



The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical

Imagination, by Greg Burris. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2019. 270 pages. \$104.50 cloth, \$32.95 paperback, \$32.95 e-book.

REVIEWED BY SAMIRAH ALKASSIM

Recently published in the Insubordinate Spaces series of Temple University Press, Greg Burris's latest book builds on his past scholarship on race, film, and cultural theory, with a focus on theorizing "the Palestinian idea" in relation to Palestine (solidarity) film and media. The first chapter presents a chain of bold questions that establish the book's philosophical aspirations: to recognize that the future is already here, equality for Palestinians is already present, and multifaith coexistence between Jews, Muslims, and Christians, (both Arab and non-Arab) in Israel already exists—although none of these

conditions are the predominant order.

Informed by the writings of Edward Said, who saw the emancipatory possibilities for all the people of Palestine as the only solution, Burris sees "the Palestinian idea" in a community of ideas advanced by other anticolonial intellectuals including Aimé Césaire, Jacques Rancière, Stuart Hall, and C. L. R. James, whose work famously helped articulate the Black radical imaginary that Burris refers to throughout the book. From this intellectual genealogy, the second chapter poses the question of whether "the Palestinian" really exists (p. 47). Although clarified as a rhetorical question based on the contingency of identity—that identity groups are mostly experienced as heterogeneous—this question reveals the book's biggest challenge, which is that theory alone is not enough to ameliorate the real material conditions of settler-colonial oppression, political limbo, and humanitarian crisis that effectively dehumanize Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel.

Burris views the fundamental struggle for Palestinians as really about equality and not visibility (pp. 9, 102–4, 111, 113–14, 117). This complex argument seems myopic because it ignores the intertwined histories of the Palestinian struggle and Palestinian cinema, for which the issue of visibility has always been vital to claiming rights and greater equity, as detailed in Nadia Yaqub's

Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution (University of Texas Press, 2018). Reducing the Palestinian problem to one of (in)equality (separate from visibility), and therefore necessitating an imagining of equality for a heterogeneous “non-Palestinian,” while interesting to consider, is difficult to reconcile with the present moment. Today, American, Israeli, and other global powers are actively working to erase Palestinian claims to sovereignty, including the right to exist in the “disputed territories,” a project that has advanced unprecedentedly during U.S. president Donald Trump’s time in office.

Burris offers a substantive argument in proposing a “radical” new vision for Palestine as part of an emancipatory project that shares many characteristics with the Black radical tradition (chapters 1 and 6). Insisting on the necessity of seeing a utopian vision in the dystopian present is definitely worthy and important; but the execution of this project through the film analysis is underdeveloped, as evidenced by the author’s sidestepping of more rigorous scholarship including Yaqub’s, as well as other books such as *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, edited by Hamid Dabashi (Verso, 2006); Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi’s *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma, and Memory* (Indiana University Press, 2008); and Najat Rahman’s *In the Wake of the Poetic: Palestinian Artists after Darwish* (Routledge, 2015). The film analysis, while interesting, focuses on a few films that are useful in demonstrating Burris’s theories, but his descriptions are peppered with debatable interpretations. For example, contrary to his claim (p. 72), the ending of Annemarie Jacir’s *When I Saw You* (2012) is not necessarily optimistic, but highly ambiguous, as suggested by a freeze frame of mother and son running to the border between Jordan and Israel/Palestine—most likely toward death, as they will probably be shot by vigilant border police. While interpretations are subjective, the idea of returning to Palestine is not necessarily attained, and it would be interesting to hold a poll among viewers of how exactly they interpret this scene.

This book’s greatest strength is its articulation of the solidarity between Black radical thought and the gifts of Said’s oeuvre. It also attends to a few lesser-known filmmakers, like Kamal Aljafari and Mais Darwazah, and the importance of experimental films in participating in this project that exemplify what the author calls “hollow time” (chapter 4). Burris astutely points out the importance of unshackling our imaginations from the tired rhetoric swirling around all things, including Palestine, to avoid creating and subscribing to false binaries (such as Jew/Arab, White/Black), and to see solidarity between sister struggles. But theory alone does not diminish the real suffering of people in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, and refugee camps in nearby countries. What this book reaffirms is the necessity of imagination in creating new systems to serve the interests of equity, parity, and justice for the oppressed, with all the dismantling that such a project entails. It offers an important contribution to scholarship on Palestine as it intersects with cultural studies and continental philosophy, but it must be read in companion with other scholarship on Palestine cinema for a deeper understanding of the latter.

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