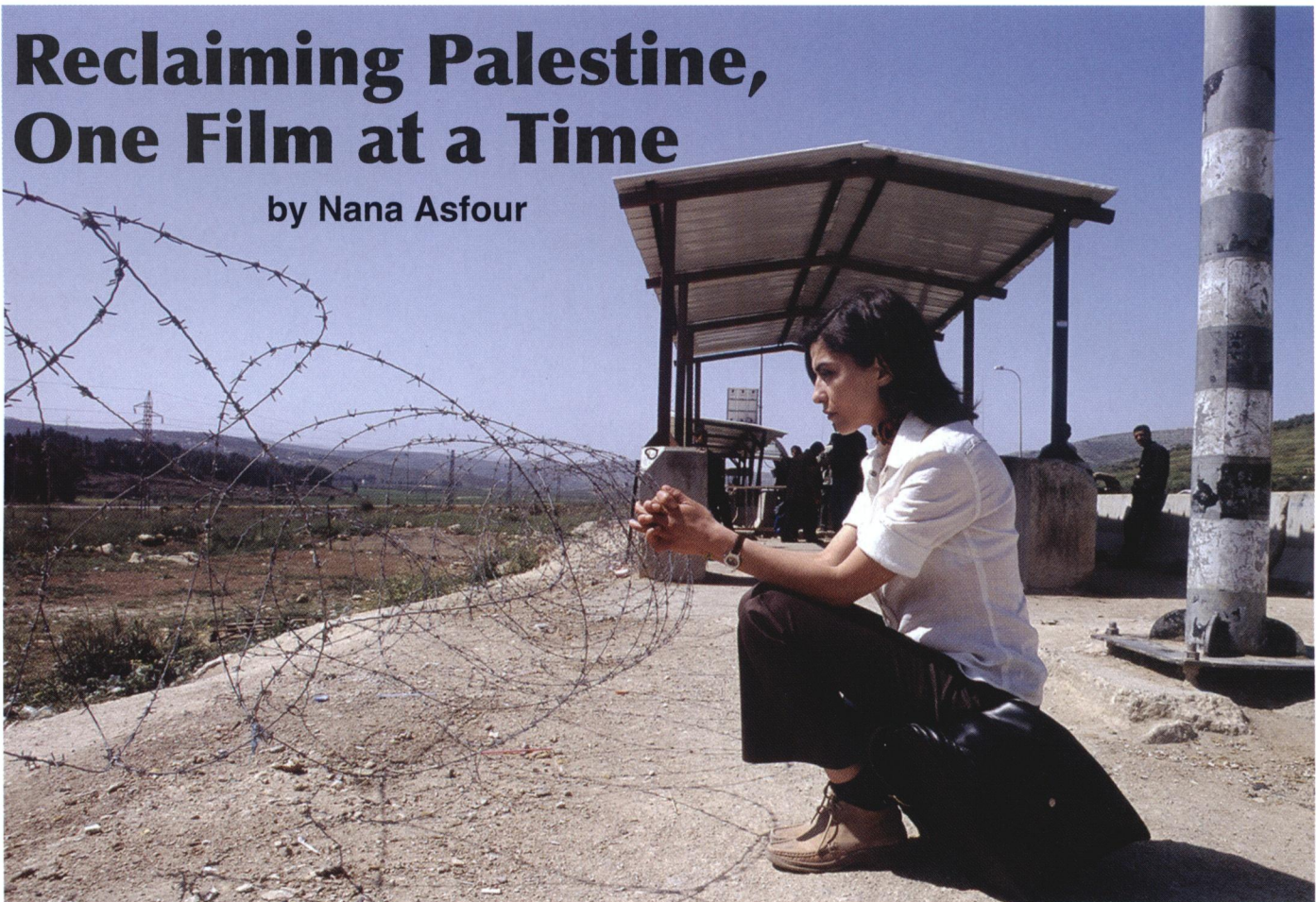


Reclaiming Palestine, One Film at a Time

by Nana Asfour

Lubna Azabal, as Suha, waits at a checkpoint in Hany Abu-Assad's *Paradise Now*



In *Waiting*, the 2005 feature film by Palestinian director Rashid Masharawi, the main character, Ahmad, is assigned an important mission: travel to refugee camps in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon to seek out every possible Palestinian actor for a new European Union-funded Palestinian theater in Gaza. Having just buried his father, he is eager to get out of the Occupied Territories, and is reluctant to accept this task. Standing amidst the construction site, the director enthusiastically enumerates for Ahmad the many facilities the theater will contain—elevators, a 2,000-person seating capacity, full parking—and the many dignitaries due to attend (Arafat, Castro, and Mandela). “How can you have a nation without a national theater?” he tells Ahmad. “How can you have a national theater without a nation?” Ahmad defiantly replies.

In the real world, there is no such thing as a Palestinian National Theater in Gaza, and yet this statement aptly befits the paradox underlying the artistic medium from which it was borne: “Palestinian Cinema.” As critic Hamid Naficy points out in his essay in *Dreams of A Nation*, one of many books recently published on Palestinian films, “Palestinian cinema is one of the rare

cinemas in the world that is structurally exilic, as it is made either in the condition of internal exile in an occupied Palestine or under the erasure and tensions of displacement and external exile in other countries.” Its existence, given the circumstances, is in itself remarkable. There is no national funding, few skilled crews, filmmakers have to work around curfews and roadblocks, cannot always access their

A cinema steeped in resistance evolves as it gains notoriety, awards, and audiences abroad.

locations and often have to shoot on the hit-and-run. In his introduction to this book, which he edited, Columbia Professor Hamid Dabashi, who in 2003 organized a Palestinian film festival at his university by the same name, declares Palestinian cinema a “stateless cinema of the most serious national consequences.” According to him the contradictory nature of Palestinian cinema “gives it a unique and exceptionally unsettling disposition.” The diversity and disparity of the cinematic approach among its filmmakers further complicates the terminology of “Palestinian cinema.” What binds Palestinian films together are the language—Palestinian Arabic—the subject—Palestinian lives—and the desire of each director to portray his own

take on what being Palestinian means.

More than any of its contemporaries, Palestinian cinema, which only began to appear in the 1980s, is an act of resistance: a kind of “I-film-therefore-I-am,” or even, “I-film-therefore-you-dear-fellow-Palestinian-are.” It is first and foremost a reclamation of an obliterated identity. Many of the contributors to *Dreams*, which is constructed as a series of essays and is an engrossing record of Palestinian cinema, covering its history, its development, and its past and current challenges, insist

that Israel has systematically tried to prevent the emergence of Palestinian culture. In her entry, Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir, who curated the 2003 Columbia festival, sums up the importance of her work and that of her fellow contemporary directors by saying, “With cameras, we tell our own stories, represent our experiences, and resist being made invisible.” In the same book, Michel Khleifi, whose *Fertile Memory* (1980) and *Wedding in Galilee* (1987) heralded contemporary Palestinian cinema, writes, “Whether we [Palestinians] live in Palestine or in the Diaspora, we have come to understand how we have been made invisible”—that word again—“through the complete absence of our own voices and images.”

As Khleifi's brother George and his coauthor Nurith Gertz point out in their concise and masterfully written *Palestinian Cinema*, Palestinians were complicitly silent during the first half of the twentieth century by not appreciating—or understanding—the potential of film as a counternarrative. Even though a few films—almost all documentaries—were made between the 1930s and 1950s (the authors diligently track down and interview individuals who worked on some of the early films), Palestinian cinema really began to take form only in the late 1960s, when Palestinian political organizations realized that (documentary) film could be a powerful vehicle to advance their cause and to influence public opinion in the West. This period, which Gertz and Khleifi term the Third Period, got its start with the Arab defeat in the 1967 War, “the most traumatic event in the modern history of the Arab people,” Gertz and Khleifi write. But it's an earlier trauma, known to the Arabs as the *Nakba*, the seminal events of 1948 during which an untold number of Palestinians were forced out from their homes and lands, and which had almost entirely muted Palestinian cinema for two decades, that would remain the focus of the films produced by the political organizations. “The central trauma of Palestine, the *Nakba*, is the defining moment of Palestinian cinema,” writes Hamid Dabashi, “and it is around that remembrance of the lost homeland that Palestinian filmmakers have articulated their aesthetic cosmovision.”

Gertz and Khleifi maintain that, as is often the case with traumatic experiences, it took a long time for the Palestinians to rebound, but because the violence continues, as if history is repeating itself, they are unable to entirely overcome those experiences. “Since the lost object lives in the consciousness as if it still exists and because past events emerge in the present as if they perpetually reoccur, time stops. The past replaces the present and the future is per-

Books Reviewed in This Article

**Palestinian Cinema:
Landscape, Trauma, and Memory**
by Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008. 256 pp. Paperback: \$24.95.

**Dreams of a Nation:
On Palestinian Cinema**
Edited, with an introduction by Hamid Dabashi. Preface by Edward Said. New York, NY: Verso, 2006. 224 pp., illus. Paperback: \$24.95.

**Filming the Modern Middle East:
Politics in the Cinemas of
Hollywood and the Arab World**
by Lina Khatib. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris Co. Ltd., 2006. 256 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$89.95 and Paperback: \$28.95.

**The Rhetoric of Violence:
Arab-Jewish Encounters in
Contemporary Palestinian
Literature and Film**
by Kamal Abdel-Malek. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 240 pp. Hardcover: \$74.95.

ceived as a return to the past,” they write. *Palestinian Cinema* considers how each generation of filmmakers has dealt with that trauma and that past, a theme that carries the authoritative narrative all the way to the end. It begins by reviewing the films of the Seventies then moves on to analyze contemporary works, with each of the major feature filmmakers—Khleifi, Masharawi, Ali Nas-sar, and Elia Suleiman—given his own chap-ter.

The authors explain that Palestinian cinema during the late Sixties and early Seventies was eager to show Palestinians as unified, as a people possessing a homogenous identity and whose commonality was a shared past. It was not interested in scruti-nizing or criticizing itself but rather in describing its victimization. The films, made largely in exile (Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia), evoked an idyllic and somewhat imaginary past, one that has been interrupt-

ed with the establishment of the state of Israel. The documentaries zeroed in on spe-cific events but always as a way to illustrate the broader Palestinian fate—many fol-lowed the blueprint of serenity (pre-1948), destruction (1948), and continuous struggle thereafter. They adopted the styles of news-reels and amalgamated scenes of destruction with victory speeches or song, transforming every Palestinian defeat into victory—and thereby providing a sort of “correction” of the past.

All in all, during this cinematically fecund period more than sixty Palestinian documentaries were made (many of these were lost after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut, the city where the PLO had moved its headquarters and where it had estab-lished a film archive) but only one fictional film saw completion under the Palestinian organizations' patronage: *The Return to Haifa*, the work of a director of Iraqi origin, Kassem Hawal, which was released in 1982, at the end of the Third Period. Adapted from a short novel by famed Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani, the film told the story of a family who left Haifa in 1948 and returned in 1967, only to find that every-thing has remained the same. The 1948 story of escape, which haunts Palestinian cinema but has yet to receive full treatment, is told here from the viewpoint of the occupying Israelis. “It seems as if the Arabs cannot observe their own story, much less narrate it,” the authors of *Palestinian Cinema* write.

Yet, the need to narrate is exactly what has inspired postrevolutionary Palestinian cinema. In his preface to *Dreams*, the late Edward Said notes that the Palestinians have had to struggle, against two great forces: Israel, which he says has asphyxiated Pales-tinian voices; and the West, which has assigned Palestinians “a visual identity asso-ciated with terrorism and violence.” As Lina Khatib demonstrates in *Filming the Modern Middle East*, which examines the (mis)rep-resentation of Arabs on the American screen as well as the Arabs' characterization of



An elderly Palestinian woman visits her land in occupied territories in Michel Khleifi's debut feature film, *Fertile Memory* (1980).



Anna Condo portrays the bride being married in an occupied Palestinian village in Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee* (1987).



Yusef and his friend duck away from a gunfight in Michel Khleifi's *Tale of Three Jewels* (1994).

themselves in their own films, Palestinians have been often depicted as brutes or terrorists by Western directors. According to Khatib, Hollywood films have regularly treated Palestinian resistance as a “revolt” against an already established order and Israeli transgressions as reprisals aimed at guerrilla headquarters. Arabic directors, meanwhile, “have limited their engagement with the politics of the Middle East because of censorship, the desire to avoid sensitive issues, the concern with attracting wide audiences or industry limitations,” and the few Egyptian and Syrian films that have tackled this topic mirror Hollywood and “engage in a similar process... of glorifying the Self and vilifying the Other.” And rather than supporting the Palestinians’ own attempts at portraying themselves, the Arab regimes have customarily denied Palestinian films from appearing on their nations’ movie screens.

Khatib’s well-researched—albeit somewhat repetitive—book covers twenty-five years of cinema, from 1980 to 2005, a period, as she notes, “marked by several salient events in the political history of the modern Middle East.” Those dates are also important markers in Palestinian cinema: the first one corresponds to the beginning of the fourth generation of Palestinian filmmakers and the second denotes the first nomination of a Palestinian film at the Academy Awards.

Palestinian cinema, as we know it today, can trace its origins to 1980, when a young Palestinian filmmaker returned from a decade of life abroad (Belgium) determined to change the course of his nation’s cinema. His name was Michel Khleifi and in a short time he realized his plans. In his essay in *Dreams*, he says that he felt the approach of the Palestinian organizations had been inadequate. “We had to provide the world with another way of talking about us,” he writes.

He realized that cinema ought to be somewhat self-probing, to “raise uncompromising questions”: who are the Israelis and are Palestinians only victims—or tormentors as well? He could see that his own society was not beyond reproach and wanted cinema to reflect the complexities of Palestinian life. “The strength of Israel stems from our weakness, and our weakness does not stem from Israel’s strength but rather derives from Arab society’s archaic structure: tribalism, patriarchy, religion and community life,” he says. The answer was to confront Israel “around the human rights principles” by concentrating on the story of individuals.

For his first film, *Fertile Memory*, he chose to document the lives of two women, a widow and a writer, who, despite their different lives, share important commonalities: they both have to contend with Israeli rule and a male-dominated society, and are both

engaged in a struggle for freedom and dignity. Financed by German and Holland television channels (the technical crew consisted of three members and the budget did not even allow for a rented car), the film severed Palestinian cinema’s ties to the political organizations and established the trend of individual cinematic productions, which continues to this day.

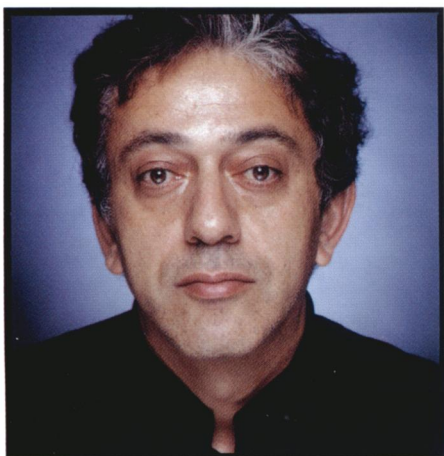
Seven years later, Khleifi released the influential *Wedding in Galilee*, which would become the first feature film by a Palestinian. Like his debut, it focused on women—here a young bride. And, as in *Fertile*, it depicted the repeated intervention of Israeli rule on daily Palestinian lives, and illustrated Palestinian society’s own oppressiveness. The groom’s father, the *mukhtar* (leader of the village), who, in order to have a traditional wedding for his son, one that will extend beyond the normal curfew hours, is forced to invite the local Israeli military governor and his soldiers, is as much of a ruthless enforcer (of traditions and other facets of Palestinian life) as are the Israelis.

Fertile Memory and *Wedding in Galilee* launched the new Palestinian cinema. In both films, land—actual geography, which was not shown but rather often evoked in the 1970s—plays an important role, becoming, as Gertz and the director’s brother note, the symbol of Palestinian identity and nationality. Khleifi, according to the writers, “was the first to draw a composed, organized map of the real Palestinian expanses, whose borders are on the horizon and whose core is the home.” Just as importantly, Khleifi’s cinema provided a new approach to the “trauma” that had defined every film of the previous generation. The authors of *Palestinian Cinema* explain that Khleifi’s films “preserve the traumatic memory, and at the same time attempt to work through it, to put it in a historical context.”

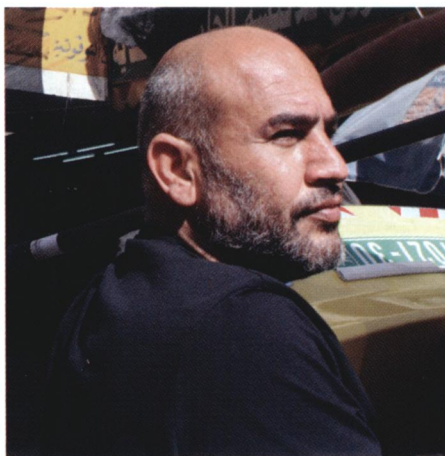
Wedding in Galilee won the International Critics’ Prize at the 1987 Cannes Film Festi-



Ghassan Abbas, as Jaber, reads a film reel as his wife (Areen Oamri) looks on in Rashid Masharawi’s *Ticket to Jerusalem* (2002).



Elia Suleiman. (photo by Robin Holland).



Rashid Masharawi



Hany Abu-Assad (photo by Robin Holland).

val, and its worldwide success inspired aspiring Palestinian filmmakers around the world. "Here at last was an instance of a proud and accomplished Palestinian talent, unafraid of expressing itself," the U.K.-based filmmaker Omar al-Qattan, who went on to produce several of Khleifi's films, writes in his essay in *Dreams*, "no longer the cowed, hesitant and humiliated Palestine, but a living, dynamic, and inescapable culture making itself heard."

But, for several years thereafter, Khleifi remained the only Palestinian narrative director and in 1989 he released another film, *Canticle of the Stones*, a story about reunited lovers who meet at a hotel overlooking Jerusalem and talk about their years apart. Filmed during the First Intifada, which erupted on December 9, 1987, the film reflects key political developments, particularly the crushed rebellion of the Intifada, which failed to bring about national change or social democratization. Khleifi once more employed a female character, whose own attempts at emancipation are smothered by her family and community, to highlight what he saw as the dysfunctional aspects of Palestinian society.

As was the case in previous years (and would be the case in the future), political deterioration was met with accelerated film production. In 1993, at the tail end of the Intifada, another Palestinian feature filmmaker emerged. After more than a decade of making shorts and documentaries, Rashid Masharawi released his feature debut *Curfew*. Set during an interminable curfew in occupied Gaza, when the Intifada was still raging, his first fictional effort highlights the despairing and constrictive reality of Palestinian refugees. A family sits at home, paralyzed and imprisoned. They eat, they talk, and they wait. The authors of *Palestinian Cinema* provide interesting com-

parisons between his approach and that of Khleifi's: "Rashid Masharawi's films do not explore the enchanted past that is restored in Michel Khleifi's films, nor do they spin—as Khleifi's cinema does—a fantasy of open expanses," they write. "Rather, his cinema delineates the refugees' here-and-now daily struggle for survival within a space that has been gradually diminishing." Whereas the house in Khleifi's film was part of the larger landscape and provided a "harmonious continuum with the space and earth," in *Curfew*, the camera stays inside the house, "trapped like one of the family members." As Khatib points out in *Filming the Modern Middle*

misfortunes depicted are personal, relating to individual life stories, they are also allegories for the collapse of Palestinian national aspirations," Gertz and Khleifi write about *Haifa*.

The failures of the Accords to bring about any substantial change is all too evident in Elia Suleiman's debut *Chronicle of A Disappearance*, which garnered a series of awards during its worldwide tour in 1996. From the opening shot of his film, which slowly and quietly pans away from a mysterious shape to reveal an elderly sleeping man (Suleiman's own father), Suleiman established his unique cinematic approach to filmmaking, one that has often been summed up as esoteric. Not much of anything happens in *Chronicle of A Disappearance*: the father feeds the birds; the mother (also Suleiman's own mother) gossips and cooks; the girlfriend sends Israeli soldiers on a wild goose chase. The filmmaker

"What binds Palestinian films together are the language—Palestinian Arabic—the subject—Palestinian lives—and the desire of each director to portray his own take on what being Palestinian means."

East, in a chapter that examines the use of space in American and Arab films, Masharawi's *Curfew* established the theme of the home as resistant space in Palestinian cinema.

For a few years, Khleifi and Masharawi worked head-to-head. In 1994, Khleifi released *Tale of Three Jewels*, "a love story, with a fantastical dimension, between two twelve-year-old children, against the background of the blunt reality of the cursed Gaza Strip," according to Khleifi (he also viewed children as subjugated by Palestinian society). The next year, Masharawi followed his debut with *Haifa*, the story of a wise fool who dreams of returning to his hometown of Haifa. Both films came at the beginning of the Oslo Accords, which were signed in September 1993, marking the official end of the Intifada. The hope brought about by these declarations is expressed by the characters in the films, but so is the exasperation of the Palestinians at the stasis that continues to define their existence. "Although the

plays himself, a director who silently observes the goings-on around him. The authors of *Palestinian Cinema* liken E.S., as the character is called, to the infamous cartoon character Handala, a Palestinian child growing up in the refugee camps, created by the late Naji al-Ali. E.S. made his first appearance in Suleiman's 1992 *Homage by Assassination*, a film segment commissioned by the B.B.C. that presents a series of images about the Gulf War, and which was made in New York, where Suleiman had spent twelve years (strangely, neither this film, nor the other short he made two years earlier, *Introduction to the End of an Argument*, are mentioned in Khatib's book, even though both of these cinematic experimentations are a direct response to the West's characterization of Arabs). As Gertz and Khleifi point out, E.S. is an "absent presence" and in all instances of his silences "there remains a doubt as to whether the speaker is, indeed, mute or perhaps it is his audience who are deaf."



Rana watches the destruction of a neighbor's home in *Rana's Wedding* (2003).

Both *Palestinian Cinema* and *Dreams of a Nation* conclude with an appraisal of Elia Suleiman, hailing him as the most exciting contemporary Palestinian director. Columbia Professor Dabashi can barely contain his effusiveness for Suleiman, in whose work he sees a sort of redemption from “the despicable thievery of Zionism.” Gertz and Khleifi, meanwhile, opt for a scholarly approach to discussing his works: “Elia Suleiman offers the most exhaustive expression of the problematic aspects of the current Palestinian film,” they commandingly remark, “seeking a middle way between the personal and the national, between the flowing sequence and the traumatic fixated time of the past, between the actual blocked space and the allegories that represent it and open it up and, at the same time, also erase it.”

While Suleiman's style resembles Jacques Tati's brand of deadpan humor, Khleifi's films are reminiscent of the French New Wave, and Masharawi's recall the neorealists, it's difficult to pin down the exact influences on Ali Nassar, who in 1997 joined the ranks of Palestinian feature-film directors with *The Milky Way*. And yet his narrative had a very distinct inspiration: the popular socialist realist prose found in Arab literature and in such publications as the Communist Party journal, *Al Jadid*, during the Fifties and Sixties. As in these literary works, the film, which is set in an Arab village in Galilee in 1964, centers around details of daily life, the struggle of local populations against military government, and the clash between the established order and the lower classes (the village leaders in *The Milky Way* are corrupt and conniving).

Gertz and Khleifi briefly compare themes in Palestinian literature with *The Milky Way*, noting that, like the novels, the film attempts to restore the “harmony of man,

land and nation.” (A more in-depth examination of Palestinian literature can be found in Kamal Abdel-Malek's *The Rhetoric of Violence*, which specifically analyzes the representation of Jewish Israelis in novels, poems, and other prose. The book also includes a chapter on Palestinian cinema—breaking down the films into themes of occupation, life-story, refugees, exile, return, women, and *Nakba*—but, despite its inclusions of some Israeli films, most of the Palestinian films receive cursory analysis, which are lifted straight out of the *Dreams of a Nation* Web site.) Nassar's film stars Mohammad Bakri, one of Palestinian cinema's most prominent actors and a filmmaker in his own right (his 2002 documentary, *Jenin, Jenin*, is one of the most acclaimed films in that format) as Muhammad, a blacksmith who befriends the local fool, and whose life, like that of every villager, is ruled by the Israeli military governor and the local *mukhtar*. The house of the latter, according to Gertz and Khleifi, symbolizes the demise of the Palestinians. “Khleifi construed the home, for the first time in Palestinian cinema, as a shrine to both family and nation,” they write. “Nassar's film mainly deals with the destruction of that house.” They point out that the repeated violations of the *mukhtar's* house “echo the primal violation: the demolition of the first house.”

The filmmakers went silent for another five years but 2002 saw a flurry of new releases, all sophomore efforts by directors and all filmed during the Second Intifada, which erupted in 2000: Nassar's *In the Ninth Month*; Masharawi's *Ticket to Jerusalem*; and Suleiman's *Divine Intervention*. While starkly different in style, the films do cover similar themes: the growing anger and despair, the reduction of the Palestinian “space,” and the overwhelming chokehold of military rule.

In the Ninth Month, shot in Nassar's home village of Arrabe, is about the kidnapping of a child in a small village. While set in the 1990s, like his debut film, it revives stories from the 1950s, its plot reflecting “the traumatic, perception of time standing still,” as Gertz and Khleifi note, and of “the past refusing to dissolve.” The home is nowhere to be seen in the film and the outside is depicted as a place of mistrust and persecution. Masharawi's *Ticket to Jerusalem* follows Jaber, a middle-aged Palestinian man as he diligently goes about, despite the breakdown of his equipment, the required checkpoint crossings, and at the detriment to his own family life, screening films for children in the West Bank refugee camps (the place of art and film in times of war and occupation has been a constant theme in Masharawi's work). As in *In the Ninth Month*, the trauma of the past remains far from resolved. As Gertz and Khleifi point out, the film shows that Palestinian men experience the occupation “as a castration,” yet it also acts as an affirmation of the refugees' resilience. “This hold on life still constitutes a passive form of opposition for the subjugated,” they write, “endowing them with an independent sphere of their own where they can both evade the hegemonic power of the rulers and undermine it.”

While Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance* depicted this idle *sumud*, as the act of staying in place is known, his next film, *Divine Intervention*, envisions actual revenge. The E.S. character reappears, and as in Suleiman's debut, he says and does very little. But his love interest, with whom he meets at the Israeli roadblock between Ramallah and Jerusalem (checkpoints are a recurring protagonist in Palestinian life and cinema), is transformed in one martial-arts fantasy scene into a Ninja-like Palestinian fighter who obliterates her Israeli opponents. *Chronicle of a Disappearance* included many vistas of landscape as seen during shots of E.S.'s travels, and the house of his parents was a place of laughter and serenity. In *Divine Intervention*, there are no open spaces, the house in Nazareth is reduced to the kitchen, and “daily life has turned into a stagnant routine encumbered by hate, anger and arguments,” Gertz and Khleifi write.

The filming of *Divine Intervention* illustrates the many technical and logistical challenges that the directors had to circumvent in order to get their films made. The politics not only seeped into the storylines, it also affected the shooting of the films. When Suleiman and his crew arrived to film in Ramallah, they discovered that the entrance of the structure where the movie theater was located had been bombed; the cash registers were also robbed, and the Dolby stereo system stolen. Many scenes were shot on the run. One of the key scenes in the movie, the detonation of the Israeli tank with a peach pit, was actually filmed in an alley in France.

Like other directors, Suleiman had to work around curfews and roadblocks, and

some of the filming had to be done from rooftops. “Cinematic means enable you to cross borders,” Hany Abu-Assad, whose Hollywood-esque films *Rana’s Wedding* (2003) and *Paradise Now* (2005) have further diversified Palestinian cinema, tells Gertz and Khleifi. Roadblocks and checkpoints feature prominently in both of his films. Rana, who darts around Jerusalem, *Run Lola Run*-style, in search of the man she needs to wed before daybreak in order to remain in her country, has to pass many of them. His next film’s opening shot also features a young woman making her way through a roadblock. In both films, the checkpoint scenes epitomize the constant denigration of the Palestinians as well as their steadfastness. In her chapter “Gendered Tools of Nationalism,” Khatib notes that “Rana represents the symptoms of Israel’s interference with the Palestinians’ private lives, but also Palestinian defiance.” She refuses to allow the conditions to victimize her and is determined to get her way. In *Paradise Now*—which unfortunately receives little attention in the various available books, perhaps because of the timing of its release—Suha, a young, wide-eyed recent returnee to Nablus, tries to stop two young men and would-be suicide bombers, with the powers of persuasion and with her domineering presence, from going through their mission.

Both of Abu-Assad’s features have been groundbreaking. *Rana’s Wedding* is the only Palestinian film to have received almost entirely Arab funding; it was produced by the Palestinian Ministry of Culture with Gulf States’ money. *Paradise Now*, which was financed by several European countries, is the first Palestinian feature film to be accepted at the Oscars as a “Palestinian film” and nominated. (In 2002, the Acad my had rejected Suleiman’s *Divine Intervention* on the grounds that it did not recognize “Palestine” as a nation). *Paradise Now* also won a Golden Globe award as Best Foreign Film from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association.

But the film’s explosive theme did not sit well with everyone. Israeli writer Irit Linor denounced it as “a moving and high-brow Nazi film.” The film was rebuked for its lack of fleshed-out Israeli characters, an accusation that has been leveled at almost every Palestinian fea-

ture. Acknowledging the merit of such criticism, Abu-Assad tells the author of *Palestinian Cinema*: “Palestinian cinema should reflect the heterogeneous nature of the Palestinian society, and while doing so, it should also deepen the familiarity with the democratic Israeli section.” But, he points out, this is made very difficult by the fact that “the Israeli presence in our lives is one-dimensional. We see the soldiers, settlers, and bulldozers. Regretfully, we do not see the democratically prone poets and artists.” As Gertz and Khleifi explain, “by driving [the Israelis] out of the cinematic frame” the

Palestinian filmmakers are in fact expressing “resistance to the hegemonic might of the rulers.” (Surprisingly, Palestinian audiences have been just as critical and leery of the filmmakers. Many of the feature films have painted the Palestinians as being partly responsible for their fate, either through their passivity or through their tyrannical societal mores. Because of such portrayals, when screened to Palestinian audiences, the films have been often received “with slanderous accusations,” according to Gertz and Khleifi.)

Yet the Israeli viewpoint is not entirely absent in Palestinian cinema. Several documentaries have sought to incorporate Israeli voices—even when dealing with a charged topic, such as the April 2002 Israeli incursion into the Jenin refugee camp. In his film *Invasion*, Nizar Hassan, who is identified in *Palestinian Cinema* as “the paramount documentary film director of our time,” and who carries an Israeli passport, gives both sides of the fierce, twelve-day battle between Israeli forces and Palestinian guerilla fighters. (In his essay in *Dreams of a Nation*, Hassan says that he was transformed into an Afghani by a European organization that wanted to show this film, but was bemused as to how to identify him.) *Route 181*, the 2004 film Khleifi made with Israeli director Eyal Sivan, which is constructed as a series of interviews with Palestinian and Israelis living along the demarcation lines set by the U.N. partition plan, known as Resolution 181, aims to expose the thoughts of ordinary citizens about the Other—and unflinchingly so. “*Route 181* provides a portrait of Israeli Jews and their Palestinian victims as they are, engaged in their daily living of oppressing and resisting respectively,” film historian Joseph Massad writes in his *Dreams* essay.

While there are but a few Palestinian feature filmmakers, those working in the documentary format are in fact too numerous to count. In recent years, as the situation has further deteriorated, the Palestinian documentarians’ approach has become more personalized, and many of their films have taken on the format of autobiography, with the device of film-within-a-film becoming a recurring motif.

Among the many short films mentioned in the books, *Four Songs for Palestine* (2001), by Palestinian-Israeli Nada El-Yas-



In a fantasy sequence, a young Palestinian woman transforms into a levitating Ninja warrior to defeat Israeli soldiers in Elia Suleiman’s *Divine Intervention* (2002) (photos courtesy of Photofest).



Soraya, played by Suheir Hammad, awaits clearance from checkpoint soldiers in Annemarie Jacir's *Salt of This Sea*.

sir who is based in Canada, is regarded as "one of the best of the new crop" by Massad. While a television blares in the background and the Intifada rages outside, a woman goes about her daily chores. Each of her activities represents a color of the Palestinian flag. The entire film takes place inside the woman's dilapidated home. "The threatened and ruined house is replaced by its parts," the authors of *Palestinian Cinema* write, and "the parts are a synecdochic substitute for the house as a whole."

El-Yassir is in fact part of a new generation of Palestinian filmmakers who focus on details and symbols, turning them into representation of wholeness. In the "A Dead End: Roadblock Movies" chapter, which analyzes the works of the latest Palestinian directors, Gertz and Khleifi note that the worsening economical and political situation for Palestinians is creating a return to old cinematic tropes. "Time that flowed in Khleifi's films has now lost its sweetness," they write. "It has become static, stagnant time... the time of waiting at roadblocks, of endless job hunts, of shopping between one curfew and another." Interestingly, today's emerging directors strive to construct Palestine as a unified national entity, just as the Palestinian revolutionaries did in the Seventies. And, as during the time of the Palestinian organizations, Palestinian cinema is experiencing a period of prolific filmmaking.

In the epilogue, the authors of *Palestinian Cinema* try to catch up on the developments in this quickly evolving cinema. In addition to *Paradise Now*, they discuss Tawfik Abu Wael's debut film *Thirst*, from 2004, about a family, living in an abandoned village, whose repression and suppression are entirely caused by the violent, despotic father (there are no mentions of Israel or the political backdrop). Despite the update, *Palestinian Cinema*, like all the other books, is already outdated (Masharawi's *Waiting* is not mentioned in any of them). In the past two years, Palestinian cinema has undergone dynamic changes. One of them is the release of Annemarie Jacir's feature debut,

Salt of This Sea, which was the official selection at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival, and was submitted as the Palestinian entry to this year's Oscars. While there are many short film and documentary female directors (most notable among them is Mai Masri), Jacir is the first female feature filmmaker. Here, Soraya, a young Palestinian woman (played by the striking Palestinian-American poet Suheir Hammad) travels from Brooklyn to Ramallah to demand her recently deceased grandfather's money from a local bank. Shortly after she arrives, she also sets out to visit her family's home in Jaffa. Even though the house is now inhabited by a young, liberal Israeli woman who invites Soraya and her two male friends to stay over, Soraya is unable to contain her mounting anger as she moves through the house. "This is my home," she screams at her host, "you took it from me." Soraya, a strong-willed and determined woman, actively and forcefully sets about to reclaim



Ahmad (Mahmoud al-Massad, right) and his crew arrive in Jordan in *Waiting* (2005).

what she believes is rightfully hers.

In addition to Jacir's film, last year saw the release of Masharawi's *Laila's Birthday*, his fourth feature (and his "best and most accessible work yet," according to *Variety*), Ali Nassar's third, *Whispering Embers*, and another feature by a Palestinian female director, Najwa Najjar's *Pomegranates and Myrrh*. This year, Cherien Dabis's *Amreeka*, about a Palestinian mother and her teenage boy who move to the U.S. from Ramallah, opened Lincoln Center's New Directors/ New Films Festival.

Another important development is that some of the technical difficulties facing Palestinian filmmakers seem to have been resolved. In a recent interview, available on YouTube, Suleiman says that he no longer has to scurry about to find trained and professional crew members—an issue that many of the other filmmakers have also had to contend with—because a cinemathèque founded in his hometown of Nazareth in 2003 has spawned a generation of skilled technicians, photographers, and filmmakers. "I'm not at all scared to go shoot my next feature film," he tells his interviewer. "It's very encouraging, in opposite to the political situation, of course, but maybe there's a dialectic between this and that."

Like many of his fellow directors, Suleiman, who returned to Jerusalem in 1994 to help develop a Film and Media Department at Birzeit University in the West Bank, divides his time between his home country and European cities. Nassar and Masharawi are among the few who continue to live in their homeland. More than anyone else, Masharawi, who resides in Ramallah, which houses the only movie theater in the West Bank (Gaza has none), has been trying to bring Palestinian films to the Palestinians, setting up mobile screenings at refugee camps and establishing the Cinema and Production Center to promote local film productions. Film has allowed him to avoid the passive waiting game in which many of his fellow Palestinians and his characters find themselves trapped. In the production notes for the aptly titled *Waiting*, Masharawi says, "I hope my films will help people understand, help open up discussions on the refugee crisis. I hope that decision-makers will be moved to do something."

Unfortunately, so far, Palestinian films have yet to effect any political reversals. For now, the war of occupation, and the war of images in which the filmmakers have been engaged, seems to remain in Israel's favor. And yet, one thing is for sure: the number of Palestinians who believe in the redemptive power of the image—and of narration—is ever-growing. As Palestinian filmmaker Omar al-Qattan asserts, "The struggle for Palestinian freedom is often most successfully conducted through Palestine's living culture, a peaceful but determined effort to introduce Palestine to the world not as a negative force, but one full of challenges and complexities and beauty." ■