

From discourse and declarations to documentaries and debates, Amnesty International's condemnation of the Gaza Strip as an 'open-aiored prison' is ubiquitous. Entrapment is the treatise of Gaza, a longing for freedom the lifeblood of its inhabitants.

This is the crux of the Leeds Palestinian Film Festival's second screening of their 'People of Gaza' event – a spring-based episode of the festival honouring the often-untold stories of Gazans, a humanising approach removed from their generally cataclysmic portrayal in media. For their second showing at the HEART Centre in Headingley, the evening's events almost reflected its own compact festival. It boasted a triptych of unique documentaries on Palestinian leisure, an exclusive interview, a subsequent Q&A with the interviewer – the night's guest speaker Susan Piper of the Manchester Palestine Solidarity Campaign – and even a succinct musical interlude.

With all three short films acting as concise and touching vignettes of Palestinian life – both uplifting and sombre – the first and most intimate of these was 2013's *Flying Paper*. Co-directed by Roger Hill and prolific musician Nitin Sawhney (who doubles as the documentary's composer), the film catalogues the UNRWA organised attempt in 2011 by Palestinian youth to break the Guinness World Record for most kites flown simultaneously.

Focusing through the lens of brother and sister Musa and Widad Al Ghoul together with their daedal kite crafting grandfather, Abu Zaid, the mini-doc is a tender and heartfelt journey alongside their quest to conquer a record still held by the Palestinians to this day. *Flying Paper* beautifully centres Palestinians on their own terms, the co-directors taking a guiding approach as aspiring journalist Abeer Ahmed oversees much of the interviews and adolescent Gazan filmmakers conduct the cinematography. The storybook aesthetic of the animated sequences woven throughout the short serve to uplift this framing – this elevation of Palestinian youth.

However, the grittiness of these sequences also reflects the film's second central aspect, the child and adult world bleeding into one and the subsequent dichotomic mature innocence of the children. Forcibly aged by turmoil, their poignant perspective of the kites as evocative of soaring freedom through the sky illuminates the unified longing for escape that burns every tier of Palestinian culture, and as such

the film neatly rests beside the avian metaphors of freedom favoured by poet Ahmed Abu Artema featured notably in the first screening of 'People of Gaza'.

In 2015, as part of Flying Paper Productions' 'Gaza From Within' series, Hill revisited the Al Ghoul family in the aftermath of the 2014 Gaza War. Now co-directed alongside award-winning photographer Anne Paq, *Return to Seifa Village* reconnects with the now mature Musa and Widad, their family home having been destroyed in Israeli airstrikes. The sorrow of the film is continually interspliced with the vivid photography of Paq herself, each a vibrant portrait of human loss and struggle. The shutter sound effect motif in Paq's camerawork frames these images as isolated points in time, mere snapshots of life as an Al Ghoul, and thus the wider Palestinian condition. *Return to Seifa Village* acts as a stark reminder of the ephemeral temporality of Palestinian comfort, imparting a retroactive bittersweet tragedy to the innocent jubilation of *Flying Paper*.

Whilst both the core films have attained significant success across a myriad of international film festivals, the night's third and final film, *Gaza, One Football, One Leg*, achieved particular global acclaim. Directed by Patrice Forget in 2019, the film explores the lives and personalities of the Palestinian Amputee Football Association national squad through the lens of their brief away match in the French commune Martigues. The placement of Palestinians in a European context removes them from the largely incomprehensible gravitas of their reality and places them in a situation familiar to us. Unfettered, their warm, spritely, and optimistic characters flourish. Detached from the war-torn landscapes so often associated with them, their intrinsic humanity shines through, at once splendid and tragic, as it cleanly exposes the deep otherisation inflicted upon Palestinians by much of the West, encapsulating the ethos at the 'People of Gaza' series' core.

In tandem with the notion of Europeanisation throughout the short film, Beethoven's "Piano Trio in C Minor, Op.1 No.3" acts as the documentary's theme, a striking piece notoriously rife with extreme contrasts and harsh oscillations, beautifully conveying the discord of Palestinian life and the comparative ease of Western happenings.

Much like the addendum to *Flying Paper* in *Return to Seifa Village*, the documentary was followed by an interview conducted by Susan Piper with Khaled Al Mabhouh, the

coach of the amputee football team. Khaled thoughtfully expounded upon the severe state of sporting life within the Gaza Strip in the wake of the renewed war, as well as the sincere and unwavering graduated Palestinians eternally feel for those celebrating their name across the globe – be their impact monumental or minute, it is eternally cherished.

Initially the LPFF's programme of the night might seem like an eclectic spread, but poignant themes and echoes resonate through each film. The first of these themes is perhaps more subtle – music. Music pulses throughout the films, from the directorial significance of the musician Sawhney (whose haunting electronica melody well complements *Flying Paper's* eccentric animated scenes), the presence of Beethoven in *Gaza, One Football, One Leg*, and ultimately "Take Back the Sky" by Scottish activist Penny Stone played during the event's interval – a ballade also concerning the 2011 kite flying world record. What unites this music is its multiculturalism. A British Asian and a Scot composing for Palestine, alongside Beethoven's canonical German score performed by Le Trio Joubran (a Nazarene oud trio). The music reflects the content of the documentaries, international solidarity around the Palestinian cause.

The second resounding theme is temporality. The temporality of Palestinian peace, of their comfort, their chance to escape. The temporality of Palestinian documentaries, outdated only several years after their release, a feeling felt even stronger in the wake of the ongoing war. But as the final film began to conclude, I realised the night's treatise was largely the opposite, atemporality. Very specifically, the atemporality of Palestinian hope. Whilst Gaza may be shelled, still their world record stands unbroken. Whilst the Al Ghoul family may suffer, still they grow and persevere. Whilst the players may be maimed, still they continue to play.

Inscribed alongside the defiant Palestinian amputee team during *Gaza, One Football, One Leg's* conclusion – and fittingly adorned aback the LPFF's 2023 T-shirts – are the words of the national poet of Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish, "We suffer from an incurable malady: hope". And just as the Palestinians are a people enraptured with hope, so too is the art and spirit of those in solidarity.