



Terra Incognita (al-Ard al-madjhula, 2002) by Ghassan Salhab
(courtesy Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris)

Palestine: the cost of resistance

Like Lebanese cinema, Palestinian film enjoyed a considerable boom and astonishing international success despite the stalled peace process and continual deterioration of the situation in the Occupied Territories. In early 2006, several full-length feature film productions were due to be shot in Palestine, all by a new generation of filmmakers: Hani Abu Asaad (As^{ad}), Annemarie Jacir, Tawfik Abu Wael (Taufiq Abu Wa'il), Elia Suleiman, Rashid Masharawi, and Muhammad Bakr. This led producer and filmmaker Raed Andoni (Ra'id Anduni) to sarcastically question why Palestinian cinema flourished while the country's crisis deepened.

There is certainly no simple answer to his question. One possibility is a rising interest in Europe and an unprecedented understanding of the virulence of the Palestinian question following the Oslo Accords, which resulted in a readiness to produce more films by Palestinian directors. Also, most of the filmmakers cited above are in a relatively privileged position. They either were born in Israel or have acquired other nationalities and are largely based outside the region. This makes them less vulnerable than regular

inhabitants of the Occupied Territories. Masharawi's and Suleiman's attempt to settle in Ramallah did not survive the massive Israeli military incursion in the spring of 2002. The renewed occupation left not only offices and homes but also equipment and film material in ruins, as in the case of documentary filmmaker 'Azza al-Hassan, who decided to move to Jordan at that point.

Nevertheless, more flexible and cheaper technology has helped quite a number of young, independent filmmakers from the Occupied Territories access the profession and survive in it. Contrary to Israel-based Nizar Hassan from Nazareth, they cannot claim to have had millions of viewers, with Israeli television airing their self-critical and compromising documentaries, as was the case with Hassan. Yet they all tend to display a similarly self-exploring and critical vein, particularly Sobhi (Subhi) Zubaidi with *Looking Awry* (Shawal, 2001), which focuses on racial difference in Palestinian society. Other examples are Najwa al-Najjar's *Quintessence of Oblivion* (Djawharat al-silwan, 2001), which explores former local popular film culture, and Raed Andoni's *Improvisation: Samir and his Brothers* (Irtidjal, 2005), a gripping portrait of a musician family from Nazareth coming to terms with their art in the difficult conditions of occupation.

What characterizes these productions, moreover, is their conscious move away from earlier revolutionary heroism and from open accusations. They tend to be inclusive while underlining difference within Palestinian society. 'Azza al-Hassan, in her documentary, *3cm Less* (3cm aqal, 2003), was not interested in praising the strength of Palestinian mothers or the courage of resistance fighters but rather was eager to look behind the scenes. With her portrait of Hagar, a mother of ten children, who suffered constant emotional deprivation because of their mother's fight with Israeli authorities over the family's confiscated land, al-Hassan showed the price of 'heroism,' namely devastated families and maimed psyches. Like others, she does not shrink from including Israelis. In one of her most subjective scenes, al-Hassan asks an

Israeli actor to meet her second protagonist, Ra'ida—whose father lost his life hijacking a plane for the Palestinian cause—and pretend to have met her father.

In general, filmmakers who grew up in historical Palestine, today's Israel, rely in part on tolerant Israeli producers and technicians and in part on Israeli infrastructure. One prominent example is Tawfik Abu Wael, who was brought up in the small village of Umm al-Fahim and struggled hard to be able to study film at Tel Aviv University. His full-length feature, *Thirst* (Atash, 2004), was produced by Avi Kleinberger, who also produced for Costa Gavras, Elia Suleiman, and others. Abu Wael's film was realized with an almost exclusively Israeli staff. Palestinian cineastes used to receive Arab (largely individual) support or created Palestinian initiatives in the Arab diaspora, as in Lebanon before the Israeli invasion in 1982, but today's filmmakers receive almost all their funds and technical support from the North, namely Europe (and occasionally Israel).

This dependency applies to quite a number of art film directors from the Arab world. The major difference is that Palestinian production and distribution are completely deprived of an autonomous homeland, so there are neither local distribution outlets nor technical infrastructure. A temporary exception was Rashid Masharawi's Cinema Production Center in Ramallah, which was created before the Israeli incursion in 2002 to boost local production, organize mobile screenings through its Mobile Cinema initiative, and establish an annual Kids Film Festival in the Occupied Territories. Otherwise, movie theaters in the Occupied Territories have been closed down since the first Intifada in 1989 because of constant curfews and shootings. In addition, the Palestinian Authority's ministry of culture, led by former Tunis PLO functionaries, was blamed for not working hard enough to support local film. A few of the works it supported were shot by the minister's wife, Liana Badr, who also held the position of director of the film and television division of the Palestinian ministry of culture.

Yet against all odds, Palestinian film, which started as an anti-colonial endeavor and then was unwillingly (or willingly) roped into the Arab-Israeli conflict, has at last been able to develop into a sophisticated and cinematically conscious presence. Doubtless, the struggle between martyr ideology and pragmatism that plays a big role in the real-life Palestinian political arena has not only left its traces on the much-exposed fiction film but also has been reflected in Palestinian documentary and in the more informal independent film. While positive images of martyrdom, as in *When You Were Paraded* (Lamma zaffuk, 2001) by Iyas Natur, as well as cinematic techniques of emotional mobilization, most prominently applied in May Masri's and Muhammad Bakr's documentaries, were not completely abandoned, they have been complemented, if not opposed, by a large number of self-critical and deconstructive films. Even if the era of exclusive unitary nationalism in Palestinian cinema has not passed (and could not face the immense Israeli military and political repression), films like Nizar Hassan's *Independence* (Istiqlal, 1994) indicate that a more complex notion of cultural and political difference has been emerging.¹⁹ Documenting the rituals and celebrations of the Israeli Independence Day, and the ambivalence it carries for Israeli Palestinians, allowed the filmmaker to reflect more generally on the complex idea of nation and national belonging. This does not mean that earlier tropes related to culture, tradition, and resistance, including martyrdom, have been discarded, but they have been channelled into a more critical vision.

The first who paved the way for this development was certainly Michel Khleifi, today an almost neglected veteran in the Palestinian arena, despite his occasional reappearance with such compelling documentaries as *Forbidden Marriages in the Holy Land* (al-Zawadj al-mukhtalat fi-l-aradi al-muqadassa, 1995) and his most recent *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel* (2004). With him, Palestinian filmmaking moved away from the diaspora (that is, exiled filmmakers affiliated with different Palestinian political organizations) toward the soil of historical



Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi yaumin akhar, 2002) by Hani Abu Asaad
(courtesy Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris)

Palestine. He and the following generation of Palestinian fiction filmmakers, namely Hani Abu Asaad and Elia Suleiman—who, like Nizar Hassan, are also originally from Nazareth—and later joined by Tawfik Abu Wael, changed the tropes of Palestinian film. Nationalist and cultural self-assertion through images of resistant fighters, martyrs, and the different features of Palestinian cultural heritage gave way, as I sketched out earlier in this book,²⁰ to helpless patriarchs, rebellious daughters, and self-aggressive young men, motifs still present in recent films, such as *Thirst* by Abu Wael. This is also why the wedding trope that appears from *Wedding in Galilee* to *Rana's Wedding* (al-Quds fi yaumin akhar, 2002) by Hani Abu Asaad—recently complemented by the Israeli production, *The Syrian Bride* (2004) by Eran Riklis, and Najwa al-Najjar's short, *Yasmine's Song* (2005)—offers a perfect dramatic pretext to negotiate change in correlation with oppression on both the personal and the political level.

Similarly, armed resistance already qualified and critically examined in *Wedding in Galilee* was placed under scrutiny in *Paradise*

Now (al-Djanna al'an, 2005) by Hani Abu Asaad. *Paradise Now*, which was even nominated for an Academy Award, depicted the situation of two young, deprived, and sympathetic Palestinians who are roped in by an extremist group and groomed to become suicide bombers. While, in this case, the much more complex motivations for suicide bombing are reduced to the personal history of a young man who wants to whitewash his family's reputation because of his father's alleged history as Israeli collaborator, Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (Yaddun ilahiya, 2002) is far more radical in its deconstruction of the notion of martyrdom. This work, which was well-received at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002, evolves around an allegorical love story of the male main protagonist from Nazareth (played by the director himself) and a beautiful woman from the Occupied Territories whom he can meet only in a car park at an Israeli checkpoint. The film displays its strength less through any rhetorical narrativity than through a number of highly ironic scenes that capitalize on and deconstruct the mass appeal of political agitation as a feature of a phantasmagorical popular culture that is, last but not least, condensed in the image of the martyr. It allows a female Palestinian resistance fighter wrapped in the typical *kufiyah*, following the rules of electronic games, to miraculously transform into a virtual figure that lifts itself high up into the air, equipped with extraordinary weaponry and supernatural powers.

Palestinian directors' self-critical pragmatism and deconstructive attitude are manifested in tropes of immobility and waiting, a recurrent motif primarily in Suleiman's last two fiction films, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (Sidjil iktifa', 1996) and *Divine Intervention*. Both repeat almost identical images of elderly men sitting around and women engaged in senseless activities. A similar theme has also been brought up by Rashid Masharawi in his latest feature, *Waiting* (Intizar, 2005), and in Tawfik Abu Wael's documentary, *Waiting for Saladin* (bi-Intizar Salah al-Din, 2001). The major problem of the young men portrayed in these films was not violence or oppression,



Chronicle of a Disappearance (Sidjil ikhtifa', 1996) by Elia Suleiman
(courtesy Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris)

but boredom. This sense of stagnation has been primarily described by '1948 Arabs,' or Israeli Palestinians, and reflects these directors' feelings of belonging to a besieged culture, something that is cemented by the highly limited possibilities for Arab cultural activities in the Arab-Israeli 'metropolis' of Nazareth.²¹

Iraq: deconstructing the nation?

While Lebanese cinema and Palestinian cinema have developed a deep skepticism regarding national heroism, or, in other words, have toppled the mythology of an ethnically, religiously, and ideologically undivided national body, Iraq has seen the emergence of an anti-colonial and in parts unequivocally nationalist Iraqi-Kurdish cinema rising from the ashes of the pre-1990 situation. The first ever Iraqi-Kurdish film, *Narjis, Bride of Kurdistan* (Nardjis, çarus Kurdistan) by Jaçfar çAli, was filmed in northern Iraq in 1991, after the first American military operation against Iraq, which resulted in greater autonomy for the Kurdish north. The film was released in the city of Irbil but not shown in Baghdad.²² Since then,

most Kurdish productions have been realized abroad, like the abovementioned *A Silent Traveler* (see page 43) or more recent prominent films by Iranian Kurd Bahman Ghobadi, *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), and *Half Moon* (2006), all shot in Iran. Similar to many Iranian post-revolution works, Ghobadi's films show deep humanism and a fascination with perilous nature. Crossing the border into Iraq is of special concern to his narratives, as is symbolically transgressing the artificial borders of the region's alleged nation-states.

Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the situation of Kurdish film-making has improved further. The two latest Iraqi-Kurdish productions, *Kilomètre Zéro* (2005) by Hiner Saleem and *Narcissus Blossom* (Zaman al-nardjis, 2005) by Masçud çArif Salih and Husain Hassan çAli were shot in northern Iraq. In contrast to Ghobadi's films, they have an explicitly political character. *Narcissus Blossom*, in particular, is a typical national liberation film, set in the 1970s, with one central embattled male figure, a young student who avoids detention by escaping into the mountains and joining the *peshmergas*. Otherwise, the film is packed with the typical modernist repertory of post-colonial film, criticizing, among other elements, arranged marriage and patriarchal structures in traditional Kurdish society.

Hiner Saleem, who left Iraq/Kurdistan as a teenager, does not choose to portray armed resistance. It seems more attractive to his protagonist to leave with his family for Europe, though hampered more by his wife's insistence on remaining with her bedridden father than by Saddam's constables. The comedy of *Kilomètre Zéro* is created through its visual style, its *mise en scène*, and the anti-heroism of its major character, who deserts the Iraqi army during the Iran-Iraq War. The film also offers a far-reaching panorama of the regime's atrocities and difficult Arab-Kurdish relations. Saleem not only received the usual European funding, but was also supported by the Kurdish "government" (as stated in the credits) in northern Iraq and by Kurdish television.