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Imagining the Nation on the Screen: The Poetics of Palestinian Cinema's Fourth Period

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This article explores Palestinian cinema's fourth period of activity that began around 1980. During this time, the world did not acknowledge the existence of the Palestinian people and their territory. Palestinian cinema thus emerged as a tool to create a national identity and voice, and to establish a continuous time and space that defined their history and territory. The films projected a collective consciousness that united the dispersed Palestinian community, creating a shared community. To achieve these goals, Palestinian cinema employed unique and complex artistic means, with its national purpose remaining consistent with its complex cinematic poetics. This bird's-eye-view article highlights the shared spirit of the films and emphasizes the commonality beyond the differences. It offers an insight into the cinematic language that characterized this period and the principles that made Palestinian cinema a unique voice on the global stage.

KEYWORDS: Palestinian cinema, Palestine, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, nationalism, cinema

Introduction

This article aims to decode the language of Palestinian cinema during its fourth period of activity, which began around 1980. During this period, it was not evident in the international discourse that there is a Palestinian people and territory, and Palestinian cinema aimed to define a national identity, to express a voice in international discourse, and to create a continuous time and space that defined the nation's history, territory, and cinema. Cinema actively created a shared community, and the screen served as a projection of the collective consciousness that united the disbanded community. Cinema used complex and unique artistic means to achieve its goals, and its national goal did not contradict its complex cinematic poetics.

This article focuses on the commonalities between different types of films made in different places during this period. Despite the differences in creators, themes, genres, filming locations, and production sources, this bird's-eye-view article highlights the common denominator of the films' spirit. It emphasizes the common aspects beyond the differences and focuses on the cinematic language that characterized this period, as well as the principles that made Palestinian cinema unique.

The Complex Definition of Palestinian Cinema

The definition of "Palestinian cinema" is not obvious. Palestinian cinema cannot be defined as films produced in Palestine in the absence of a sovereign Palestinian state. Most Palestinian directors do not live

in the Palestinian Authority[1] and hold Israeli, European, or American citizenship. Some films are not shot in the Palestinian Authority but in Lebanon, Israel or other countries. The financial support for producing the films usually comes from Israeli or European funds or producers and, in the last decade, also from Arab countries.

This situation raises many questions. Is the video art of Mona Hatoum, born in Lebanon into a Palestinian family and living and working in New York and Great Britain, Palestinian? Is *Paradise Now* (2005), funded by Germany, Netherlands, and France and directed by Hany Abu-Assad, who was raised in Nazareth and lives in the Netherlands, a Palestinian film?[2]

Despite these questions, the common ground for the variety of films made by Palestinians leave no room for doubt; Palestinian cinema exists, but it must be defined differently than "films produced in Palestine." When writing on Palestinian cinema, the implied assumption is that Palestinian films are defined according to their director's nationality. This definition also includes directors born in exile, such as Leila Sansour, who was born in Moscow and lives both in Bethlehem and London.[3]

In the discourse on Palestinian cinema, it is usually also assumed that a Palestinian director is any Arab whose family resided in Palestine before 1948, even if they moved from their native land during the events of the *Naqba*.[4]

Another criterion for defining Palestinian cinema, which applies to almost all Palestinian films before 2010, is the focus on the national situation. Even films like *Women in the Sun* (Sobhi al-Zobaidi, 1999), *Yasmin* (Nizar Hassan, 1995), and *Sindibad Is a She* (Azza el-Hassan, 1999), which address the status of women in Palestinian society, anchor the gender issue in the national context. Palestinian cinema has developed a unique language connecting personal stories with national narratives. This paper concentrates on the cinematic language of Palestinian films and its national meaning.

Periodization of the Palestinian Cinema

This article addresses the fourth period of Palestinian cinema, which began, according to Gertz and Khleifi,[5] between 1980 and 1982 and continues to this day. What signifies the beginning of the

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[1] The Palestinian Authority is a non-sovereign entity currently administered under the Israeli state.

[2] The Israeli critic Irit Linor questioned its competing for the Oscar for Best Foreign Film on the grounds of there being no such country (I. Linor, *Anti-Semitism Now*, Ynet, 7.02.2006, https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3211771,00.html). See a discussion of this point in H. Dabashi, *Introduction*, [in:] *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, ed. H. Dabashi, Verso, London and New York 2006; see also N. Hassan, *A Letter from the Rest of the World or*

"*The Afghan Arabs*", [in:] *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, ed. H. Dabashi, Verso, London and New York 2006.

[3] Director of the films *Jeremy Hardy vs. the Israeli Army* (2003) and *Human Shield Theory* (2003).

[4] The *Naqba* – the Arabic term for the Palestinian catastrophe – is a seminal event in Palestinian national definition.

[5] N. Gertz, G. Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma, and Memory*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis 2008.

fourth period is the PLO was evicted from Lebanon to Tunisia and the Palestinian cinema made a place fir itself in the homeland, as well as Michel Khleifi's film *Fertile Memories* in 1980, which presents a new poetic cinematic language.

This period of Palestinian cinema is characterized by personal cinematic works by directors who express their worldviews in diverse styles. They all relate, directly or indirectly, to the Palestinian issue. These are not propaganda films, but individualistic and creative films related to the Palestinian situation. Various public and private sources fund these films.

The fourth period is unlike the third period, dating from 1968 to 1982, which was characterized by cinematic work in the service of Palestinian military groups in Lebanon, particularly the cinema department of the PLO. During this period, most films were documentaries[6] dealing with the lives of Palestinians in Lebanon.

I would like to identify a current fifth period starting around 2010, characterized by more diverse filmmaking, including a new wave in Palestinian-Israeli cinema, alongside new Palestinian television drama series, and the emergence of new modes of production, such as digital streaming. The economic sources of cinematic productions, too, have changed significantly in this current period.

The new wave in Palestinian-Israeli cinema includes films by Palestinians who are citizens of Israel (Arab Israelis), along with films and television drama series created by Arab-Israelis with Jews, concerning the unique situation and identity of Palestinian-Israeli in the present time. The wave is different from the fourth period not only in dealing with the life of Arabs in Israel but also in its cinematic language: as opposed to the fourth-period movies that aimed to unite the Palestinian-divided space, the new wave isolates certain urban zones – Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Jaffa or Haifa – and within those cities it focuses on the life of young Arabs and their homes. The shots are claustrophobic, and the narrative ends in a dead end. The characters are stuck between cables that stop them from fulfilling their dreams and love life. They end up dreaming of escaping to the USA or Europe. The films of the new wave focus on young Palestinians who face private conflicts in their careers and in their love lives. It places characters from the bourgeoisie at its center. Not only do urban characters appear in the new wave, but the city itself is dominant and meaningful in these films.

The protagonists confront the current reality, and set humanistic, universal goals for their lives, such as academic studies, a career, and a stable romantic relationship. However, due to differing circumstances, they do not fulfill their goals and confront failure in those fields. As Palestinian-Israelis who hold a hybrid identity, they can't

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[6] The exception is one feature film – *Return to Haifa* (1982), which was made by a director of Iraqi origin, Kassem Hawal, and produced by a group associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (N. Gertz, G. Khleifi, op. cit.).

find their place in any of the social circles around them and thus they dream of escaping to a city in the West, like Berlin, Paris or even New York. Hence the unification that was dominant in the third and fourth period is now replaced by the dis-integration of time, place, and life story. For example, the films *Last Days in Jerusalem* (Tawfiq Abu-Wael, 2011), *In Between* (Maysaloun Hamoud, 2016) and the television series *The Writer* (Sayed Kashua and Shay Capon, 2015) end in a possibility of emigrating to Europe or North America.

This new wave concentrates on the present, while the fourth period expresses a nostalgic memory of the harmonic past and the waiting for the glorious independent national future. So, in many ways, the new wave is different from the fourth period, and besides it, many other forms of Palestinian creation exist in cinema, television, and digital channels are active today in Israel, Gaza, the Western Bank and other places.

Beyond that, the political and national status of the Palestinians has radically changed in recent decades. From a "people that history has forgotten," to use Rashid Khalidi's words, they have become a people that gained tremendous sympathy and support and became the symbol of the fight for freedom in the Western world. Palestinian cinema has evolved since its founding period to the present day. The focus has shifted from presenting a continuous Palestinian time and space to expressing diverse streams that depict different Palestinian identities. While the fourth period concentrated on united national sovereignty, the fifth period has shifted to concentrate on present life and limited space.[7]

While some new Palestinian films continue to use the cinematic language typical of the fourth period, focusing on powerful expressions of national identity, many express their creators' and community's unique identity in new cinematic styles and modes. This expression of Palestinian self-perception is the main characteristic of the fifth period, and still awaits scholarly discussion. This article, however, concentrates on the fourth period and on its characteristic poetics over and beyond its diverse articulations.

Metaphors That Link the Personal and the National

One of the most prominent artistic motifs of the fourth period is the need to let the Palestinian voice be heard and to document Palestinian history. Some third-period films already tell the national story through personal stories. For this purpose, techniques addressing the relationship between individual narratives and the national narrative were developed.

The film *Because the Roots Will Not Die* (Nabiha Lutfi, 1977), made in Lebanon during the third period, describes the destruction and massacre of Muslim Palestinians by Christian Lebanese militias

[7] On the new wave in Palestinian-Israeli cinema see Y. Ben-Zvi Morad, *Track Changes: The New Wave of Palestinian Cinema in Israel*, [in:] *Israeli New Media Reader: Film, Television, Internet*, eds. Y. Peleg, R. Kaplan, I. Rosen, Texas University Press, Texas (forthcoming).

in the Tal al-Zaatar Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in 1976. The women of Tal al-Zaatar give testimonies of the massacre. Photographs from newspaper items on the massacre and footage of the dead, wounded, and armed Palestinian fighters, are inserted between the filmed testimonies.

In their interpretation of the film, Gertz and Khleifi focus on the return of the trauma of the *Naqba* in the story of Tal al-Zaatar. They claim that the film exchanges the historical sequence of events for a cyclic, transcendent representation, necessarily grounded in Palestine's founding event of the *Naqba*.[8]

The present paper focuses on the cinematic means of expression of the fourth period of the Palestinian cinema (some borrowed from literature, as I shall show) that establish the relationship between the private and the national that we can already find in *Because the Roots Will Not Die* from the third period. The narrative goes from destruction to resurrection in the film's overall structure as well as the scenes' internal structure. The film's first part is constructed from a cross-arrangement of the testimony of the women who survived the event and shots of news items and later stills of dead and wounded bodies. These shots add historical and realistic validity to the spoken testimony.

Later, the footage of the dead and wounded is replaced with shots of Palestinian fighters moving through the streets. This montage illustrates the transition from destruction and victimhood to fighting.[9] In the final scene, the women describe the hardships of their life after the massacre, especially the difficulty of bringing water to the camp. The women endanger their lives when trying to reach the well outside the camp. The film ends with shots of children, who, in Palestinian cinema, consistently represent the hope for national liberation.

Thus, the film begins with destruction and death and ends with hope. The narrative constructed through the film's editing is one of growth into the future and victory. Although the women's struggle to get water to the camp, the closing scene and inserted shots emphasize the national importance of insisting on bringing water to children against all odds. Children are the generation of the future – they are the national roots that will flourish because the women water them: the film's key metaphor here becomes that of children as trees planted in Palestinian soil. The women connect the past, which they remember and retell, and the future, embodied in the children they give birth to and raise.

The personal interactions between women and children communicate the film's national implications. Just as the men achieve redemp-

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[8] Ibidem.
[9] In the later films of the fourth period, the victim becomes a tool of struggle in the discourse on justice. Since the nineties, Israeli and Palestinian cinema have attempted to prove their moral standards by portraying themselves as victims in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. My research sheds light on this phenome-

non: Y. Ben-Zvi Morad, *Self-Sacrifice and Forgiveness: Religion and Nationalism in New Israeli and Palestinian Cinema*, [in:] *The Struggle to Define a Nation: Rethinking Religious Nationalism in the Contemporary Islamic World*, eds. M. Demichelis, P. Maggiolini, Gorgias Press, New Jersey 2017.

tion through armed struggle, women do so through fertility, care and continuity.[10] The metaphor of the Palestinian nation as a branching tree is central throughout the film. The massacre is described as tree felling, and the women water the national tree. The children are the roots who will not die. Another literary/cinematic device used here is synecdoche. Tal-al-Zaatar serves as a synecdoche for Palestine, and its narrative is the national Palestinian narrative of destruction and rebirth.

In the fourth period, national significance also evolves from individual stories through metaphor, synecdoche, and metonymy. However, the current use of literary/cinematic devices is more subtle and occurs alongside other complex cinematic methods. The fourth period excels in a subjective perspective and a more artistic and freer photographic and editing style.

Palestinian cinema has often been discussed in terms of Fredric Jameson's[11] argument about the allegorical nature of Third World literature. In quite a few cases, I would like to argue that the term *synecdochical* would be more accurate, since many films present the national epic by focusing on a particular detail of the whole – on certain people, a specific village, or a particular family. The national story grows out of individual stories in feature films and documentaries.[12] The synecdochical basis of Palestinian cinema allows for the emergence of a national Oedipal narrative, as I will elaborate in the following sections.

In Palestinian society, as in other societies that do not have national independence, private life is greatly affected by the collective situation. In addition, the male "front line" is not distinct from the "civilian population" consisting mainly of women, children, and the elderly.[13] "Masculine" fighting (confronting the Israeli army) also occurs inside or near the houses. Moreover, an essential part of the Palestinian struggle is *tzumud* – holding on to the land – and Palestinian cinema positions women as the flag-bearers of national unity, return, and *tzumud*.[14]

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the cinematic description of frontal combat evolved, as can be witnessed in *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu-Asad, 2005) and *Invasion* (Nizar Hassan, 2002). Such material was only alluded to in the films of the 1980s and 1990s. How-

[10] The parallel between male fighters and women's fertility is apparent also in the contemporary period of Palestinian cinema.

[11] F. Jameson, *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*, "Social Text" 1986, no. 15.

[12] I would like to thank Dr. Yael Munk, who drew my attention to the frequency of synecdoche and displacement in Palestinian film.

[13] Such divisions are typical of armed conflict the world over, reflecting and dictating a conservative gender division. On this subject see, for example, N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, Sage London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 1997.

[14] See a detailed discussion on women's role in the Palestinian national struggle as presented in the cinema in Y. Ben-Zvi Morad, *Patricide: Gender and Nationality in Palestinian Cinema* (in Hebrew), Resling, Tel-Aviv 2011, and on its influence on Israeli cinema in eadem, *Borders in Motion: The Evolution of the portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Contemporary Israeli Cinema*, [in:] *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, eds. M. Talmon, Y. Peleg, Texas University Press, Texas 2011.

ever, most fourth-period Palestinian films focus on the more "civilian" Palestinian struggles, such as keeping the keys of homes lost during the *Naqba*, exploring the past, holding national ceremonies, and observing memorial days, working towards family reunification, fighting the legal battle for the land and the right to live in the homeland, as well as preserving Palestinian traditions. In this situation, where the private and the national are so closely linked, there is no distinction between the domestic, feminine, family space and the public, national space. Thus, women can take an active and central role in the national struggle without giving up their family roles.

The Palestinian national story is a story of silencing denial, and displacement.[15] The internal silence in Palestinian society accompanied exclusion from the international arena. Kimmerling and Migdal note that after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority:

Muteness as a Means of Expression

> One central question was how to build a shared imagined community for all its residents, extending, as well, to the Palestinian in the *ghurba*, [exile] […] an independent Palestinian curriculum—including the creation of a national history and myths, a true national narrative […]. [T]he Palestinian Authority recruited the best of the local intelligentsia in order to formulate a curriculum and write textbooks. […] But all these reforms proved to be much harder to effect than anyone had imagined, involving a long and complicated process—one demanding many more resources than the Palestine Authority could marshal.[16]

As a short-term substitute, attempts have been made to recruit the media – press, radio, and television to construct Palestinian identity.

However, Palestinian films show that the Palestinian story although denied and silenced in the public domain, was told in families. Palestinian cinema is not resurrecting a voice that was silenced and died but amplifying a voice whispered by private individuals, especially women. Of course, it is of great political and national importance for these personal stories to be assembled into a meta-narrative.

Palestinian cinema took upon itself the role of creating this Palestinian meta-narrative but has met with some challenges. How can it film what is not - the lost homeland? How can it create a story out of silence? How can cinema create an imagined national community without becoming propaganda? The silent past of Palestine is difficult to recount for various reasons: the intensity of the trauma of the *Naqba*; the lack of footage; the continuation of complex events in the present; the scattering of the Palestinian people; years of lacking a cultural and

[15] On the silencing of Palestinian history, see R. Khalidi, *A Universal Jubilee? Palestinians – 50 Years After 1948*, [in:] *Eye to Eye: Documentary Film Seminar on the Subject of Conflict. Conference Proceedings*, 1st June 2003. On Palestinian film as a means of breaking silence, see H. Bresheet, *Telling the Stories of Heim and Heimat, Home and Exile: Recent Palestinian Films and the Iconic Parable of the Invisible Palestine*, "New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film" 2002, no. 1(1); H. Dabashi, op. cit.

[16] B. Kimmerling, J.S. Migdal, *Palestinians: The Making of a People*, Free Press, New York 1993, pp. 350–352.

national center; the subaltern's compromised access to modes of self-expression;[17] Israeli censorship in the past, and – in the case of cinema – the difficulty of telling a national story through the cinematic medium. Film focuses on the present and on action, not on what is not there. Palestinian cinema has developed the ability to reconstruct what has been destroyed and what is absent in the present, and to make it into art. In that sense, it is unique.

Palestinian cinema has been collecting testimony from as early as 1970, the third period, and creating a historical archive. This process is ongoing, and contemporary Palestinian films present personal testimonies of loss. The public nature of this process creates a meta-narrative that raises national consciousness.[18] Due to the above-mentioned forms of silence and silencing Palestinian society, as has been said, remained voiceless in the international arena. As a result, Palestinian cinema is saturated with metaphorical images of silence and muteness.

The short film *Silence* (2004) by Suha Arraf documents the residents of Rafah, Gaza, following the demolition of houses by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). A soundtrack recording daily life as it would have occurred before the demolition – for example, residents discussing the hot water supply in the shower – accompanies footage of the destroyed homes. When footage of IDF soldiers shooting near an elementary school is shown, a shopping list is read aloud in voice-over. The contrast between the usual routine on the soundtrack and the visual scenes of shooting and destruction highlights how the IDF activity prevented Palestinians from leading their everyday lives.

It is this gap between the soundtrack and the pictures that renders the narrative of destruction. Thus, it is possible to imagine life in homes and the demolition of those homes – actions missing from the film itself. The film's soundtrack creates narration and describes an action: the destruction that is missing from both the picture and the soundtrack but is created in the gap between them. The film's title, *Silence*, testifies to the difficulty of describing the trauma and devastation with cinematic tools.

An earlier documentary is *Stress* (1998) by Rashid Masharawi, which describes routine life in different places in Palestine as a state of tense waiting for change. The film opens with workers standing in long lines behind fences and surveillance facilities at the Erez checkpoint between Gaza and southern Israel. At the many crossings between Israel and the Occupied Territories, Palestinians undergo security checks that violate their privacy and undermine the purpose of their trip. In *Stress*, Palestinian men in shabby clothing hold plastic bags containing their daily meals, arriving early at the checkpoints, hurrying to be first on

[17] See G. Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, [in:] *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson, L. Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, Chicago and Urbana 1988.

[18] See actor and director Salim Dao's personal story and how he describes its turning into a collective one during the making of the film *Keys* (2003) – S. Dao, *Salim Dao: A Word from the Director* (in Hebrew), [in:] *Eye to Eye…*, pp. 127–128.

the minibuses that take them to work in Israel. The contents of their plastic bags are checked, and on the way to the minibuses, they push and crowd together so as not to go back to Gaza without wages. An elderly woman is asked to open a gift-wrapped package containing chocolates. The woman probably must make a long, roundabout journey to visit her loved ones in a different area of Palestine. Now that the box has been unwrapped and opened, her gift is spoiled.

Palestinians are filmed at various places in the homeland, moving about uncomfortably, in the face of repeated humiliation and extreme existential hardship: a seller at the market who is unable to sell his wares because he is held up at the checkpoint; another man swinging his legs nervously; thistles moving in the wind; another man sitting idle and unemployed; chairs overgrown with weeds. The tension is communicated without words – by documenting the accumulation of dust, suffocation, and anger. Through short, tense shots, sharply cut in the editing process, the situation is presented as a ticking bomb.

The camera wanders in Gaza and stops: We are looking at a six-year-old child in make-belief IDF uniform and holding a toy gun. He lines up three little girls and a younger boy against the wall and pretends to beat and shoot them. The camera moves from the child's gun to the rifle of an IDF border guard and from him to a Palestinian policeman and the PLO flag. The children's violent game suggests that the violence that the Israeli army brings with it seeps into Palestinian society.

A similar description of the violence that has developed in Palestinian society can be seen in the opening scenes of *Paradise Now*. The aggression of some Israeli soldiers penetrates Palestinian society, where men behave with humiliating authority toward younger men and children. A similar process occurs in Tawfik Abu Wael's film *Thirst* (*Atash*, 2004), in which the problematic power relations associated with military occupation are integrated into a violent patriarchal structure. Traces of the IDF's violent control are apparent in the behavior of Palestinian men and turned against younger men and women through the existing, conservative gender structures of society.

In the film *Stress*, an analysis of the influence of the occupation on Palestinian society emerges from a collage of photos, with no interviews and no narration. The camera looks at the events in silence. The only interviewee in the film is a mute man who waves his arms and moves his lips, but we cannot understand the words he is trying to say. This choice of a mute man as sole interviewee conveys Palestinians' silent cry. Whether Palestinians are mute (sometimes because of trauma) or cry out, their voice is not heard, and their testimony remains silent.

Muteness is a motif in Palestinian cinema. In Mohammed Bakri's film *Jenin, Jenin* (2002), a mute interviewee delivers testimony using his hands on the IDF incursion into the camp. In Arraf's *Silence*, discussed above, the camera focuses on silent or ostensibly mute people: at the film's beginning, there are shots of children using sign language, and at

its end there is a shot of an old woman putting a finger to her lips. All these images reinforce the notion of Palestinian voicelessness.

Ali Nassar's feature film *The Milky Way* (1997) introduces Jamila, a woman who, as a child, stopped talking after witnessing the murder of her mother during the war. Mabruq, the film's protagonist, also experienced the trauma of losing his family and home during the war and remained naive, vulnerable, and immature. Jamila and Mabruq represent the innocent victims of war, who cannot overcome the trauma to describe it in words.

The main character in Elia Suleiman's films, played by himself, is a director who watches the cruelties and absurdities of life under military occupation and cannot respond. For example, in *Divine Intervention* (2003), he looks on as an Israeli soldier abuses Palestinian drivers at the A-Ram checkpoint. The protagonist is sitting in his car like someone watching a film at a drive-in; he cannot prevent the events from unfolding or cry out against them. His power is in making films: We watch his film *Divine Intervention*, which is his weapon in the national struggle. The duality of this character – mute helplessness and the power of creating films – represents a more general duality. Palestinian cinema fulfils a national role that gives it great public power, but it expresses an awareness of the limitations of this power. Film projects an illusion of reality and does not intervene directly in it. As such, it mirrors the Palestinians, whose power is limited.

One of the central objectives of Palestinian cinema is to give voice to Palestinians both in the international arena and among Palestinians themselves. The film *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (Elia Suleiman and Jayce Salloum, 1990) addresses the representation of Palestinians and Arabs in American and Zionist media and the effects of this representation on their self-perception. The directors created a collage of existing films that represent Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular as terrorists, nomads, or non-existent. This collage parodies the original creations and inverts their meanings. The massive presence of texts and films that describe Palestinians as objects, in the third person, ignoring their own perspective, clarifies both the intensity of the silencing and the tendency to speak in the name of the Palestinians in the global media. The parodical editing invalidates the American and Zionist images of Palestinians. According to Yael Munk's definition, such exposure to the construction of awareness and the subversive use of hegemonic texts are the central techniques of activist cinema worldwide.[19]

In a similarly subversive way, color is used in Palestinian cinema to convey political messages – in Israel and the Occupied Territories, where many forms of Palestinian public gathering were banned, where

[19] Y. Munk, *Between Algeria and Palestine: Some Thoughts on Political Cinema* (in Hebrew), [in:] *Eye to Eye…*

the Palestinian national colors red, green, black and white were forbidden, and cinema was considered a threat to Israeli security. In the film *Four Songs for Palestine* (Nada El-Yassir, 2001), color, especially the national colors, and symbols, are used to create a sense of continuity against the interruption of Palestinian life due to the Israeli occupation. In addition, the nursing mother and her white milk at the center of the film contrasts with the Palestinian blood and death it also portrays. Even though Palestinian film often expresses Palestinians' inability to remain silent in the face of the absurdity and horror of the occupation, paradoxically, the silent cry, in the cases I am looking at, tells the Palestinian national story. In this sense, the very act of making films is an act of resistance.

Palestinian cinema has developed unique artistic techniques for articulating national goals. This cinema creates on the screen an image of the whole, undivided homeland and the united people as an expression of national aspirations. In the film *War and Peace in Vesoul* (Elia Suleiman and Amos Gitai, 1997), Amos Gitai and Elia Suleiman, both expatriate directors in France who grew up in Israel – one Jewish and the other Christian-Arab – travel together by train on the way to the city of Vesoul in France for a film event. They talk among themselves about cinema and nationalism. Suleiman claims that Palestine exists in the people's consciousness and that consciousness precedes reality. In short, national consciousness is being constructed in Palestinian cinema as a preliminary stage for constructing the actual Palestinian state. To borrow Benedict Anderson's term, cinema is a screen onto which the *imagined Palestinian community* is projected.[20]

Meanwhile, in reality, there is no Palestinian sovereignty; the people are scattered and not unified in struggle; the failed leadership does not represent the entire nation, and another generation of children is being born into poverty, death and deprivation, Palestinian cinema evokes a wish by means of an idealized situation, in which an imagined leadership appears as a divine revelation and the children lead the united people to liberation. Palestinian cinema expresses hope that change will take place through art; that is, it credits itself with the ability to create change. At the same time, it is conscious of the limitations of its power, shattering the illusion of unity and national salvation, presenting its product as mere cinematic sleight of hand. Palestinian cinema asserts itself as a mirror and thus shatters the illusion necessary to create a complete self-image.

This phenomenon is evident in the film *Stress*, mentioned above, which depicts a repetitive routine: the film's opening shots showing a morning at the checkpoint are identical to the shots of the following

The Unification of the Imaginary Homeland

[20] B. Anderson, *Imaginary Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York 1991.

day and this endless cycle describes the imprisonment of the Palestinian people behind fences, roadblocks, and their inescapable way of life. However, at the same time, the film offers hope for a better future. It opens a window to a liberated tomorrow in the final scene, which portrays children gazing at the land from a high hill overlooking a Palestinian village. One of them sits on a big branch, while his friends sit at the foot of the tree. The children represent the next generation, and their gaze at Palestinian land at the start of a new day sends a message of sovereignty over their homeland and hope. The big tree symbolizes the Palestinian tree of life that will carry a new generation inaugurating a better future.

The divided country and the scattered nation are united in *Stress*. The Palestinian day consists of a routine of anger and anxiety, waiting for national transformation. As the action moves from place to place, each scene in the film is shot in a different Palestinian city: Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Hebron, and the editing unites these cities into one contiguous space. The similar fate and distress of the Palestinians in these various locations unite them as a people in the film. Each city appears by its name and the name of its respective region. Thus, communities are placed on the map as a Palestinian answer to the exclusion and division imposed by Israeli policies. Shots of the various places in Palestine and editing them as a continuum make Palestine a contiguous homeland despite the land's actual fragmentation.

This is a common technique in Palestinian film and is also apparent on Palestinian television.[21] For example, a program on Palestinian television broadcasts Palestinians who live in the Palestinian Authority, Israel, exchanging greetings with their relatives in the diaspora. Through the broadcast, families who cannot meet are united. Uniting families through television is a synecdoche for national unification, as it is in Palestinian cinema.

The documentary film *We Are Fine* (Azza El-Hassan, 2003) is modelled on this type of "sending regards" television program. Here the camera captures members of a Palestinian family in Lebanon who send their regards to their relatives in Tulkarm in the West Bank. Unlike the more usual radio and television programs, the director of this film does not use the phone in the studio but films both in Lebanon and then in Tulkarm. In both places, the family members introduce themselves before the camera because their relatives across the border have never met them in person. They send their regards and describe their lives, beginning with "We are fine." Next, the family members (in Lebanon as well as in the West Bank) retell how events unfolded since they fled from their home in Haifa in 1948, including their suffering in the diaspora and the atrocities of Sabra and Shatila in 1982. The contrast

[21] On Palestinian television, see D. Galili, *Palestinian Television* (in Hebrew), seminar paper in the course "Space and Memories in the Palestinian Cinema", lecturer: Nurith Gertz, Tel Aviv University, Department of Cinema and Television, 2001.

between the regards and the statement "We are fine," on the one hand, and the actual family histories creates ironic humor of a kind often encountered in Palestinian films. Through the families' private stories, Palestinian history is told. The scattered parts of the family symbolize the Palestinian nation, dispersed through the homeland and in exile. Photographing the two parts of the family, documenting their history, and editing all of this into one film is a cinematic act that works towards the nation's unification and the documentation of its historical record.

Azza El-Hassan, the director, who takes the cassettes from Lebanon to Tulkarm, in the West Bank, must pass through the IDF checkpoints that interrupt the continuity of Palestine's actual space nearly preventing the transfer of the cassettes. Having managed this hurdle, next it transpires that the relatives cannot meet in Jordan as they had hoped to because of Israeli restrictions. The family members are not united, and the Palestinian space remains split and controlled by the Israeli army. In the film, however, a different continuum is created in which Palestinian people and Palestinian space are united. The director's journey thus becomes a journey of national unity.

As we watch the filmed documentation of the family members, we become part of the family and part of the unified Palestinian nation. Cinema is used here to establish national identity by, paradoxically, giving voice to, and presenting the images and narrative of, national destruction. It unifies the geographical space and the members of the Palestinian people who are in exile. The film's choice of parody and irony, and the format of a "send regards" program allow for the creation of this unity.

The film *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* (Mai Masri, 2001) makes a similar move. Masri, the director, documents two Palestinian girls corresponding with one another in the framework of a Palestinian national project: Manar from the Deheisheh refugee camp in the West Bank and Mona from Shatila in Lebanon. Masri gives the girls video cameras to document their lives and send the films to each other. Video film is used here to deepen national consciousness and unify Palestinian people and space. Manar photographs Sephoria, the village where Mona's family lived before they became refugees. She even sends her sand from the homeland. Finally, they meet at the border fence, together with the other children participating in the national project. Masri says[22] the border is a metaphor for overcoming obstacles and divisions.

Focusing on children and using cinema in a self-reflective way is characteristic of many of Masri's films. In her *Children of Shatila* (1998), handing out cameras to children blurs the distinction between documenter and documented, and the interviewed children become interviewers and researchers of their people. The viewer is integrated into the process of national research and national unification. As in

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[22] Mai Masri, personal communication, 8.05.2011.

Al-Hassan's work and in many other Palestinian films, the viewer becomes part of the unified Palestinian people.

Rural landscape photography is another prominent feature of Palestinian cinema. For example, in their analysis of *A Wedding in Galilee* (Michel Khleifi, 1987), Gertz and Khleifi[23] point out that the camera emerges from houses and bus windows, giving onto the fields, breaking through the curfews and checkpoints imposed by the Israeli rulers. It is as though the camera re-takes possession of the homeland's soil.

Many Palestinian films take place among ruins. In Elia Suleiman's short film *Cyber Palestine* (2000), Joseph and Mary are photographed inside a building that combines antique Roman columns and a contemporary building style. The architecture creates a continuum between Palestinian Christian existence in the present and the local beginnings of Christianity, thousands of years ago.[24] The use of Christian myths, such as the story of the birth of Jesus, and Muslim myths, such as the conquests of Salah al-Din, in Tawfik Abu Wael's film *Waiting for Salah al-Din* (2001), incorporating images of ancient local architecture, connects the Palestinian narrative to the history of the place. In Ali Nassar's film *In the Ninth Month* (2002), the scene in which the child Amal investigates his family, village, and national history takes place among Byzantine structures, which were used as houses in the Arab period. This creates a historical continuum from the Byzantine period until today, tying the family's private history and the village's history to the centuries-old history of the Palestinians and their homeland.[25]

Nonetheless, Palestinian cinema tends to focus on more contemporary remnants of Palestinian existence rather than ancient historical ruins. The ruins of houses abandoned in 1948 comprise a permanent landscape in Palestinian cinema. In many films, children and old people visit these ruins which once were homes, and are now closed Israeli military zones, grazing areas, or Israeli vacation spots. Visiting the place testifies to the courage of returning and confronting what was lost. Such moments suggest the possibility of historical continuity and a future, despite the devastation that interrupted national continuity. Palestinians often keep the keys to houses and documents of ownership of the property they were forced to abandon. Salim Dao's film *Keys* (2003) focuses on this subject. The Palestinian home that remains standing in the occupied landscape and whose inhabitants have been scattered into exile, represents loss, on the one hand, and stability, on the other, Palestinian roots planted on the land.

Houses form the center of many films directed by Rashid Masharawi. His short film *Maklubeh* (Upside Down) (2000) brings

[23] N. Gertz, G. Khleifi, op. cit.

[24] Y. Ben-Zvi Morad, *Patricide…*

[25] I would like to express my gratitude to the late Prof. Ehud Netzer for his assistance in dating the architectural structures in the films.

together Palestinian cinema's most common national symbols: the abandoned Palestinian house, the Palestinian nation that preserves tradition, traditional food, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and, self-reflexively, cinema itself. In this film, an elderly woman wearing traditional dress prepares *maklubeh*, a Palestinian chicken dish with rice and vegetables. Different views of Palestine are shown through the window: the sea, Gaza, and the Jerusalem hills. Finally, when the dish is ready, it leaves the house, flying and circling over Al-Aqsa.

Here, food and traditional customs evoke the past and Palestinian culture, acting as unifying factors. As in other films, the food is cooked by women. The house unifies the interrupted Palestinian space by showing various sites through its window. Through the window, the house turns Palestine into one space filled with Palestinian tradition thanks to the woman and her cooking.

It is not only the Palestinian space that is unified through the view from the window but also Palestinian history. The house connects the sea and the Dome of the Rock, situated in the Al-Aqsa compound in Jerusalem. In Palestinian cinema, the sea symbolizes the past when the population had freer access to the sea. Al-Aqsa, in contrast, represents the sovereign future. In many films, the eyes of the nation are raised to the Al-Aqsa complex and the Golden Dome of the Rock, which symbolizes hope. Juxtaposing the sea with Al-Aqsa creates continuity between cultural heritage and the hoped-for future. The merging of Palestinian space and time is carried out by women, their cooking, and their homes.

This film uses a photographic and editorial technique involving a "blue screen" to the effect of gathering Palestinian space around one house. The flight of the *maklubeh* over Al-Aqsa was made possible by editing using superimposition. Highlighting its own means of expression, this film points to the role of cinema in creating national unity. The film can create a counter-reality (upside-down, in Arabic: *maklubeh*, like the name of the traditional dish) to the reality of occupation, thus providing hope for the future. During the cooking, as the woman turns the dish over, the picture of reality is also inverted as the camera turns upside-down. We can see this reversal of reality as a return to the situation before the occupation, the opposite of the current Palestinian reality.

From the film's perspective inverting reality restores the past and reinstates Palestinian sovereignty. In this sense, turning the camera upside-down parallels how the eye and the *camera obscura* see the world as upside-down. Thus, flipping the camera and inverting reality in *Maklubeh* returns Palestinian control over the landscape and creates a situation free from the mediation of the dominant ideology of Zionism, free from the control of the hegemony, which turns reality upside-down to fit its ideology (to borrow from Marxist theory).

Maklubeh is perhaps one of the most "optimistic" of Masharawi's films, and its optimism is ironic. The irony turns the tables on the magic

act in his film *The Magician* (1992). In this film, a magician makes an Israeli Arab restaurant worker disappear. His disappearance symbolizes the disappearance of the Palestinian homeland and nation. In *Maklubeh*, Masharawi himself functions as a hidden magician: as a director, wielding his cinematic magic, he "brings back" the lost homeland, unifies it, revives its customs and symbols, and returns the Palestinians to their lost home, but only ironically.

Summary

Palestinian cinema serves as a central and essential platform for constructing the Palestinian community, as it gathers testimony of the loss of home and homeland and transforms participants and viewers, individuals who bear a personal loss, into conscious members of the Palestinian nation with a sense of national belonging. Palestinian cinema functions as a central historical archive in the absence of a leadership and a national territory that unites the various parts of the nation. When s/he recounts the history and describes the Palestinian present, the Palestinian filmmaker creates a consolidating meta-narrative. Some films construct national myths and unity while simultaneously dismantling and undermining them.

Palestinian cinema unifies space and time to create a homeland, in which a unified nation with a continuous history has its roots in the local soil. Palestinian cinema is a weapon in the national struggle and mobilizes artistic and creative resources. Nonetheless, Palestinian cinema also demonstrates its creators' awareness of the illusory character of their medium and of the limitations of its influence on the national reality; often, films' most prominent statement is ironic, regarding the helplessness of the Palestinians in the face of powerful, oppressive forces, together with a recognition that cinema can only bring about imaginary change. The combination of a sense of national mission and an acknowledged inability to effect actual change creates a unique kind of humor. This humor blends the desire to recognize historical truth by a relentless dismantling of every story and questioning the meta-narrative; Palestinian cinematic irony moves between the recognition of the fixed and stable signified of the Palestinian homeland and a postmodern questioning of the system of signification.[26] Palestinian cinema opposes the Israeli discourse that excludes the Palestinian voice but, at the same time, is aware that the central feature of the Palestinian voice is its muteness. Palestinian cinema yearns to produce an ideal past before the occupation, a solid, supportive past on whose basis a common national infrastructure can be created. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is aware that the past was not necessarily ideal or homogeneous and that it is not always possible to revive it and hold on to it.

[26] As Hamid Naficy claims regarding diasporic cinema – H. Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey and Woodstock, Oxfordshire 2001.

Many of the films I have considered here also reflect on Palestinian cinematic tradition as such. These films treat the cinematic medium as a discursive wrestling arena, where Palestinians have been struggling not only to express their voice but also to be recognized as a people. In the years of the fourth period, this struggle has been mainly in terms of Palestinians' helplessness and lack of voice.

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