

Grassroots festivals and film activism: Palestine Film Festivals in the UK

Introduction

According to the late Edward Said, Palestinian cinema provides a “visual alternative... a visual incarnation of Palestinian existence in the years since 1948”.¹ Due to its transnational nature and the challenges of colonialism, Palestinian cinema has mainly reached audiences through international and Palestine-themed film festivals.² There are currently dozens of Palestine-themed film festivals worldwide, which since the Gaza war began in October 2023 assume heightened significance in offering what Said calls “an alternative”.³

This review focuses on three annual Palestinian film festivals in the United Kingdom (UK): the London Palestine Film Festival, the Bristol Palestine Film Festival, and the Leeds Palestinian Film Festival, and draws on a research project in progress. We discuss the festivals’ 2024 editions, within the longer trajectory of their development, explaining how they deploy different curatorial strategies to position themselves as sites of culture and spaces for what we might call ‘soft’ political activism. Reflecting on the ways the festivals were affected by, and responded to, the context of the war, we argue that a spike in audience attendance has emboldened the festivals to expand the scope of their programmes. It enhanced programming of ‘beyond the film’ events that encourage embodied and experiential modes of engagement, inviting us to problematise traditional notions of activism in film festival contexts.

Amplifying Palestinian Voices: festival identities and curatorial approaches

The three festivals can be characterised as activist grassroots festivals. They are small-scale, volunteer-led and reliant on sporadic funding from different sources.⁴ They were founded within context of activism by enthusiasts with no prior professional background in cinema: the London Palestine Film Festival in 1999 by the Palestine Society at The School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London; The Bristol Palestine Film Festival in 2011 by the footballer and activist David Owen and the Leeds Palestinian Film Festival in 2015 by a group of pro-Palestine women activists. Despite modest beginnings, the festivals have run annually since their inception. They expanded over the years, carving a visible presence within their respective urban cultural calendars and holding events in prominent venues.

Activist film festivals aim to increase public awareness and to catalyse political action, often by challenging hegemonic narratives.⁵ All three festivals aim to amplify Palestinian voices in the UK public sphere, pushing back against a media and political landscape that often

marginalises or distorts Palestinian narratives. Their programmes are framed as counter-narratives that invite audiences to encounter Palestinians “telling their own stories in their own ways”.⁶ However, there are important differences in the festivals’ curatorial approaches that call for a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between cinematic expression and political advocacy in activist festivals contexts.

The London Palestine Film Festival frames its identity around fostering Palestinian film culture and plays a crucial role in situating Palestinian cinema within the world cinema landscape. Based in London, with its transient and diverse population, and emerging out of the university context, the festival curates a rather highbrow programme which caters to a cosmopolitan milieu of cine-literate and politically engaged audiences.

Davies noted that activist film festivals typically prioritise using films to present information and testimonies, rather than being concerned with art or entertainment.⁷ Post-screening discussions, which are central to the operation of activist festivals, tend to move beyond the film itself, connecting its narrative to the socio-political world and aiming to influence the thinking of the audience.⁸

In contrast, the programming agenda of the London Palestine Film Festival often promoted experimental and artistic works and its Q&As regularly engaged with the cinematic aspects of the films as much as with the political issues they depicted. In this respect, we might think of it as an ‘identity-based’ film festival, which foreground the representation of films linked to specific communities while forming cosmopolitan assemblages that aim to influence identity building.⁹ In the specific Palestinian context, fostering film culture is in itself a form of resistance, in face of longstanding erasure mechanisms of Israeli Colonialism. Such curatorial philosophy ensures that Palestinian cinema, if we return to Said, is not a means to inform audiences about Palestinian existence, rather it *is* Palestinian [cultural] existence.

The curatorial approach of the Leeds and Bristol festivals foreground advocacy more explicitly. Framed as alternative spaces for political action in their respective cities they aim to raise awareness of the Palestinian plight beyond traditional activist circles by using film as a “much gentler way to outreach to those unfamiliar with Palestine”.¹⁰ Attempting to reach wider audiences, the selection criteria of both festivals tend to prioritise documentaries and fiction films with a broader appeal.

Another strategy to widen their audience is curating events that move beyond the film dispositif. The Bristol festival includes a non-film event in each programme: live music,

comedy, theatre and others. The Leeds festival works in partnerships with local organisations to host collaborative community-based events that combine cinema with other cultural forms and participatory activities.

Such ‘beyond the film’ events, to use Dickson’s term, reflect a wider shift in programming practices of film festivals, responding to the rise of the experience economy and changing modes of film consumption.¹¹ In many of these ‘beyond the film’ events the experiential value revolves around a sense of playfulness and festivity.¹² The ways in which such experiential dynamics play out in the context of activist film festivals – which often involves the witnessing of suffering - call for critical unpicking, especially when festivals temporalities coincide with times of crisis of the kind unfolding in Palestine at the time of writing.

Programming in Times of Crisis: the 2024 editions of festivals

The 2024 festival editions were held in the thick of the Gaza war, amidst an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe and an increasingly polarized UK public sphere. This has impacted the festivals’ positioning and exposure and informed their programming practices.

The shifting political atmosphere in the UK forced the festivals to negotiate, for the first time in their history, not only a position of marginality but more overt dynamics of exclusion. This has primarily affected the running of the 2023 editions of the festivals, which were held a month into the war. Under the Conservative government at the time pro-Palestinian action was openly vilified. The then Home Secretary Suella Braverman, for example, labelled pro-Palestinian protests as “hate marches”, while Prime Minister Rishi Sunak warned of “extremists” seeking to “tear us apart”.¹³ In this climate of suspicion, cultural institutions became hesitant to support Palestinian events. The most overt example was in Bristol, where the Arnolfini, the city’s major cultural venue and home for the festival for several years, withdrew from hosting the festival.¹⁴

In London, while some of the venues raised security concerns, the festival’s events ran as planned but with notable restrictions. The Barbican and ICA introduced bag searches and name checks for the festival’s events, as well as an app used during the Q&As to filter questions from the audience.

Reflecting the frustration of the organisers, and nodding to the festival’s core identity, Atika Dawood, the festival’s producer, proclaimed in her opening speech:

Attending and organising film festivals should not be activist work. We should not have to deal with security issues and red tape. Films should be expanding our knowledge and transporting us to other worlds. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the context, we have to fight for our position on screens around the world. It should not be an act of solidarity to attend a film screening...¹⁵

By the 2024 editions of the festivals some of these tensions had eased, although the public debate around the war remained and remain volatile and campaigns for Palestine continue to be policed.¹⁶ In Bristol, following sustained dialogue and a change in management, the Arnolfini resumed its partnership with the festival and in London security checks in the Barbican and ICA were relaxed.¹⁷

At the same time, the festivals saw a spike in audience attendance in the last two editions. The organisers reported a sharp rise in ticket sales in 2023: nearly 60% in London, 133% in Bristol and 57% in Leeds. A further modest increase was reported in 2024 by the London and Bristol festivals (16.7% and 14% respectively), while the Leeds festival saw an increase of 123%.¹⁸ Surveys we conducted with festival attendees indicate that a significant portion of respondents were attending the festival for the first time, and often this was prompted by the political events of the past two years.¹⁹

In response to the political climate and encouraged by the rise in audience numbers, all three festivals expanded their activities, running in 2024 their most extensive programmes to date.

All three festivals featured several films from and about Gaza that were framed as opportunities for festivalgoers to see Gaza beyond the dominant images that circulate in mainstream media or cinema and invited reflection on the wider context of the war. A primary example was the then newly released film *From Ground Zero* (2024), that had its UK premiere at the London Palestine Film Festival. An anthology of 22 shorts made inside Gaza between January and June 2024, and produced by the renowned Gazan filmmaker Rashid Mashrawi, the film was promoted as a unique glimpse into the resilient spirit of Gazans during that year and was scheduled to close the festival with a simultaneous multi-screening across nine venues in London and other cities. This, along with a curatorial decision not to include a Q&A was aimed, according to the organisers, to emphasise the rawness of the voices and the severity of the situation. In Bristol the film was scheduled to open the festival at the Arnolfini, an event that also marked the renewed partnership between the festival and the venue, and the screening was followed by a Q&A with the French producers of the film. At the time of its screening at the

Palestine Film Festivals in London and Bristol, the film had only started its exhibition cycle and was refused a screening at the 2024 edition of the [Cannes film festival](#).²⁰ The festivals were therefore offering here a unique experience of first viewing that is usually reserved for bigger A-list festivals.

Moreover, the festivals expanded by enhancing ‘beyond the film’ components of their programmes. The London festival’s positioning as a promoter of Palestinian culture was strengthened by its unusual decision to commission a stage play to open the festival. The play, *A Grain of Sand* - a one-woman show written and directed by Elias Matar and performed by Sarah Agha - drew on testimonies and poems by young people in Gaza that were collected in Leila Boukarim and Asaf Luzon book *A Million Kites: Testimonies and Poems from the Children of Gaza*.

Figure 1: *A Grain of Sand* Q&A at London Palestine Film Festival, Barbican Centre, London 2024

The Bristol festival added a live concert of the Palestinian-British singer and songwriter Reem Kelani to its opening film and concluded with an afterparty at a local club featuring DJs from Paris, Lebanon and Palestine, that served as a fundraiser for the Gaza children’s animation project *My Story Became a Film*. Another event held at the [Palestine Museum and Cultural Centre](#), included a screening of *The People and the Olive* (Aaron Dennis, 2012) paired with an olive oil tasting and Palestinian food, celebrating the agricultural and culinary heritage of Palestine while fostering conversations around sustainability and land rights.

The Leeds Festival developed further partnerships with local organisations and programmed ten additional one-off events throughout the year. Its programme featured two craft workshops for families and children, two events with music and the annual embroidery workshop, which were hosted in a variety of venues across the city. One of these events was a kite-making workshop organised in collaboration with the local charity St Luke’s Cares, that was paired with a screening of *Flying Paper* (Nitin Sawhney and Roger Hill, 2013), a documentary about young Gazans attempting to break the Guinness World Record for kite flying.

Figure 2: the Kite-Making Workshop at Leeds Palestinian Film Festival 2024

Another was a double-bill of the documentaries *Resistance Climbing* (Zachary Barr & Nick Rosen, 2023) and *Walls Cannot Keep Us From Flying* (Jonathan Mehring, 2021), which follow rock climbing and skateboarding sports in Palestine, that was screened in the Leeds bouldering centre City Bloc. Dickson terms such programming practices spatio-textual programming – a

specific mode that celebrates a connection between the ‘spatial conditions’ of the exhibition site and the ‘narrative images’ on-screen.²¹

The curation of these events is not only an example of the synergies created between visceral activities (kite-making, olive oil testing) or the materiality of the space (bouldering centre) and the on-screen narratives in such modes of programming, but also of the strategy the organisers deploy to reach new audiences and expand the circles of advocacy. The Leeds partnership with City Bloc, for example, allowed the organisers access to users who otherwise might not be aware or invested in the Palestinian issue or would not be frequenting the Hyde Park art house cinema that is the festival’s traditional hub. The choice of films in this case is also strategic not only in relation to creating a pleasurable ‘experiential value’ from space-narrative connection, but also a means to introduce the Palestinian cause to the uninitiated through affinity with everyday practices – in this case the love of rock-climbing.

In these events the facilitated post-screen discussion, that is a key practice of activist film festivals, were replaced with elements that encouraged engagement with the films’ content through the experiential value of the visceral or the spatial dimensions. Such encounters potentially generate affective modes of knowledge and empathy that are more corporal than conceptual, more embodied than intellectual.

Conclusion

In the contemporary context of the war in Gaza, and in the face of a polarised UK public sphere, the London, Bristol, and Leeds Palestine Film Festivals demonstrate that, as Cable suggested, the most important uses of cinema in the service of activism remain centrally in the grassroots realm.²²

With the agility that is afforded to grassroots organisations the festivals responded to an increase in public interest in Palestine by expanding their programmes, seizing opportunities to reach new audiences by diversifying their activities and building new connections. The different curatorial strategies that they deployed not only sustain the visibility of Palestinian cinema, in face of its scarcity in more mainstream exhibition contexts, but also foster through ‘festivilization’ practices opportunities for local communities to engage with Palestine through multiple cultural forms that move beyond film texts alone. In curating such beyond-the-film

events they invite audiences to engage with the content showcased in ways that are embodied, affective, and relational.

To what extent such modes of engagement are effective in mobilising audiences into political action, or indeed how might they prompt us to revisit our understandings of notions of activism, are questions that are beyond the scope of this review but that we are keen to explore further in our research. What is certain, at least from our initial observations, is that the festivals' events facilitated, through film screenings, discussions, workshops, performances, food tastings and other elements, infrastructures for solidarity and belonging that are much needed today.

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¹ Quoted in Dabashi, H. *Dreams of a Nation*, London: Verso, 2006.

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- ² Saliger, 2014, 2024; Cabel, 2021; Gertz and Khleifi, 2008.
- ³ See: Palestine Film Institute, “Festival Directory,” accessed August 14, 2025, <https://www.palestinefilm.org/en/directory>.
- ⁴ See Cabel, 2021 for definition of grassroots festivals.
- ⁵ Davies, 2018, p.1; Tascón, 2017, p. 32.
- ⁶ See the London Palestine Film Festival website, <https://www.palestinefilm.org.uk/>, accessed August 14, 2025
- ⁷ See: Davies, 2018, p.3.
- ⁸ Tascón, 2017, p.33; Iordanova, 2012, p.15.
- ⁹ Acciari, 2017.
- ¹⁰ Leeds festival organisers, interview with authors. December 17, 2024 [online]
- ¹¹ Dickson, 2017.
- ¹² See the typology of beyond the film events in Dickson, 2017, p.92-93.
- ¹³ See for example: Rajeev Syal, Dan Sabbagh, and Kiran Stacey, “Suella Braverman Calls Pro-Palestine Demos ‘Hate Marches,’” The Guardian, October 30, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/oct/30/uk-ministers-cobra-meeting-terrorism-threat-israel-hamas-conflict-suella-braverman>; Daniel Boffey, “Calling Gaza Protesters Extremist Risks Dividing UK, Says Government Adviser,” The Guardian, March 8, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/08/calling-gaza-protesters-extremist-risks-dividing-uk-says-cohesion-adviser-sara-khan>
- ¹⁴ Bea Swallow, “Arnolfini gallery cancels Palestine film festival events”, BBC News, November, 22, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-6749622>; see also the announcement on the Arnolfini website dating November, 22, 2023, <https://arnolfini.org.uk/press-releases/update/>
- ¹⁵ London Palestine Film Festival, Barbican Cinema 1, London, November 17, 2023.
- ¹⁶ One example of these tensions is ban placed on the activist group Palestine Action by the British Government in and controversy around the decision. See: Rajeev Syal “Home Office wins right to challenge Palestine Action’s terror ban appeal”, The Guardian, September 4, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/sep/04/home-office-wins-right-to-challenge-palestine-action-proscription-appeal>
- ¹⁷ See: <https://arnolfini.org.uk/an-apology-from-arnolfini/>
- ¹⁸ Figures were reported to the authors by the festival organisers. The increase in percentage was calculated by the authors in comparison to the ticket sales in the previous years.
- ¹⁹ As part of the authors’ research project 965 post event surveys were collected across the three festivals with return rate of about 10% in each, and 30 follow-up online individual interviews were conducted with attendees. First time attendees made up 67% of respondents in 2023 and 57% in 2024 in London. 56% in 2023 and 33% in 2024 in Bristol, and 27% in 2024 in Leeds.
- ²⁰ See: Rauwaida Amar, “Film was the best way to convey our art amid the suffering in Gaza”, +972 Magazin, July 2, 2024, <https://www.972mag.com/ground-zero-rashid-masharawi-cannes-gaza/#:~:text=Politics%20has%20long%20been%20a,%2C%E2%80%9D%20Masharawi%20told%20+972>
- ²¹ Dickson, 2017.
- ²² Cabel, 2021, p. 313