

Staging the Sublimation of Cliché: Elia Suleiman's Silences in *The Time That Remains* (2009)

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I don't get so close that you think:
"Oh my God; this is interesting."

I worked with a certain amount of [Palestinian] actors; some of them I did not enjoy very much because they come from a very very severely overacting theatrical experience I cannot stand. Sometimes when they start to use their... *expressions* on their faces, I'm like, please... you know, then Palestine the cliché starts: we are victims or we are victors or... we always have to put some angry expression to say how our land was lost, which doesn't work for me. As you see I don't use it. A lot of the characters are *movements* within the frame, and I prefer the *choreography*, I prefer the *musicality* that comes from their appearances etc... it would be a lie to say that I directed them, so to speak...

Elia Suleiman²

You gave no instructions save to forbid excessive interpretation... [to] beware of those who do not know what weariness is, who interpret too much.

Mahmoud Darwish³

An elderly mother and her son sit wordless in a Nazareth living room, facing us. The television screen they are watching, which is never seen, spews the sounds of a raging battle, which neither receives nor seems to require any commentary.

Twice the son glances at his mother, who gazes fixedly at the screen. Twice, he reaches out a hand, which she bats away, without looking up, before he can clasp hers to comfort her, at least, to register that she is not alone. But she is alone, her experience utterly incommunicable, and beyond comfort. The third time it is she who twitches – about to bat away a hand he hasn't yet raised.

The scene lasts barely 30 seconds of what seems a long take – even in the context of a film awash in them. It is, in some ways, as close as the film gets to the contemporary Palestinian experience in its classical representations, whether by Palestinians or others. Yet if the scene is exquisite it is because of what does not happen in it – the son clasping his mother's hand – and what does: the batting away of the hand that is twice there but the third time not: its uniquely resonant use of the moving image's unique ability to provide this specific brand of mimesis. Word and image are, here, both present-absentees, implied but abstained from. Authorial intent is present, if anywhere, in the staging of the abstention, in the silence of it, and in the silence concerning it.

The scene comes near the end of the Palestinian-Israeli director Elia Suleiman's third feature film, *Al-Zaman al-Baqi* ("The Time That Remains," 2009) – which has every claim to be as sophisticated and successful a Palestinian engagement as there is with the core Palestinian notion and idiom of return (*'awda*.) that emerged from the dispossession of the *nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948.

Palestinians have, of course, produced extraordinarily complex and subtle representations of return. Conceived of as ongoing and ever more unresolved as a result of the failure of the Oslo process and an impossibility of acknowledging defeat attendant upon that failure – among the central *motifs* of Mahmoud Darwish's last *diwan* – it is ever more present as the structuring moment of Palestinian lives.⁴ One might well argue that, since 1948, most of Palestinian art, speech, and, of course, movement – indeed, everything constitutive of Palestinian experience since then – fundamentally and, since Oslo, increasingly, consists of attempts to capture the idea of return. Kanafani's 1970 novella *A'id ila Haifa* ("A Returnee to Haifa") the subject of both film and theatre adaptations, is only the most celebrated of the earlier canonical manifestations of these.⁵ Suleiman's own two previous features, *Sijil Ikhtifa'* ("Chronicle of a Disappearance," 1996) and *Divine Intervention*, (subtitled "A Chronicle of Love and Pain,") with both of which *The Time That Remains* is in intricate dialogue, are among the most subtle explorations of the particular, metonymic predicaments of Palestinian citizens of Israel. And it is surely something of this quality of the experience of the Palestinian citizens of Israel as metonym of Palestinian experience that could prompt a young friend I showed the film to in Bureij camp in Gaza, whose experience otherwise differs radically from that of the bourgeois Christian Palestinian-Israeli family shown in *The Time That Remains*, to nonetheless react to it with: "Silence is the hardest language."



Scene from the film.

The Time That Remains, I would like to suggest here, marks a qualitatively new high in more than just Suleiman's art and craft. It also pushes back the boundaries of the uses of silence in Palestinian cinema. It may also be the most compelling evidence for film's being the medium most apt to conveying the complexity of return in the post-Oslo era. One might, indeed, suggest that *The Time That Remains* stages the post-Oslo Palestinian experience more broadly as contained in a certain existential need for some kind of acknowledgement of the possibility of the impossibility of return – thus of some understanding of Oslo as a kind of defeat, as it is depicted in the late compositions of Darwish (d.2008). A Palestinian conception of defeat, both national and individual might, then, be more than ever conveyed in the staging of silence *in time* rather than in articulation – even articulation as subtle as Darwish's, whose indirectness approaches the same qualities. This, in turn, makes Suleiman's latest work also among the most acute explorations of the relationship between silence as form and content – on film or any other medium.

Edward Said held that “a desire for articulation as opposed to silence [is] the functional idiom of the intellectual vocation.”⁶ The preponderance of silence in much contemporary Palestinian cinema, and especially in the films of Suleiman or Kamal Aljafari's *Al-Sath* (“The Roof”) 2006, *Mina' al-Dhakira* (“Port of Memory”) 2009, channels a broader – but entirely compatible – argument for the staging of elective silences as contemporary language of Palestinian mimesis: elective as opposed to entirely imposed silences, or, say, articulation imposed in political rather than aesthetic terms. It insistently invites, that is, a reading of such elective silences as perhaps the

most Palestinian form of articulation in the post-Oslo present.

It is hardly incidental that Suleiman dubs his films “almost silent movies.”⁷ Often ostensibly bereft of a framing narrative, they are expressive precisely in their apparent disengagement from a consensus that narrative or narration should be indispensable to expression in general – or, implicitly, to the historicity of Palestinian narrative in particular. There will be no voiceovers here. In *Chronicle of a Disappearance* scenes are separated by the non-sequitur, silent-film title *al-yom al-tali* (“The next day”). In *The Time That Remains*, as in all his feature films to date, Suleiman again appears but never speaks. (Most famously, he comes close but never quite in a farcical scene in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, in which his doomed attempts to deliver a speech are systematically foiled by feedback and other disturbances.) His silences are particularly expressive in his latest film, more explicitly personal, and in which he features more consistently, than in any of his others to date.

The Time That Remains, in the simplest terms, chronicles the experience of Suleiman’s family in Nazareth from 1948 to the present. It is framed by his return to Nazareth as an adult, from a long absence – perhaps, it is strongly implied, one enforced by a teenage engagement in politics represented as inevitable. (In two separate 1970s scenes, a Palestinian Israeli policeman instructs young Elia’s mother that Elia has 24 hours to leave the country, though this seems not to have any effect at the time. The return itself takes up the final third of the film, following a scene that, typically, may or may not suggest at least the metaphorical, fading-away death of his father, as a teenage Suleiman (ES)⁸ looks on.

Explicitly subtitled “Chronicles of a Present Absentee,” *The Time That Remains* addresses the peculiarly literal “impossibility” of return to some Palestinians: that of those *fil-dakhil*: “inside,” or “1948,” as most Palestinians call Israel in this context: the minority who were never forced to leave then – not even, as the family of Mahmoud Darwish was, only to return “illegally” almost immediately, as “present absentees” under Israeli legal terminology. Even to one who grew up in Nazareth under Israeli rule, what awaits ES on his return remains disorienting. In a scene shot from the same angle and framing as in an earlier scene and age, he arrives at night, climbs the stairs of the house, and finds the key under the flowerpot. Since, in the 1970s scenes, ES’s father has moved out of the 1948 family home, it is not clear whether the earlier house was expropriated as “absentee property.” If not, this would lend further valence to the film’s subtitle: “present-absentee,” a notoriously oxymoronic Israeli legal designation before it is a rich metaphor for the Palestinian experience in Israel more generally. The Suleimans may thus not qualify for even that label, except in abstract terms, to designate Palestinian citizens of Israel more broadly, if not Palestinians in general. Again, however, the fact that we do not know merely underlines the fact that it need not matter: that the Palestinian experience is in some sense ultimately singular – and its singularity certainly impervious to how individual groups of Palestinians may be designated by Israel.

Once ES is inside, the doorbell rings. Through the peephole he, and the viewer, see an Israeli policeman. ES double-takes, hesitates – afraid as much as startled, the

viewer may surmise, given ES's past experience with policemen. He puts down his briefcase then brusquely opens the door. "Are you Elia Suleiman?" the policeman asks, in Arabic, before raising a plate to the camera: "Tabbouleh. I made it for you. Easy on the burghul, just as you like it. You'll tell me what you think. I'll come back later. Good evening, welcome home." He walks off, leaving ES clutching the plate, wearing his perennial, indescribably baffled expression. (This is, in writing on Suleiman, inevitably compared to that of Buster Keaton – which, while a useful referent, sells it somewhat short: it is his very own.)

Cut to a dishevelled Suleiman in pyjamas, wearing the same expression, moving his head from side to side to follow the ballet of the apron-clad policeman and a South-East Asian caretaker in gymwear mopping the floor, to the tune of "Jingle Bells" on the TV screen. Cut to ES and his now aged mother sitting at breakfast in the kitchen as the policeman, his gun in its holster, does the dishes, and the caretaker makes the tea. It quickly becomes apparent that both are caring for ES' mother, who now lives alone: the father has indeed died – although whether this was in the final 1970s scene sketched earlier or not, we are, typically, never told. The policeman is clearly smitten with the caretaker. She appears unsmitten. "Did you hear the shooting last night?" the voluble policeman asks ES from the sink, rather rhetorically: "A drug war between two big families. You hardly know the place these days. You look at someone, they point a gun at you."

Whatever it is that ES has returned to – Nazareth, Israel, Palestine, some unclassifiable combination of the above, or something else entirely – it has clearly moved on from the immediately preceding 1970s scenes. He spends the evening, not hearing, much less talking, politics, national or local – but watching the caretaker perform an especially excruciating karaoke version of Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" (and it does go on) as the policeman gazes at her admiringly; the only movement, his reaching for the sofa cushion to hug it.

Perhaps the most explicit undermining of the possibility of ES, and with him, potentially, any Palestinian, "returning" in any simple sense is, however, a brief clutch of scenes set in Ramallah later in the film. While they ultimately do belong to this film, they also feel somewhat apart from it stylistically, altogether more reminiscent of the sketches of *Divine Intervention*. They immediately follow a scene in which a fireworks display over Nazareth echoes, perhaps, the televised sounds of the *intifada* in the scene that this essay began with. Initially off-camera, these sound more sinister still, given that the celebration could be explicitly at the expense of a Palestinian Nazareth audience, a jarring reminder of their constitutive lack of belonging to the state conducting the celebrations. The camera pans away to a distracted ES packing his bag. Arabic music takes over, over a shot – the film's *leitmotif* if any is – framed by the window to the balcony, where ES' mother sips her coffee in profile, the fireworks and view of Nazareth in the background. It then cuts to ES, as ever without explanation, on a Ford Transit *service* on the road to Ramallah – the first time, save for an ethereal opening scene in a taxi at night, that the film has left the Palestinian-world-unto-itself that is Nazareth.

The Ramallah scenes follow. A beautiful young woman gets on the *service*, a keffieh around her neck, and sits next to ES. A little further down the road a large young man gets on, pushing them closer together. “Ramallah,” he tells the driver. Suleiman insistently glances in the young woman’s direction, glances she fails to return. The van’s sunscreen falls open on one of the road’s notoriously countless potholes. (The viewer may know that, past Qalandia checkpoint but officially still within Jerusalem, the road is “under Israeli administration,” thus unrepaired by the Palestinian Authority – hence its appalling condition. As ever in Suleiman, such knowledge would both add to the exquisite deliberation that makes his every scene so rich – and is entirely unnecessary for the scene to work in full.) The sunscreen reveals a pin-up tucked inside it, which the woman does briefly stare at – before the driver, again, and again, with each passing pothole, holds the screen up to hide it, driving one-handed.

ES checks into the Royal Court Suites hotel, bourgeois Ramallah central, in front of which a ballet of magic-realist sociability unfolds between a traffic policeman and each passing car. A taxi driver gets out of his car, vigorously embraces the policeman – who, of course, is “directing” traffic as he would an orchestra – on both cheeks, and drives on, as ES looks on from the doorstep. For some minutes only the word “Ramallah” has been heard, bar the policeman’s background conversations with his friends as Suleiman looks on from the pavement.

ES awakes to the sound of an *intifada*-classic confrontation below his window between Israeli soldiers mounting an incursion into Ramallah and Palestinian *shabab* (young men). As the camera returns to ES, the sound is replaced by a lone squeak. ES peers out of the window once more; the squeak is of a pram pushed by a young woman nonchalantly passing through the confrontation, which has paused around her. A soldier raises his rifle at her: “Go home!” “Go home? You go home!” she replies, and walks on, the kabuki confrontation immediately resuming behind her. ES heads downstairs to watch, from behind a parapet, a tank blocking the small residential street, its turret tracking every move of a blithely unconcerned young man who has come outside to put the garbage out before pacing the street while talking on his phone, discussing new music to share and the night’s party at a hip Ramallah bar. When he goes indoors the turret turns until it is aimed directly at ES, and the viewer. Cut. A jeep stops outside the party, insistently announcing a curfew, ignored from the inside. The megaphone warning gradually mingles with the beat of the music, as the soldier ambiguously begins to move to it.

Cut. Suleiman stands before Israel’s West Bank Wall, holding a high-jumper’s pole, which he uses to leap the Wall cleanly. (The scene prompted varying degrees of applause each of three times I saw it in theatres: among the Ramallah audience at the premiere Suleiman attended there, at the al-Kasbah cinémathèque, and at New York’s Lincoln Center and Museum of Modern Art. Two *shabab* I showed the film to in Bureij camp in Gaza were unmoved.) Cut. We are back in the taxi, now stalled, of the film’s first scene, ES, presumably on his way to Nazareth from the airport, smoking as the driver slumps asleep at the wheel. Cut. Back to Nazareth. The doctor, emerging

from the hospital room to which Suleiman's mother has moved in the short time we have been away, greets him, as the policeman had, with *hamdillah as-salaama*: "Welcome home." The Ramallah episode takes up under ten minutes of the film's 109. Yet, like its every other moment, it is a piece of the puzzle without which Suleiman's whole, exceptionally elegant edifice might be structurally far weaker.

Given the extraordinary narrative, aesthetic and political tapestry of the film as a whole, and the progression that it represents from *Divine Intervention* in terms of addressing the experience of 1948 more explicitly than Suleiman has done before (in an interview about *The Time That Remains* he says "I had not very much hope that I would ever touch upon it,"⁹) it is, at first viewing, almost disappointing that Suleiman feels the need to take ES and the viewer to Ramallah at all. The Nazareth he presents us with appears – and this is surely a great part of the brilliance of the film – entirely sufficient unto itself as a metonym of the Palestinian experience, both of 1948 and later. It appears, that is, able to contain the multifariousness of the Palestinian experience like no other. Nazareth is the "capital" of Palestinians in Israel, and their experience, while not by any means the most physically violent, is arguably that which most closely approaches the limits of representation – with this liminality, rather than the mere experience of violence, conceived of as the cornerstone of the Palestinian experience. The Ramallah scenes, by contrast, verge more on metaphor, and what they contain – e.g. the *shabab*-soldiers confrontation – in some sense already, inescapably metaphorical. And it is this constitutive foreshortening of the viewer's imagination, to some inevitable degree implicit in the use of the classical tropes of Palestinian victimhood and agency that is a great part of the difficulty of Palestinian representation, that Suleiman's style in general, and his Ramallah scenes in particular, so deftly both foregrounds and bypasses.

Palestinian *'awda* is, then, not here. It is precluded principally by Israeli tanks and soldiers, necessary as those have been for over 60 years to prevent the physical return of Palestinian refugees. It is, as in such chronicles of post-Oslo return as Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*, precluded by the very texture of what has been lost in 1948 and since – and, all-importantly, by *how* it was lost, incrementally, including by those who never left, a world still within the sight and grasp of those who still live "inside," in "1948." Return feels, in fact, all the more foreclosed by the very absence of *any* physical displacement in the case of Suleiman's family, and of many Palestinians in Israel – even within the limits of conceiving of return as, first, foremost and fundamentally, an idea: the idea of Palestine. The house, the stairs leading to it, the neighbors, can all remain precisely the same in outward appearance over time. Only the meaning of the lives lived in and around them has changed: is continually changing, to something that, no matter how dispiriting it may seem, can never be acknowledged to have been meaningless given the risk of retrospectively invalidating the meaning of Palestinian life since 1948. One of Darwish's last prose poems is titled *What's It All For?* "... [M]eaningless words, *which are not meant to mean anything*: "What's it all for?"¹⁰ The question here, as in Suleiman, is surely whether the question can be asked at all – and if so, how – if Palestinian lives are to preserve

the equilibrium required to preserve meaning in their experience. The meaning of the question appears to be contingent upon its not being asked – or, as in Darwish, on its not being explicitly asked; and, perhaps, in the answer's being, as it can be on screen, largely silence.

This is, perhaps, what prompts ES to head to Ramallah, in ostensible search of the more familiar visual cues to second-*intifada*-era Palestinian experience that Nazareth may not provide. If, however, the Ramallah digression – and it matters that it should feel like a digression – successfully underlines the fact that the shots of ES' mother, silent on her balcony, could in and of themselves embody the Palestinian experience, Suleiman may be allowing his viewer to think, so much the better. When ES returns to Nazareth, his mother, in her hospital bed, is clutching a photograph of her dead husband, Fuad, sitting at the same balcony as we have seen her in so many scenes, staring at the view. Any attempt to take anything away from that experience of silent, infinitely profound sadness in every moment, on the grounds that the Nazareth experience is less representative of the national experience than the recent experience of Gaza, for example, would rightly appear indefensible – and unwarranted.

As an exploration of simultaneous alienation from and relatedness to the experience of occupation, the television-watching scene I sketched at the outset feels, however, altogether more convincing than the later Ramallah ones. (Typical of Suleimanic bathos, the next scene is of the mother's nightly foray to a fridge the upper door-shelf of which is filled exclusively with ice-cream cones, to indulge in her not-so-guilty pleasure, later to be reproached – in, ludicrously, Hebrew endearments – by the caregiver measuring her blood sugar levels.) The only other intrusion of the West Bank prior to the Ramallah scenes is when a ragamuffin, no more than twelve, comes to the open door of the house, trying to sell the caretaker beans for ten shekels: "Please, take them; I don't have the fare for the bus." "Didn't you hear? Get out of here," the pointedly demasculinized, apron-clad policeman interjects, emerging from the next room, a duster in one hand and a bottle of detergent in the other. The boy, unconcerned, sizes him up. "Where are you from?" "From Jenin." (The destruction of Jenin's refugee camp in 2002 is, of course, as potent a symbol of the second *intifada* as there is.) "Do you have a permit to enter Israel? Where's your ID?" "Leave – him – alone!" the caretaker barks, in stilted English. "If you don't have it I'll take you to the police station," the policeman warns. "I said *leave the boy alone*. Come inside." "*Khalas*, go away," the boy, apparently (off-camera,) says to the policeman; then, to the caregiver: "OK, give me a cigarette." "Give – him – cigarette!" she hollers, again in English, at the policeman in the next room who obediently passes the boy one through the window. The boy makes a lighter gesture; the policeman returns to light the cigarette for him. The boy takes a drag and blows the smoke in the policeman's direction, daring him to react, before picking up his plastic bags and sauntering off.

The policeman, of course, dare not react, apparently shamed by the caregiver with no political stake – plausibly one of those laborers, mainly Thais, whom Israel imported during the second *intifada* to replace Gazan workers, both in the settlements there before 2005, and inside Israel to replace West Bank workers. The

policeman and the boy are never seen in the same frame: the shot is divided down the middle by the wall, and only the policeman's gloved hands extend through the window. The policeman's blitheness in uniform around ES and his mother does not extend to the boy – nor to an audience less desensitized by repetition to the absurdity and irretrievable shame of his situation: a Palestinian Israeli policing – mainly – Palestinians, for the benefit of Israelis. All that this scene might be seen to contain is best left un glossed, just as it is left unspoken by Suleiman.

After displacement, Suleiman might be interpreted as saying that there is only time that remains – time, as distinct from anything resembling closure or redemption through physical return, no matter how long-awaited. In an interview about the film he addresses simplistic interpretations with bravado: “*The Time That Remains* is not at all a metaphor of Palestine. Not at all... I’m not saying anything about the Arab-Israeli conflict. In fact, the phrase ‘the Arab-Israeli conflict’ does not even belong to my dictionary – at all. I only reflect and sponge experience, and that happens to be as a Palestinian Diasporic – or everyday reality.”¹¹

Inasmuch, however, as Suleiman does gloss the film’s title, it is as an acknowledgement of the quality of the post-1948 Palestinian experience – rather than as a ringing affirmation of its conventionally ascribed meaning. The title contains no more than what it contains; and that – the time that remains, not only the time that has passed – is everything. This is not an acknowledgement of hopelessness – inasmuch as acknowledging the impossibility of return might otherwise be seen, in Palestinian political language at least, as the certificate of inseparable national and personal defeat. Suleiman again: “If I was hopeless, I would not have made a film entitled *The Time That Remains*... there is *only* hope... *The Time That Remains* is a kind of warning about the regression of the *status quo*, or the regression of the state of things. You warn because there is hope... *We are not necessarily winning. We are only trying to arrest the regression*, unfortunately.”¹² The exit music is so ostentatiously at odds with the film’s subtlety that it remains daring, vintage Suleiman – an Arabic-tinged version of “Staying Alive,” by the electro duo Mirwais and Yasmine Hamdan.

Whatever regression is at work here, in the post-Oslo Palestinian present, is cast in aesthetic terms as much as, if not more than, political ones, however broadly the political may be understood. Suleiman is thus in implicit dialogue with the late, “Trojan” Darwish and his casting of hope, in a poem in his last collection entitled “A Talent for Hope,” not as “the opposite of despair” but as a “talent”; of suffering, not as a talent, but a “test” of that talent; and of a certain indifference – including, presumably towards the possibility of any idealized understanding of return – as “one aspect of hope.”¹³ The sustaining of such hope might best reside, then, in pre-emptive autocritiques of the ideal return, of the kind provided by the likes of Mourid Barghouti, and Suleiman or Darwish, among others. These would be valuable inasmuch as they provide a different language from – if not one opposed to – the unchanging, sloganeering proto-certainties of Palestinian

Authority politicians, decried as increasingly hollow representations of lived experience. Since while the legitimacy and validity of historical slogans may remain uncontested and incontestable, they may – like all slogans – struggle to speak equally to all Palestinian generations quite as intimately as one might hope – or as some Palestinians might prefer to be spoken to by others.

This latter possibility is raised in a recent article by the anthropologist Diana Allan, who, foregrounding the uses of silence among the *jeel al-nakba* (generation of the disaster) to communicate the ongoing experience of 1948 to one another, raises the possibility that this experience appears to be “better” expressed (in a necessarily complex sense of “better”) the less narrative structure, or even narrative characteristics, it has – including the structure of the nationalist narrative. One might take this further to suggest that the experience of 1948 may be better expressed the less it is articulated. Such an interpretation requires a willingness to contemplate a possibility radically against the grain of Palestinian discourse: that “stories do not seem to be a retentive *milieu* for memory or communal solidarity, which instead appear to settle into *silent* practice, gestures, and repetitive rituals – meeting for coffee, a lullaby. It suggests that remembering Palestine and the events surrounding the expulsion have come to be unconsciously performed where they may have once been actively relayed. It also seems as if speaking about these events and experiences has come to represent a form of excess.”¹⁴

One more Ramallah scene from *The Time That Remains*, mentioned in passing earlier, illuminates what it is that Suleiman’s style achieves in this respect.¹⁵ The scene below may not be the richest one in *The Time That Remains* - but in its transcending of cliché by its staging *in silence*, it is especially suggestive of how best to represent another, more coded variety of the life of ‘these events and experiences’ – those of 1948 – in the present.

The scene is a party in second *intifada*-era Ramallah. (This alone would be an arrow aimed at the clichéd representation of that era - were it not, again, that Ramallah’s party scene has, in recent years, become such a staple of *New York Times* pieces on the West Bank, displacing further coverage of, say, Gaza.) The full-glass frontage of a discothèque, “Stones,” reveals Ramallah’s “beautiful people” gyrating to house music, above an empty street at night. An Israeli army jeep pulls up slowly outside, ignored from inside. A soldier announces on his loudspeaker: “To the inhabitants of Ramallah: curfew, curfew.” The party continues without a beat - rather, with only dance beats to be heard. As the soldier repeats his warning, persistently ignored, his voice seems to blend with the music, the soldier and/or his words moving in rhythm with it - but ambiguously still: this remains the viewer’s interpretation, not a straight fact on screen open to immediate processing as such. The camera cuts to the scene of Suleiman leaping the Wall.

The scene exhibits Suleiman’s most precious quality precisely because it is the

one that ostensibly comes most dangerously close to metaphor – i.e., in Palestinian context, to the potentially fatal dangers of cliché. And yet, by somehow sustaining reticence in interpretation – the self-underlining absence of speech in a cacophony of dance music and the threatening blaring of a military loudspeaker, analogous to that of the absent commentary on the Nazareth television screen – the danger is averted, even as the perils of appearing precious by ignoring *intifada* cliché altogether *merely because it is cliché* are also circumvented. Anything, everything – and, all-importantly, as close to nothing (i.e. to the banal) as is possible in military occupation – could be happening in this scene. It could be happening simultaneously; and it could reflect both well and badly, politically and humanly, upon both parties. There is, or could be, both bourgeois/youth resistance and a portentous habituation to violence or, worse, to occupation.¹⁶ There is, or could be, both the empathy of the young soldier with his partying Palestinian counterparts – and his blindness to the vulgarity of such empathy from his own position as agent of structural violence. At least one general truth is present, and it is the major one: that of military occupation, and, with it, of the *nakba*. The specific truths are left open, all the richer for the fact that the spectator knows their full potential, no less rich if they do not. The sliding scale of what the audience brings to what is on screen, and how much it matters that they should have something to bring, is near-perfectly calibrated. The political valence is a function of this; the aesthetic valence is immune to it. The balance that has preoccupied Palestinian artists – the “unfair relation between the cultural question and the political question”¹⁷ of which *jeel al-thawra* (the intermediate, revolution-generation) poets may especially complain – is, for a moment at least, resolved by the necessity of spectator participation. Suleiman, best left unglossed, on silence:

... silence itself actually has a site that is so undefined in our life, in our spiritual life, and it has a very political territory. If you're silent so many times it's so destabilizing to power structures. They would beat you in order to talk. And silence also does not have a center. Silence is something that the spectator can participate in. You can fill in the space if you want. I take pleasure from the spectator participating in the making of the film...¹⁸

Any overly self-conscious attempt at a faithful artistic or creative rendering of Palestinian experience runs the particular risk of cliché, in its broadest sense of failure of mimesis. The means of production of viewer attention in Palestinian film is thus, in *The Time that Remains*, not the absence of cliché, but its subversion; not railing against cliché – railing against it being itself by now perhaps a cliché – but sublimating it, and staging its sublimation.

To the extent that Palestinian art is to aspire to faithfulness in every moment, every frame, every image – the aspiration is to the kinds of truth embodied in painting or photography. What it is that Suleiman's best scenes approximate, however, is not

photographs, but postcards, the most potent of which is the recurrent long take of his mother on her Nazareth balcony at various ages, framed through the same window. The slightest didactic excess would shatter this equilibrium. The mark of successful mimesis in this context is, I have suggested, to stage one's abstention from such excess: an art and craft that Suleiman has by now perfected even while engaging the Palestinian story at its core – and, unlike in his previous films, through something akin to conventional linear narrative. It is tempting, then, to consider the possibility that perhaps only film, with its unique means of staging silence, can do this showing-without-telling, inasmuch as the moving image – necessarily, to some extent – contains the widest range to approximate the Palestinian experience in general, and the refugee experience in particular. How far this defies verbal description is captured by the Palestinian writer Adania Shibli's review of Kamal Aljafari's *Port of Memory* (2010):

What it shows is essentially visual, something no written poem could even envision. I too will not commit the crime of trying to write about the film; this is a work that can only be seen, not talked about; all that can be said is that it brings cinema to a place beyond the question of fiction, documentary and video art. Not only that; it does so as if no camera were there, or there were a camera without a man – the invisibility here is of film itself.¹⁹

One cannot, of course, avoid the crime of trying to write about film, as one cannot avoid the crime of trying to write about silence; notwithstanding Michael Wood's gloss, in his *Children of Silence*, of "the notion that silence is what literature longs for but can't reach, not only because its very condition is language but because a complicated fidelity to silence is one of literature's most attractive attainments."²⁰ In Palestinian context, this might best be read into the characteristics of recent Palestinian literature, outlined by the leading Palestinian literary critic Faisal Darraj as consisting in

... three features: a decision to limit the effort to describing representative lives in stark detail and as they are lived, exposed and bare, and remote from any optimistic – or pessimistic – ideologies and wishful thinking; a decision to remain rooted in the bleak everyday, day in and day out lives of their characters, almost as in a nightmare and without any referral to a near or distant future; and finally, the extinguishing of any and all certainty, replacing it with doubt, possibility, and expectation-less waiting.²¹

Suleiman's work suggests like no other that the medium for these features may not be writing or speech, but silence. It may be that here, if only here, film can do what literature can only aspire to, nor even perhaps envision: refrain from describing Suleiman's mother's hand never quite matching his expectation; letting silence do its work.

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Endnotes

- 1 I thank Sameen Gauhar for comments on this article; Kamal Aljafari for talking through these themes, often; and Paul Aarons and Wasseem al-Sarraj of the Tida institute in Gaza.
- 2 Interview with Amanda Palmer, "The Fabulous Picture Show," *Al-Jazeera English*, 14 January 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zH8sEJbatrw&has_verified=1
- 3 Mahmoud Darwish, *Fi Hadrat al-Ghiyab* (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes, 2006), 168; trans. Mohammed Shaheen, *Absent Presence* (London: Hesperus, 2010), 114.
- 4 M. Darwish, *Athar al-Farasha. Yawmiyyat* ["The Butterfly Effect. Diaries"] (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 2008) [in Arabic].
- 5 Including the film adaptation by Qasem Hawl (1982), which, although not by a Palestinian, is an early candidate for the first Palestinian fiction feature. The original print fell victim to the storied disappearance of the PLO film archive during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982. (The first Palestinian fiction feature is often held to be the Palestinian-Israeli Michel Khleifi's *Urs al-Jalil* ["Wedding in Galilee,"] (1987)).
- 6 E.W. Said, 'The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals' in H. Small, ed., *The Public Intellectual* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 31
- 7 L. Butler, "A Cinema of Nowhere: an Interview with Elia Suleiman," *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXIX, 2 (Winter 2000), 68.
- 8 The character played by Suleiman in the film is henceforth referred to as ES, his name in the credits.
- 9 Interview from the *Time That Remains* DVD
- 10 M. Darwish, *Athar al-Farasha. Yawmiyyat*, 57 (translation by Catherine Cobham: M. Darwish, *A River Dies of Thirst: Journals* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2009), 25 (italics mine.).
- 11 S. Haider, "A Different Kind of Occupation": an interview with Elia Suleiman', *Electronic Intifada*, 1 February 2010.
- 12 S. Haider (italics mine).
- 13 M. Darwish, *Athar al-farasha*, 60.
- 14 D. Allan, "The Politics of Witness: Remembering and Forgetting 1948 in Shateela Camp," in A. H. S'adi and L. Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba. Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 261.
- 15 The last scene of *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, in which Suleiman's parents are silently asleep in front of the TV playing the Israeli national anthem, has a good claim to be the most touching in the history of Palestinian cinema.
- 16 The Bureij *shabab* mentioned earlier were, tellingly, thoroughly unimpressed by the notion that dancing under curfew might be considered a form of resistance by any Palestinian.
- 17 Interview with a *jeel al-thawra* poet, Ramallah, 2 February 2006.
- 18 Interview with Amanda Palmer, *Al-Jazeera English*, *ibid*.
- 19 www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/exclusive/palestine_film_festival_2010.php
- 20 Michael Wood, *Children of Silence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1
- 21 F. Darraj, "Transformations in Palestinian Literature," *Words Without Borders*, November 2006 (italics mine).