of the *Disappeared*, in profile against a massive crowd with her loud-speaker calling greetings across the airport in Beirut to a man returning from decades in an Israeli prison<sup>12</sup>; the handmade wooden bird in the hand of sleeping baby Nour turning into a coloured real bird fluttering away from the prison cell.<sup>13</sup> Hope is embodied in the children of her trilogy, such as Mona and Manar, or Issa and Farah, and so many others. There is an almost magical link out of their potential future in the films, to their reality decades later on and which in some cases was defined by the experience of the film, or by Mai’s personal impact on their lives.

### *Profound Engagement*

The “profound engagement” with a film’s characters during long preparation for filming, of which Amiralay spoke, is certainly another hallmark of Mai’s work. And it has not been an engagement that ended with the filming. Decades after the films were made, many of these people are still in Mai’s life in Lebanon and Palestine, like an extended family. In South Lebanon, she visits Khadija’s house. In Shatila, she passes by the little phone kiosk business of Osama, a confident teenager from *Frontiers*, *Dreams and Fears*, and others from that film like Mona, now a hard-working doctor with small children will come to her house, and Manar a Ph.D. student in Germany calls to tell her she has a new baby.

Another person from that film, Tamara Abu Laban, who was then a teenage girl in Dheisheh camp, traces her career choice and trajectory directly to inspiration from Mai. In one of several conversations she told me, “I said once on Palestine TV that Mai is my godmother. My family wanted me to study medicine or architecture and I started architecture, but soon I changed to media and TV studies and did an MA in Jordan. I was inspired by being in *Frontiers* and I always wanted to be like Mai, she’s a woman, a strong woman and she works towards a better situation for my people. We all saw the impact of the film in Palestine of course, and in the US, in Europe, many people changed their attitude when they saw what Palestine is. They saw us as human beings – even once in Geneva

people asked me, ‘Are you from the film?’ It was my dream to work with Mai and I was so happy to film some images for *3000 Nights* for her. I filmed the prisoner release in Ramallah at the Mukataa. The theme touched me deeply you know, my father was in jail for 18 years, he was one of those in the prisoner exchange of 1985.”

The theme of incarceration, and Mai’s commitment to profound engagement, led her to the work of the Lebanese actor and director Zeina Daccache. Her plays and documentary films over a dozen years, notably *Twelve Angry Lebanese*, and *Sherazade*, acted by prisoners inside prisons resulted in changes of Lebanese laws on prisoners’ rights and on domestic violence. “Zeina is talented and funny, and she has had a huge impact on the prisoners she’s worked with and remains close to. She’s humanised ostracised people and she’s activated change, so for me there is a big parallel in the goals of our work. This is what I wish for in all my work, the goal is to activate change, not just to have a happy work life and be recognised. People always ask me, especially about *Frontiers*, ‘Did your film change the situation?’ One film can never change a situation, but reaching new audiences, ordinary people, can light sparks which will have consequences.”

Mai takes pleasure from underlining the role of women film-makers. “I am proud to see how many Palestinian women directors have emerged in the past few years most notably Annemarie Jacir, Cherien Dabis, Najwa Najjar, Hiam Abbas, Azza el-Hassan, Maha Haj, the two sisters Larissa and Leila Sansour, and Suha Arraf. They are making powerful films of quality that are being screened worldwide. Statistics show that over half the films made in Palestine are by women. Nowhere else in the world is this gender proportion true: 4% in Hollywood, 18% Europe and 11% Israel. This is an outstanding phenomenon that shakes filmmaking gender norms and sets a positive example for women filmmakers around the world.”

There are several unique legacies from Mai’s work in her career so far. One is her contribution to the flourishing of female talent in Arab filmmaking. Another is the consistency of her attention to beauty and humanity in work that spanned three decades of unforgettable documentation of Israel’s wars in Lebanon and Palestine. Third is her contribution to telling a very different kind of war story by using different protagonists—women and children. She draws attention to how, in the many highly commercially successful US films on the Vietnam War, the stories are those of



white American men, and the absence of Vietnamese characters, society, and culture strikes her.

Across the decades of Mai's work and her original commitment to telling the human stories of layers of injustice, destruction, death, has not changed, but with her move into fiction with *3000 Nights* her imagination was able to deepen the emotional impact of her work. And by using only Palestinian actors, including those playing the parts of Israelis, she emphasises the artistic strength of Palestinians with memorable power. In the scenes of torture and their counterpart of the scenes of hunger strikes, she has the experience of incarceration running as a thread through her work. Incarceration is central to Palestinian consciousness throughout the generations of the last 100 years and she has given its true value to Palestinians—women, children, and men as everyone lives it.

The symbolism of the names chosen for some of the characters in *3000 Nights*—Layal/night and Fidaa/sacrifice deepen the intensity of their experience and transmit it on a deep level to viewers. They also echo other symbolic names of important characters in her documentaries and her life, notably, Kifah/struggle. Mai's work is, as she often says, personal. In her mind when she says this, she sees her beloved nephew Munib who was so very seriously wounded by a sniper on the border in 2011. That personal family trauma was a scene replayed weekly in the Great March in Gaza from 2018, in which nearly 300 mainly young people were shot by Israeli military snipers and 6500 were maimed for life. Memory is always alive. As Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian national poet, put it, "We love life whenever we can./ We dance and throw up a minaret or raise palm trees for the violets / growing between two martyrs."<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. Chapters 2, 6, 7.
2. July 18, 2018, Basic Law, known as the Nation-State Bill specifies Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people.
3. Alkassim, Samirah and Nezar Andary, *The Cinema of Muhammad Malas*. Palgrave Macmillan 2018.
4. <https://bidoun.org/articles/pulp-the-archive>. A conversation with Omar Amiralay.
5. <https://bidoun.org/articles/pulp-the-archive>. A conversation with Omar Amiralay.
6. <https://bidoun.org/articles/pulp-the-archive>. A conversation with Omar Amiralay.

7. Annemarie Jacir is chief curator and founder of the *Dreams of a Nation* Palestinian cinema project, dedicated to the promotion of Palestinian cinema, and has taught Palestine film courses at Columbia and in several Palestinian refugee camps in Palestine and Lebanon.
8. Masharawi started work as a teenage day labourer in Israel, became a house painter, then interior decorator, and got his first chance as a production designer in Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee*. In that film, he also had an acting part as someone had to drive an army jeep and he was the only person on the set who could.
9. Chapter 2.
10. Personal communication.
11. Chapter 3.
12. Chapter 5.
13. Chapter 1.
14. Darwish 1986.

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## FILMOGRAPHY

Mai Masri studied film at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State University (USA). She directed and produced several films that were screened worldwide and won over 90 international awards including the Mipdoc Trailblazer Award in Cannes (France), the Luchino Visconti Award (Italy), and the Asia Pacific Screen Award (Australia). She founded Nour Productions in 1995 with her late husband, film-maker Jean Chamoun. Her debut feature film, *3000 Nights* (2015), inspired by the true story of a young Palestinian mother raising her child behind bars, had its world premiere at Toronto International Film Festival and won over 28 international awards. It was selected to represent Jordan at the 2017 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, and Palestine at the Golden Globe Awards.

### FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR

**3000 NIGHTS** 103 minutes, **Nour Productions** (Lebanon), **Orjouane Production** (Lebanon) and **Les Films d'Ici** (France) in co-production with Palestine, France, Jordan, Lebanon, UAE and Qatar, 2015

- *Circle Jury Award, Washington DC International Film Festival, USA 2016*
- *Jury Award, TheWIFTS (Women's International Film & Television Showcase), USA 2015*

- *Audience Award, Valladolid International Film Festival, Spain 2015*
- *Audience Award, Annonay International Film Festival, France 2016*
- *Youth Jury Award, International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights Geneva, Switzerland 2016*
- *TaoEdu Youth Award, Taormina International Film Festival, Italy 2016*
- *Youth Jury Award, “Paysages de Cineastes” Festival, France 2016*
- *Women’s Jury Award, “Paysages de Cineastes” Festival, France 2016*
- *Best Film, Malmo Arab Film Festival, Sweden 2016*
- *Audience Award, Malmo Arab Film Festival, Sweden 2016*
- *Special Jury Award, Islamic Film Festival, Iran 2016*
- *Audience Award, Rotterdam Arab Camera Film Festival, Netherlands 2016*
- *Audience Award, MIZNA Twin City Arab Camera Film Festival, USA 2016*
- *Best Actress Award, Mediterranean Film Festival of Annaba, Algeria 2016*
- *Kantara Award, Festival Arte Mare, Bastia, France 2016*
- *Press Prize, Festival du Film Arabe de Fameck, France 2016*
- *Best Screenplay, Carthage Film Festival, Tunisia 2016*
- *Bronze Award, Carthage Film Festival, Tunisia 2016*
- *“Prix du Film Engagé” Award, Muret Film Festival, France 2016*
- *Jury Award, Rencontres Internationales des Cinemas Arabes, Marseille, France*
- *First Prize, Students of Dreux, Cap sur le Monde festival, France*
- *Best Actress Award, Dhaka International Film Festival, Bangladesh 2017*
- *Mediterranean Lady Wilmar Award, Salina Doc Festival, Italy 2017*
- *Special Mention—Women’s International Film Festival, Lebanon 2018*
- *Best Film, Gollut Film Festival, Catalunya, Spain 2018*
- *Golden Olive Award, Jerusalem International Film Festival, Gaza 2018*

**33 DAYS** 52 minutes, **Al Jazeera** Documentary Channel, 2007

- *Best Documentary, Valladolid Film Festival, Spain 2008*
- *Special Mention. Mediterranean Film Festival, Tetouan, Morocco, 2008*

**BEIRUT DIARIES** 52 minutes, **Nour Productions**, 2006

- *Best Documentary, Asia Pacific Screen Awards, Australia 2007*
- *First Prize, Biennale des Cinemas Arabes, Paris 2006*

**FRONTIERS OF DREAMS AND FEARS** 56 minutes, **ITVS**, 2001

Won 14 international awards including:

- *Best Documentary, Biennale des Cinémas Arabes, Paris, France 2002*
- *First Prize, International Women's Film Festival in Torino, Italy 2002*
- *First Prize, Golden Sun Film Festival, Barcelona, Spain 02*
- *First Prize, Ismailia International Film Festival, Egypt 2001*
- *Film Critics Award, Ismailia International Film Festival, Egypt 2001*
- *La Colombaia di Luchino Visconti, award, Ischia, Italy, 2003*
- *Award of the Youth of Geneva, Nord-Sud Film Festival, Switzerland, 2003*
- *Earth Vision Award, Tokyo, Japan 2001*
- *Jury Award, Beirut International Film Festival 2001*
- *Silver Award, Argentina Documentary Film Festival, Buenos Aires 2006*

**CHILDREN OF SHATILA** 50 minutes, **NOUR Productions**, **Channel 4**, 1989

- *Best Director, Arab Screen Film Festival, London 1999*
- *Best Camera Award, Arab Screen Film Festival, London 1999*
- *Nominated for AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AWARD, Amsterdam 1998*

**HANAN ASHRAWI: A WOMAN OF HER TIME** 50 minutes, **BBC**, 1995

- *Best Documentary, One World Media Awards, UK, 1996*
- *Award of the Public at IMA festival in Paris, 1996*
- *Best Documentary, CMCA Palermo, Italy, 1997*

**CHILDREN OF FIRE** 50 minutes, MTC production for BBC, 1990

- *First Prize, Cairo Television Festival (1995)*
- *Award of Public, Feminin Pluriel Festival in France*

Films Co-directed by Mai Masri and Jean Chamoun:

**SUSPENDED DREAMS** 50 minutes, TVE, MTC production for BBC2, 1992

- *Grand Prix, FIMA Film Festival, Paris, 1993*
- *Best Documentary, Damascus Film Festival in 1993*

**WAR GENERATION—BEIRUT** 50 minutes, IBT and MTC for BBC1, 1985

- *Bronze Apple Award, National Educational Film Festival, USA, 1990*

**WILD FLOWERS: WOMEN OF SOUTH LEBANON** 67 minutes, MTC, 1986

- *Special Jury and Best Music Award, Valencia Film Festival, Spain 1987*
- *Film Critics Award, Carthage, Tunisia*
- *Special Jury Award, Damascus Film Festival*

**UNDER THE RUBBLE** 40 minutes, MTC, 1983

- *Special Jury Award, Valencia Film Festival, Spain 1983*

Mai also produced Jean Chamoun's award-winning films: **IN THE SHADOW OF THE CITY** (2001), **WOMEN BEYOND BORDERS** (2004), **HOSTAGE OF TIME** (1995), **LONGING FOR THE LAUREL** (2008), and **LANTERNS OF MEMORY** (2009).

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