

## Out of the Shadows

### The Photography and Film of Akram Safadi

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The case can be made that, since the inception of photography, Jerusalem has been one of the most photographed places in the region. As a holy city of Christendom, non-photographic depictions of Jerusalem have been commonplace for centuries in Europe and the rest of the Christian world. This genre partially inspired and informed the advent of photography in Palestine so much so that most early photographs are attempts to “biblify” Jerusalem and all that is connected with it. Since new generations of photographers are often informed by the work of the preceding generation, the prototypical photographic representation of Jerusalem has always concentrated heavily on its biblical and religious sites or 'biblical' representations. This was the case even as the conflict between eventual Israelis and Palestinians began to leave its mark on the city's landscape. Despite that many twentieth century photographers came to Jerusalem to capture political events, the contrast of these events with the archetypal

image of Jerusalem as a holy city haunted the pictures photojournalists produced, and their accompanying captions. The result was that Jerusalem was both over- and under-photographed, in the sense that certain features of the city were heavily documented by photographers, while many other aspects of the city were completely ignored.

The work of Jerusalem photographer Akram Safadi presents us with a long-awaited fresh view of Jerusalem both as a holy and as a secular city. In his work Safadi captures Jerusalem from within as a living social space, without ignoring the weight of its sacred history. Safadi manages to show his viewers the socially inhabited modern landscape in which young men, some wearing Bob Marley T-shirts, play billiards in the same Roman market in which Jesus himself might have had a stroll on his way to the temple. The use of black-and-white photography, coupled with the play of bright light in the background darkening the features of the billiard-playing men in the foreground, create a near-alienating distance between the viewed and the viewer. The use of shadows, dark colors and close-ups brings some of the images to life, but in a manner that pulls them from the shadows as if they are shy to assert their presence in a city overwhelmed by its own history.

Born in Jerusalem, the city in which he still resides, Akram Safadi took up photography in the middle of the 1980s after graduating from Birzeit University. His early work belongs almost exclusively to the genre of photojournalism. His photographs appeared in local and international media and were exhibited in various cities in Europe. By the end of the 1980s, Safadi began to work with film.

Safadi's first film was "La Chambre Noir de Jerusalem: Stories from Jerusalem". The film's main theme is the city, but in reality the film is an autobiographical piece about

Akram himself as a photographer. The narrative is framed around his photojournalist career, which he was embarrassed by, and then abandoned. A decade later, Safadi revisits his archive of black-and-white images only to find unfinished stories. He makes a film about the people he photographed, their lives more than a decade later, and - most importantly - their relationship to Jerusalem.

Reem Talhami, Ali Jiddeh and Farouq Duzdar were all close friends of Safadi and all appeared in his photographs in the late 1980s. Talhami is a singer, Jiddeh is an activist-turned-tour guide, and Duzdar is described by Safadi as a landlord. They are all Jerusalemites living in the city, but all are nostalgic about their lives in the city from one decade earlier when Safadi captured glimpses of them in his photographs. Their longing, although personal, has the aura of religiosity; it brings to mind the longing of medieval pilgrims for the holiest city in the world. Safadi's characters in the film seem to suffer a certain nostalgia that is typical of exiles - yet they are neither exiles nor yearning to return to Jerusalem. Their longing for the city is no doubt connected with the general Palestinian situation in Jerusalem where the city itself has been 'exiled' through siege and separation from its surroundings. Too, I would argue that their longing is also about the magic of photography and its unparalleled ability to inspire in viewers feelings of nostalgia and a desire to return to the moments it has frozen in time.

Akram Safadi might be a photographer, and a good one indeed, but first he is a Jerusalemite narrating his love for his city in pictures and in film.



*Mr. Duzdar and his daughter.*

*Source: © Akram Safadi.*



*Bob Marley gazes from the T-shirt of an Old City sheb.*

*Source: © Akram Safadi.*



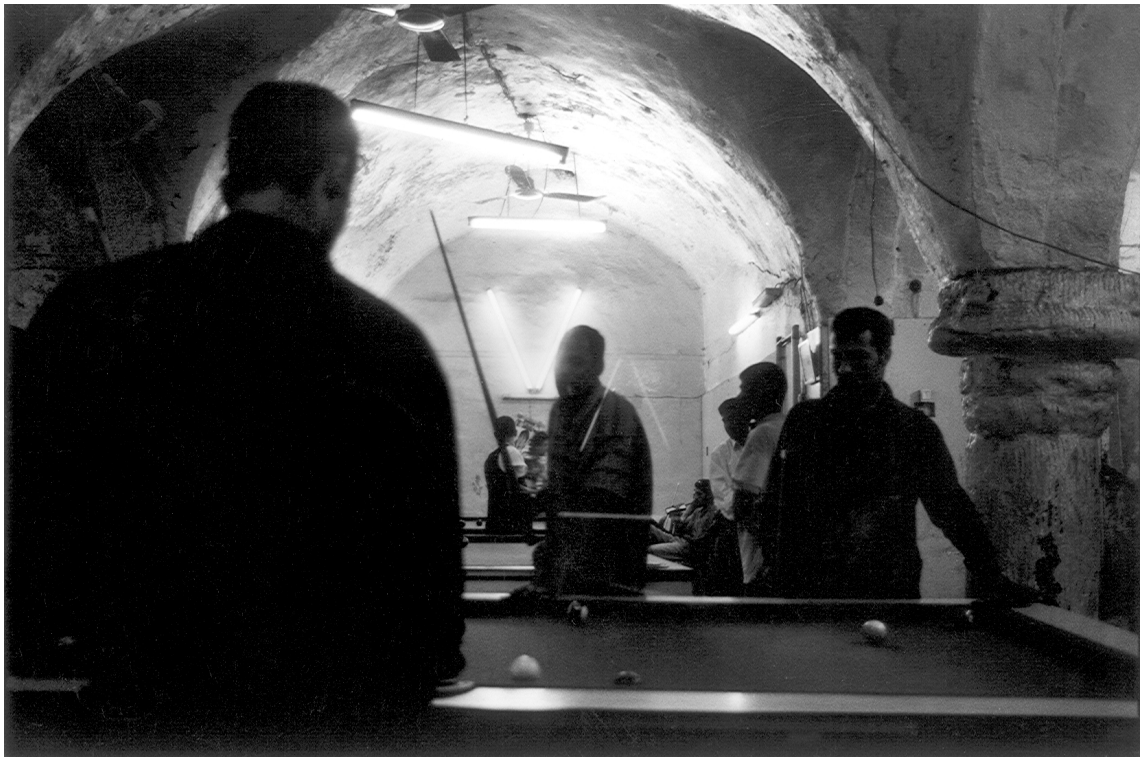
*Shadowplay in Jerusalem.*

*Source: © Akram Safadi.*



*A Palestinian vendor opposite the walls of the Old City.*

*Source: © Akram Safadi.*



*A billiard hall in Jerusalem's Cardo.*

*Source: © Akram Safadi.*



*Children on a stoop.*  
Source: © Akram Safadi.