Palestinian Children: Dying to Live

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Staying Alive. 2001. 28 minutes. A film by Ghada Terawi. For more information contact Staying Alive. PO Box 4389, El-Beireh, Palestine; e-mail: stayingalive_2001@yahoo.com

News Time. 2001. 54 minutes. A film by Azza El-Hassan. For more information contact MEC Film. Irit Neidhardt, Hafenweg 26a, 48155 Münster, Germany; +49-251-66-33-46; http://www.mecfilm.de/

> "I love life" . . . "I want to be a martyr" . . . "It doesn't matter if I die" . . . "I want to play."

So the subjects of two recent films, *Staying Alive* by Ghada Terawi and *News Time* by Azza El-Hassan, speak to the contradictions in which Palestinian boys in the occupied territories find themselves. These documentaries capture the harsh realities of Palestinian children's lives during the intifada. The boys joke and play but are confronted everywhere with death: the deaths of their friends and classmates, the memorials to death all around them, and their own possible deaths. The films also convey the ambivalent values attached to *individual* life and *collective* death. The questionable significance of life lived without dignity or hope for a better future is highlighted by the value of a death that is coded through a nationalist movement that, like all national struggles, requires and praises fearless self-sacrifice.

Staying Alive follows the daily life of two adolescent boys from Jalazon Refugee Camp in Ramallah. Terawi accompanies Ahmad and Mohammad during their daily clashes at checkpoints, talks to their families, films them at work and at play during slingshot practice on the hills overlooking an expansive Israeli settlement. Ahmad's proclamation that he loves life is tempered by his desire to fight the occupation by throwing rocks at soldiers. He knows the dangers, but he considers stone throwing necessary for self-defense. The children in both films participate in demonstrations, as a form of entertainment, an exciting sport, as well as an expression of national commitment. Their only fears are of and for their parents, who the boys realize would be angry if they knew they were at the demonstrations, or would be unspeakably distraught if a son was killed.

Frame from *Staying Alive.* (Courtesy of Ghada Terawi)

Mohammad's parents talk about their desperate efforts to dissuade the boys from going to the demonstrations, words that echo the agonized discussions regularly featured in Palestinian media and among NGOs. But in response to this adult anguish, the children in these films, like most children I talked to, insist they do not fear anything (but God) and laugh off questions about what they want to be when they grow up, because growing up is not guaranteed. Some of this nonchalance is conveyed in the music that Terawi and El-Hassan have chosen as background for the often jostling camerawork that follows these boys along their bumpy paths around Ramallah. The cheerful, sauntering guitar-strumming matches the somehow happy-go-lucky demeanor of the boys, especially Mohammad, a child whose wry humor, quick sardonic grin, and blasé attitude is barely interrupted by moments of serious contemplation.

El-Hassan's *News Time* is a more reflexive piece that engages the director's own biography and the filmmaking process itself. Also centered around adolescent boys living under occupation during the early days of the intifada, the film comments on media representations of the intifada as much as on the intifada itself. "They say we make good news," El-Hassan, the narrator, says with only a hint of scorn, as she watches the cameras watching the stone-throwing boys. The film raises profound questions about how people in a culture under the microscope begin to see themselves, accepting constant observation as normal, knowing their stereotyped images are feeding a world hungry for dramatic news, while hankering for the opportunity to be listened to as individuals. Nidal, known as the "talker" in El-Hassan's group of boys, says his favorite activity is being in the movie because he likes talking about his life; but he is shown talking just as much about the grisly deaths of friends.

Both directors examine the sharp discomforts generated by individuals' inabilities to fit into predetermined national character types. The boys in these films are not heroes, though they claim not to fear death and say they want to be martyrs. They sometimes slip into almost self-mocking anti-occupation rhetoric. The slogans, images, and arguments they use reveal how repetitive and formulaic the demands for freedom and justice have become after more than 35 years of occupation. The children speak

of fighting for their nation but still regret that they do not have birthday parties, felt by many to be a bourgeois celebration of the individual child, inappropriate during such a time of collective suffering.

The films record the suffocation that marks life in Ramallah. Death, martyrs and their posters, shelling, poverty, funerals, stone-throwing clashes, and boys' slingshots, parents' fears, children's fearlessness, no futures, no birthday parties—these are the constant images, common concerns, monotonous topics of discussion, and relentless sources of anxiety that saturate public space, local media, and individual consciousness. Characters in both films try to escape. Mohammad, in *Staying Alive,* stows away on a bus to Jordan, where he is discovered and returned to his father. His family teases him and asks why he wants to go to Jordan, where there are no clashes. Without missing a beat, he replies, "I'll throw stones at the Jordanians."

One of the most moving images in El-Hassan's documentary is of the quartet staring up at a huge poster of 12-year-old Mohammad Al-Durra being shot to death as he huddled under the arm of his panicked father. Filmed in wide angle from across the street, the boys are dwarfed by the poster at the entrance of Ramallah. They stand on their tiptoes to point out the massive bullet holes gouged into the cement beside Al-Durra's head, and the viewer is left wondering what these children must be discussing as they look at the frozen, larger-than-life death of a child just like them.

Children have received tremendous attention during this intifada, both internationally and within Palestinian society. The news media, NGOs, psychologists, and political contestants have represented Palestinian children variously as innocent victims, heroic strugglers, and manipulated militants. The debates surrounding Al-Durra's death signaled a discursive shift away from concerns about the illegality of the occupation toward the *quality* of Israeli occupation and the morality of Palestinian forms of resistance. Palestinians appealed to the world's sense of moral outrage by highlighting Israeli callousness in the cold blooded killing of a defenseless child. To justify the large numbers of Palestinian children killed or injured, Israeli propagandists suggested that Palestinian mothers were "throwing their children" into battle, and called into question the civility, indeed the humanity, of Palestinian families. Not unlike the arguments of earlier colonizers who justified their imperial "civilizing missions" by pointing to the brown man's ill treatment of his brown women, the treatment of children has been made into a sign of moral fitness. No longer a question of Palestinians' right to resist, or the need to implement UN Resolutions demanding an end to the occupation, the debate has been reduced to mutual accusations of barbarity.

These two films intervene in this new discursive field. In modern political discourse, "suffering" and "victimization" have become rhetorical levers, and children empty signifiers on which conflicting values and goals are inscribed. Through their intimate portraits of individual boys, however, both these films challenge this abstraction by showing complex and conflicted human agents who navigate the daily turmoils of life under occupation, imagine their futures, and negotiate the increasingly restricted choices allowed them.

I met one of the stars of *News Time* a year after the film was completed. He had grown about a foot and was becoming an even more handsome young man. He regaled me with stories, one of them about his brother's arrest and subsequent administrative detention. While recounting the brutal details of his brother's beating and arrest in the middle of the night, he became visibly sad. Sadness was a reaction neither film dwelled on but that is never fully crowded out, even by the machismo of youth. Later in the evening, during a lull in the conversation, the boy pulled a gun from the belt of his pants, grinning like a typically mischievous teenager at my shock and fear. Only later did I confirm that it was just a toy.