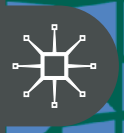

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Love and Resistance in the Films of Mai Masri

Victoria Brittain

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Dedicated to the Palestinian artists, poets, writers and filmmakers who keep memory and hope alive.

Preface I

One evening in the late summer of 2017, a month after the death of Mai Masri's husband, Jean Chamoun, the most famous Palestinian actor, Mohammed Bakri, stepped off a Beirut theatre stage and out of his character of the anti-hero Said in his one man play based on Emile Habibi's novel *The Pessoptimist*. Bakri is not only an actor, but also film director, and father of three actor sons. He epitomizes Palestinian cultural strength. On this occasion, he interrupted his performance, leaned into the front row of the audience, and embraced Mai, thus publicly offering her his condolences and expressing his high esteem for her and for Jean. Then, as quickly as he had interrupted his role, he returned to his place on the stage as down at heel Said. It was a moment which held the close-knit audience—the Palestinian/Lebanese artistic and social world of Lebanon, spellbound in sympathy with Mai and Bakri, both of whom at this moment jointly personified the Palestinian experience of loss.

A few nights later in the same theatre a moving tribute to Jean took place. Mai and her daughters were called to the stage and presented with big bouquets of white flowers, and a standing ovation. Then the symbolic Keys of Beirut were presented to Mai by the theatre's founder, renowned actor and director Nidal Al-Ashkar. All four of the women spoke to an audience they knew well, people who had for years supported and participated in the couple's decades of shared work based on faith in the power of cinema to capture the history they had experienced.

Among the speakers and performers at that Memorial were people whose much younger selves also appeared in extracts shown from some of the couple's films. Extracts from a legendary iconoclastic and comic radio programme '*We are still alive…thank God*' hosted jointly by Ziad Rahbani (the son of Lebanon's best loved singer, Fayrouz, and an artist in his own right) and Jean, during the civil war, had the audience laughing with remembered delight at how the pair had sustained them with irreverent, sardonic humour through the darkest of times.

Sami Hawat, a well-known actor and musician, who had performed in two of Jean's films decades before, played an *oud* solo, as he had played for Jean at home every week during his long years of illness. In the audience also were film editors, producers and many who had appeared in the films of Mai and Jean, or worked with them. The presence that night of these numerous collaborators emphasized the old bonds of loyalty to the collective works of art which had helped keep this community sane throughout the various wars which they had endured. This was recognition that the films would be a record and witness to the everyday destruction and death which constantly threatened. Such events, full of laughter as well as deep sadness and appreciation, were replicated in communities in many places in Lebanon in the next week. And a year later it was the turn of Ramallah, on the occupied West Bank, to hold a film retrospective to honour both the Lebanese Jean, and Palestine's own Mai.

Over all these events lay for many the shadow of loss and emotion, not only of Jean as an individual, but of an earlier era. A previous generation of Palestinian filmmakers had included Sulafa Jadallah, a woman who formed a team with Hany Jawhariyya and Mustafa Abu Ali, and had been a key part of the PLO's cinema of resistance in Jordan and Lebanon during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These were films covering the historic moments of the new wave of Palestinian exiles in 1967 after the Six Day War; in 1970 the Black September of repression of Palestinians in Jordan; Hany Jawhariyya was killed by a shell as he filmed a Palestinian guerrilla action in the area of Ain Toura in 1976. He has often been called, "The first martyr of Palestinian cinema."

But the film clips projected during these evenings celebrating Jean in 2018 showed Mai in the early 1980s when she had started her collaboration with him and was emerging as the first prominent and independent Palestinian woman film maker (Fig. 1).

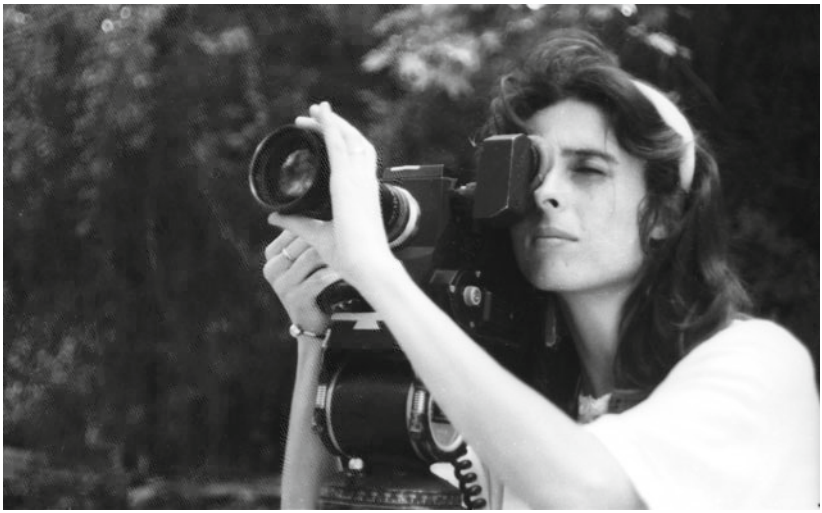

Fig. 1 Mai filming in south Lebanon 1986

Mai was also the first female cinematographer, and a producer and co-director with Jean. Later, she became a solo director with her own signature themes of collective resistance and resilience as in the response of women and children, mostly in the refugee camps of Lebanon, to their extreme experiences of war, displacement and imprisonment. These experiences were also the themes of those earlier Palestinian filmmakers and their Iraqi and Syrian colleagues documenting Palestinian realities of a vanished period of guerrilla war.

The 35 years of Mai Masri's films across Palestine and Lebanon show the interlinked histories of millions of mostly unknown people in the two countries. Here are close-ups of the first and second Intifadas in Palestine; of Hanan Ashrawi and the failed Palestinian peace process; of the repeated Israeli invasions, occupations and attacks on Lebanon; of the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war; of the lives in the martyred refugee camp of Shatila. Throughout the camera is embedded in the intimate lives of children, women, families, former militiamen, unveiling an intimate reality unseen before, except among the participants themselves. Mai is a true *auteur* who has evolved her original signature style and themes to make

her films—whether made with Jean Chamoun or alone, quite unmistakable. Like a few other women filmmakers of her generation, in particular Jane Campion, and Mira Nair, she shattered the glass ceiling which historically accorded that word to male film makers like Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut. All Mai's films have been made in war times because that is where her life has been. Grief, death, loss, are the most intimate of emotions and people share them openly with her. It is this gift of intimacy, along with meticulous research, which makes Mai's films speak so deeply into the viewers' consciousness.

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Preface 2

Mai Masri grew up a child of two continents, two languages and two religions in a household with two cultures embedded in a deeply secure family base. Her mother, Angela Kegler, was brought up in Texas, an only child who lost her father when she was 13. Her mother was a librarian. At university in Texas at 19 Angela met Munib Masri, who was doing the same course in geology as she was and who was part of the large Arab diaspora in the state (Fig. 2).

They were married a year later and their first son was born in Texas. Soon the young family moved to Munib's hometown Nablus, then a few months later to Amman, Jordan, where Munib had the job of mapping oil and water wells, and where initially he was much helped by his wife having also majored in geology. Angela adapted to the Middle East gradually, learned to speak Arabic, and had six children.

Mai was born in Amman, and she and her five siblings were brought up in Amman, Algiers and finally Beirut, following her father's work as a geologist and engineer. Her father provided her with a lifetime connection to Palestinian identity. Through him too she grew up feeling a link to the Arab generation fired by the powerful political currents of Arab nationalism and Third World power expressed in Gamel Abdel Nasser's Egyptian revolution of 1954 which ousted British troops from the Middle East, and the Algerian war of independence launched two weeks after the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy. Alongside this world of male power embodied in her father there was the parallel dual influence equally strong

Fig. 2 Munib Masri and Angela Kegler at their graduation ceremony, Sul Ross University, Texas, 1956

on Mai. Her mother was always present, the gentle, loving and encouraging parent, constantly reading or telling stories to the children. She took the girls to ballet and drawing lessons, encouraging a focus on the arts. She awakened in Mai imagination, love of literature, the longing to tell stories herself and wanting to do something to make a difference, not just through politics, but using art (Fig. 3).

They are part of a large Palestinian family from the West Bank city of Nablus, which Mai feels is her home town and returns to often, although most of her life has been lived elsewhere after Nablus was occupied by the Israeli army in 1967. Today Mai's large family is as close as ever, though her brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, and her own daughters live scattered between New York, Amman, Ramallah, Beirut and London. Her own home is in Beirut, her mother lives in London, while her father is back in Nablus.

Fig. 3 Angela Masri with her children Rabih, Mai, Mazen, and Dina at home in Beirut 1966

Mai's school and university years were spent in Beirut at a time of strong student political participation and the rise in Lebanon of support for the Palestinian resistance. Mai volunteered in schools in the Palestinian camps, and was active in student movements. She was studying then at the International College in Beirut. But as the civil war took its devastating hold on the society she left in June 1976 to join her elder brother, Rabih, in California. There she enrolled in The University of California at Berkeley, a 17 year old idealist completely uncertain of what she wanted to do. By chance she stepped into a class of French professor, Bertrand Augst. He was teaching highly intellectual film analysis of the work of Hitchcock, Godard, Alain Resnais based on semiology (Christian Metz) and psychoanalysis (Lacan and Foucault). "This was what I had been looking for, without knowing it—it was perfect," she remembers. "I became obsessed with cinema, swept away by my classes, the library, the films." It was a time of rich opportunities to see the widest of film worlds. Berkeley then was home to the Pacific Film Archive started ten years before as

a copy of the *Cinematheque Francaise* in Paris and devoted to showing international, archive and experimental films. Here she encountered some of her great film influences and loves: Italian neo-realism, Costa Gavras, Pontecorvo, Iranian, Latin American filmmakers and others. Her favourite films, watched over and over were Patricio Guzman's three part documentary *The Battle for Chile*, (in which the camera man was actually killed), *Man with a Movie Camera* by the Soviet director Dziga Vertov, and Costa Gavras's *Z* and Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*. All four gave her the direction she would eventually head for in film making devoted to historical authenticity. Additionally, the American experimental film maker, poet and choreographer of the 1940s, Maya Deren, was a direct inspiration for her of a woman with her own voice in a male-dominated film world. She also read and reread John Berger's classic *Ways of Seeing*, adapted from his 1972 television series of 30 min films, which educated a generation in Britain. "Seeing comes before words," was Berger's most famous line. Years later, echoing Berger's thought, Mai would say how in her work images came to her long before words.

Meanwhile, back in Beirut in 1976 the airport was closed because of the war and there was no going back to her other life.

Mai moved on from film theory at Berkeley to San Francisco State university and a four year programme of every aspect of filmmaking films. She worked as a waitress and evening receptionist in a small hotel to support herself, and at the same time received a crash course in parts of American society she would never have otherwise encountered. At 17 she was the youngest in her film class which included students from many different backgrounds, many of them political exiles. They came from Iran, Iraq, Israel, Latin America, including particularly Chilean exiles, and a small US contingent of Vietnam veterans. Mai, with her past experience of Palestine and Lebanon to share, was thrust into a highly politicized student world of ceaseless political discussion and strong anti-war themes. Angela Davis, already an icon of US black struggle, was then teaching a course (Fig. 4).

In those years far away from home Mai's Palestinian identity remained always central to her personality. Like all Palestinians, dispossession, exile, and distance from close family were primary experiences of her childhood and youth. Later she lived through the life-changing traumas of Israel's wars in Lebanon, and the widening Israeli occupation in Palestine. She made it her life's work to tell the human stories of women and children, artists, journalists, actors, farmers who made lives of joy and dignity in the context of wars, prisons and refugee camps.

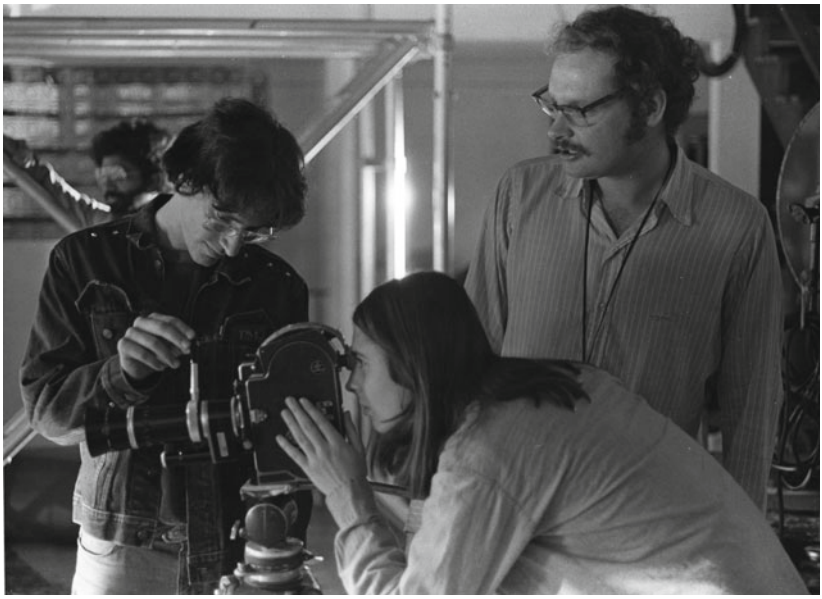

Fig. 4 Mai at San Francisco State University 1978

As an adult, Mai made Beirut her home and the centre for her work. In 1986 she married the Lebanese film maker Jean Chamoun in Paris. Jean, whose own work was already deeply involved with Palestinians in Lebanon, was her closest collaborator for the thirty years of their life together. The couple had two daughters—Hana and Nour—who from their childhood to the present day have been enmeshed in their parents' work. After a long illness Jean passed away in 2017, and Mai continued the work she had begun with him (Fig. 5).

The chapters of this book begin with Mai Masri's latest work and first feature film—*3000 Nights*. The film is written by Mai based on the intimate stories of Palestinian women prisoners and has its background in the most dramatic of real events which she experienced in her 30 years as a documentary film maker and filmed at the time. As a feature film it carries the viewer's imagination deeply into an unknown world. This is the most ambitious and fullest expression of Mai's life-long preoccupations

Fig. 5 Mai, Jean, Nour, and Hana in Beirut 1997

with two central themes of the Palestinian experience, incarceration, and the role of women, as mothers, as political actors and as fighters.

3000 Nights provides a wide window to look into her years of documentary film making examined chronologically in subsequent chapters. The seed of *3000 Nights* came to her in an encounter with a former prisoner in the mid 1980s in Nablus in the West Bank when she was filming *Children of Fire*, the first of her three documentaries on children in war, whose experiences of displacement and occupation are a key theme in Chapter 2. And the violent opening images of this chapter show her own personal baptism of fire filming the 1982 Israeli bombing and besieging of Beirut. These, like images from the devastated Palestinian camp of Shatila, recur in almost all the films as a collective memory, including for a younger generation who know them vividly if only from elders' repeated stories.

All Mai's films are essentially linked, and the same people and historic events often reappear in films made years apart, as in Chapter 3, *Torture and Love in South Lebanon*. The theme of women's centrality to struggle

is explored in three central women in both films, and their prison experiences. Their lived experiences were key to the eventual making of *3000 Nights*. In Chapters 4 and 5 the focus is the 15 year civil war in Lebanon. Chapter 4 explores the reality of the war across generations, and finds absurdity in those war years, and then resilience in rebuilding. The second, in two films made 25 years apart, focuses on the open wound of the 17,000 Disappeared people and how their families find strength in their common determination to remember, and find answers to what happened to their family members.

Chapter 6 is the second film of the trilogy of children in war, this time set in Lebanon, in the Palestinian camp of Shatila, and is carried by the dreams and imagination of two central child characters. The third part of the trilogy is examined in Chapter 7 which brings together children from refugee camps in both the West Bank and Beirut. Unique historic footage shot in 2000 on the border as the Israeli army withdrew after 22 years examines the children's lives in relation to history and memory.

A timeline of major political events in Lebanon and Palestine which are the background to her films is given as an aid to the general reader. And a book list indicates some of the source material for further reading.

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