Palestinian anti-narratives in the films of Elia Suleiman

By Refqa Abu-Remaileh

May, 2008. The ongoing nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has had a marked effect on Palestinian literature and film. Palestine has been and continues to be an intensely political and politicized subject matter. As the youngest of the art forms to treat the conflict, the medium of film raises a number of questions on art and politics. With many claiming that wars are being fought as much on our TV screens and in the media as they are on the ground, documentaries and fiction films have played a vital role in challenging stereotyped media images of the conflict.

In this paper I will focus on the Palestinian-Israeli filmmaker Elia Suleiman, whose films have pioneered a reflective meditative cinematic language, introducing a new visual vocabulary to images of the conflict. Born in Nazareth in 1960, Suleiman began by making short films in the early 1990s during his self-imposed exile in New York. He later resettled in Jerusalem, out of which emerged his two full-length fiction films, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) and *Divine Intervention* (2002). Suleiman's hallmarks are non-linear episodic narratives that rely less on plot and characterization and more on the combination of film structure, editing and soundtrack to create meaning. The emphasis on form and the non-verbal is in stark contrast to many other Palestinian films where the spoken word plays an important role, and understandably so. The oral tradition surrounding the conflict is brimming with stories waiting to be told, documented or covered. In fact, the ongoing occupation of Palestinians is like a story-factory, with countless stories being produced every day.

It is not surprising then that many Palestinian films are 'issue-films.' The majority of films are documentaries dealing with issues ranging from the wall, the checkpoints, the second Intifada, the siege of Ramallah, to exploring the echoes of the 1948 *Nakba*. Many of these documentaries are also very personal films – the filmmakers, especially those

working in the West Bank, have based their films on their own stories, often tracing family history and interviewing their friends, parents and grandparents. The need for these films is made more urgent by the limited and biased media coverage of the conflict. In the West Bank and Gaza, where the Israeli occupation is more visible, there is a strong inclination to relay a clear message, often in reportage-style films, to expose Palestinian suffering at the hands of the occupation. This makes the films politically more overt with a clear structure that serves the purpose of exposing the issue at hand.

In an interview, Suleiman distinguishes between two kinds of occupation: a more "overt" occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, and a "psychological" occupation in the Palestinian areas that were occupied in 1948 and are now part of Israel.

> The occupation of 1948, is no longer militaristic, there's no longer a military government with tanks and soldiers in the streets and all that. It's become psychological, economic, denial of rights, humiliation in all its forms, and it's manifested in the film [*Divine Intervention*] by the ghetto atmosphere. [...] In the 1967 territories, obviously, the occupation is overt. It's as blunt and pornographic as it was for the 1948 Palestinians, but with the difference of time. So in 1967 that same process started in another border – expropriation and annexation of land, a large emigration of Palestinians right after the war, and so on.[i]

The overt occupation is more tangible, more visible, and the flurry of Palestinian documentaries since the second Intifada have documented many of its aspects. However, the "psychological occupation" Suleiman talks about is more difficult to represent – it is an occupation that has seeped into the mind and body and cannot be captured with the same immediacy as in an image of a checkpoint for example.

Set in Nazareth and Jerusalem, both *Chronicle* and *Divine Intervention* probe the psychological and the existential in a manner unfamiliar to Palestinian films up to that point. With their modernist aesthetic, Suleiman's films are seen as very much part of the foreign film circuit, making the rounds at international film festivals. However, my research focuses on situating an analysis of Suleiman's films in a Palestinian filmmaking, literary and intellectual context. Suleiman's films speak to other Palestinian films – the plethora of overt images of the occupation in documentary and other films act as invisible footnotes to Suleiman's politically-subtle images, creating space for experimentation and meditation.

In this paper I will look at several aspects of Suleiman's style and technique. First, I will take two examples of staple images and techniques used in Palestinian films, first the image of the checkpoint, followed by the prevalent use of the interview technique, and investigate Suleiman's variations on these aspects. I will then move on to Suleiman's exposition of 'negative spaces,' and the idea of presence by virtue of absence. Finally, I will look at Suleiman's exploration of the notion of time, and the concept *al-'awda* (return).

Before moving on to discuss checkpoints, a brief outline of *Divine Intervention* and *Chronicle* is in order. It is difficult to give a summary of the plot of these two feature films because of the non-linear, episodic nature of the narrative, however, on a structural level, both films are divided in two parts. The first part is set in Nazareth, entitled "Part I: Nazareth, Personal Diary" in *Chronicle* and "Nazareth" in *Divine Intervention*. The second part is set in Jerusalem, entitled "Part II: Jerusalem: Political Diary" in *Chronicles* and "Jerusalem" in *Divine Intervention*.

The Nazareth sections are based on a series of vignettes of daily life, giving a sense of the ghetto-like existence of the Palestinians living in Nazareth. The Jerusalem sections are the less static sections, both in terms of camerawork and content. The link between the two sections in *Chronicle* is Suleiman's character, ES, who decides to move into an East Jerusalem flat: "I moved to Jerusalem to be closer to the airport," ES types on his computer screen. In *Divine Intervention*, ES presumably continues to live in Jerusalem. In addition, a third in-between space is introduced in Divine Intervention – the checkpoint, demarcating a space between Jerusalem and the West Bank, where ES meets his West Bank Palestinian girlfriend. Despite the similarities in film structure, there are marked differences, as well as a crucial time gap of six years, between the two films, which are interesting to investigate as the subject of a future paper.

1. Checkpoints

A number of scenes in *Divine Intervention* are set at *hajiz al-Ram* (al-Ram checkpoint). The first of these 'checkpoint' scenes is an establishing scene which

introduces this new geography/place of checkpoints. Later checkpoint scenes revolve around the meetings of ES and his West Bank girlfriend at the checkpoint car park.

The first checkpoint sequence is in stark contrast to the claustrophobic Nazareth episodes that directly preceded it. As we move closer to the West Bank, we move closer to a more overt, visible form of occupation. This is also an external occupation, which has not managed to seep into the minds and bodies of the people. Unlike the static Nazareth space, this in-between space on the edge of the checkpoint offers some space for the imagination. As we can see from the clip of this scene, it is a space where there can be some experimentation and creativity with the film image, especially in relation to ideas of resistance and defiance. **[Video: checkpoint scene from *Divine Intervention*: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iaHO1rj5MY]**

The scene begins with the commotion, noise, and crowds we often see in checkpoint scenes. However, we soon realize this scene is not what we expected. First, and most striking, is the camera work. Unlike the static framing in the Nazareth scenes, here we get a beautiful crane shot, reaching as high as the tower and descending to ground level by the foot of the car. This is a highly deliberate and controlled image – not the unpredictable handheld camerawork of documentary footage of checkpoints. With the descent of the camera the soundtrack goes very silent, except for the sound of swishing – a kind of magical hush which is unusual in checkpoint scenes. A woman emerges out of the car and the soundtrack is taken over by the first piece of non-diegetic music in the film as she begins her defiant walk. However, this is more of a glamorous catwalk compared to what we might expect defiance and resistance to look like.

What is most unusual about this scene is the way Suleiman integrates the fantastical into the narrative, let alone a checkpoint scene. There are none of the usual blurring or flashback techniques used to denote dream or fantasy sequences in Suleiman. Instead, it is through the fluid camerawork, combined with the catwalk performance, the improbability of the tower collapsing and the soldiers letting the woman pass that we get hints of the fantastical. But, whose fantasy is this? As it turns out, Suleiman's character, ES, is quite the day-dreamer and this scene may have been a figment of his imagination.

Even though the meeting scenes between ES and his West Bank girlfriend are set at the checkpoint, the way the checkpoint is represented is markedly different from the

documentary representations of checkpoints viewers of Palestinian films often see. What we see as viewers is only what the characters see. The camerawork in these scenes focuses on the characters and the silent love story between ES and his girlfriend. Despite the fact that the lovers never say anything to each other, the camerawork focuses on the shot-reverse shot of an implied conversation, albeit a non-verbal one, through glances and facial expressions. Only when the characters look ahead at the checkpoint does the camera cut to a view of what they see from the car. Thus, as viewers we are twice removed from the checkpoint. Simultaneously, we become involved with the characters as witnesses of the injustices that take place before their eyes. This structural distance emphasizes the love story, and does not allow the image of the checkpoint to overpower the simple humanity of two lovers meeting, which in turn highlights the inhumanity of the checkpoint. **[Figures 1-15]**

2**. Anti-Interviews**

Suleiman blurs the boundaries between documentary and fiction, especially in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, where the interview, the staple of many documentary films, is given a bit of a twist, with the effect of challenging viewers' preconceptions of the kind of information the interviews may be present them with. In the Nazareth scenes (Part I) there are three disconnected scenes set up as interviews and another in the Jerusalem, Part II scenes. Except for the first interview, all others are given the label of *mi`ad* (appointment with...).

   a) **The Mother [Figure 16]**

The first of the three, despite being set up as an interview, is actually what I would call an 'anti-interview,' especially if we are to look at it in a Palestinian film context. The shot opens with a still of a living room and at the centre of the frame, a couch. Enter ES's mother. She sits on one side of the couch and proceeds to recount the towns' gossip, peppered with her unforgiving comments - all this before heading out to pay her condolences to the very same people she verbally slaughtered. She ends her monologue ironically with, "It's better if one stays silent and doesn't say anything."

What is interesting about this scene is that it is Suleiman's interview-the-parents opportunity, which many Palestinian filmmakers have taken up.[ii] Yet, Suleiman does not engage his mother in "telling" us a story – possibly her experiences of 1948, perhaps stories of dispossession, war, or even memories of pre-1948 Palestine. From the very beginning, we encounter a resistance to traditional storytelling techniques. Suleiman is less interested in excavating the past and more interested in interrogating the present. The recounting of town gossip is in fact a piercing insight into human relations, and paves the way for further psychological explorations of a people living in claustrophobic Nazareth.

b) The Priest [Figure 17]

In the first *mi`ad* scenes, entitled "*mi`ad ma` abouna*" (appointment with the priest), ES takes a trip to Lake Tiberias, where he interviews a Greek orthodox priest in a beautiful monastery overlooking the lake. The scene is set up like an interview, however, the content of what the priest says and his language are not what we might have expected. For example, his comments on tourism in the Holyland, he says (in Greek):

> That's where Jesus is said to have walked over water. Now it's a gastronomic sewer, filled with excrement, shit of American and German tourists, who eat Chinese food. It forms a crust on the surface of the lake. Anyone can walk over water and make miracles now.

The interview with the priest does not try to give us the information we might expect, for example, more pointed comments on the religious dimensions of the conflict, interfaith dialogue or something along these lines. Instead, it emphasizes a recurring idea in both films, the idea that the land is being stripped of its holiness, and hence stripped of its title, The Holyland. In *Chronicle,* we discover that the The Holyland is but a souvenir shop, not even visited by the tourists. When a group of Japanese tourists walk past the shop and one of them decides to stop momentarily and take a snapshot of the souvenir shop with the owners (ES and his cousin) sitting at the doorstep, that is when we realize that ES and his cousin have themselves become Holyland relics, fit for a postcard picture.

c) The Writer [Figure 18]

The next *mi`ad* is entitled "Appointment with the Writer: a story that could be made into a film." Similar to the set-up with the mother, here we get a static frame with an armchair. The writer walks in and sits on the chair and begins, "I visited Grandpa who was in the Turkish army for three years... 'Grandpa, tell me a story about Istanbul,'" the young writer had asked his grandfather. His grandfather proceeds to tell him a story about how wonderful the food was in Istanbul, detailing the deliciously spiced lamb's head that he would eat:

> Here's a story you'll never forget. Istanbul is the flower of all cities, it is unique. There's nothing like the food there anywhere else in the world. We were stationed 15 minutes away from Istanbul. At noon, we had lentils with worms which I couldn't eat. I had 5 coins, and would cross the street, pass by the bookshop and the clothes shop until I reached the public garden. There, a man with sparking pans cooked lamb heads, nicely spiced, with saffron and all. He'd serve me a head in two hot loaves of bread. I'd sit on the nearest bench, eat, throw the remains in the bin and go home. The beauty of Istanbul is beyond comparison.

A few years later, the grandfather tells the same story, embellishing the details of the lamb's head dish with more spices. After many years of the grandfather's dispossession in Lebanon, he was finally allowed to visit Nazareth again, and being prompted by the same question, he would yet again, despite all the time that had passed and all the suffering he had endured, tell the same story about the lamb's head made with pepper, saffron and nutmeg.

This is an unusual interview in terms of what is being narrated. It takes us back to pre-1948 Ottoman rule of Palestine, which is why the grandfather was posted to Istanbul as a young soldier. Yet again, our expectations and preconceptions as viewers are challenged. The writer, while recounting his grandfather's story, mentions what he expected, or wanted, the story to be about. "I thought he'd tell me a story with young people, adventure, and a tall green eyed girl..." – the kind of escapist adventure narrative a young boy would ask his grandfather to recount. We as viewers might have expected the writer, who is in fact Taha Muhammad Ali, a well-known poet from the Galilee, to make pointed comments on the situation, history, politics, poetry and literature. Instead, he tells a very repetitive story, based on his grandfather's memory which becomes an

elaborate culinary fantasy over time. As with many other scenes, it is left open to interpretation. One interpretation would be the idea of returning to the same story despite the passage of time – the idea of "return" and cyclical time are integrated into Suleiman's film structure. If we pursue this interpretation a little further, the scene emphasizes the non-literal nature of these interviews, and the disjunction between their content and their intended meaning, a gap which the viewer is prompted to fill in.

d) The Real-Estate Agent [Figure 19]

The last of the scenes given the title of *mi`ad* is "*mi`ad ma` al-simsar: dar lil ijar fi shariqiy al-quds*" (appointment with the real-estate agent: a flat for rent in East Jerusalem). The scene opens with the camera focusing on the real-estate agent. At first it appears that the scene is set up as an interview until we realize that the real-estate agent is in the middle of a conversation, and from his Arabic use of feminine pronouns and gendered verb conjugations, we understand that he is not addressing ES but a female presence. The frame cuts and we get another shot, this time from the hallway outside where we see ES flipping through a magazine waiting for his turn. **[Figure 20]** The scene closes and we don't get to see ES's appointment with the estate agent. Again, we might have expected the man to speak about the difficulties facing Palestinians in East Jerusalem, especially relating to land, housing, permits, bulldozing of houses built without permits, and so on. Instead, the scene reveals hypocritical traditionalism in Palestinian society. The real-estate agent lectures the woman in his office by citing notions of honor, all the while inappropriately flirting with her:

> Think of me as your father. We are Arabs. We have our traditions. If a girl wants to study, she should stay with her parents until she marries, so her honor is safe. You, God bless you, you're tall and pretty, you're 20 or 22. What more do you want? […] You're a nice girl, well bred, and very pretty too. I'm worried about you. I have room for many a friend. Everybody knows me and respects me here, you know. So?

The scene ends on that note, while in the hallway ES is passively flipping through a magazine. As well as the pointed social commentary, this scene is not just an anti-interview in a documentary sense but also has a narrative function of connecting ES to

Adan, the young woman at the office, whom we see again in later scenes set in Jerusalem.

The Promised Land [Figure 21 and 22]

The last time the word *mi`ad* appears as a title in *Chronicle* is closer to the end. The black title screen reads: "*Ard al-mi`ad*" translated as "the promised land." The frame opens with a long road running down the centre of the frame in the midst of a desert. Here, the use of the word 'mi`ad' evokes an association with the other appointments. The root of the word is *wa`d*, a promise, and hence a *mi`ad* is an appointment based on a promise. This final 'appointment' is with the land itself. The subject of this appointment or interview – the land – however, cannot speak. Instead, the soundtrack speaks with non-diegetic music: Natacha Atlas' song, "Why do we fight?" with lyrics along the lines of, "Let's return to peace, let's find love again/with God's mercy, let's make peace we are brothers. May God bless you…."

As outlined above, the interviews do not conform to our expectation of what they might "tell" us. Suleiman's films defy telling the linear, chronological story of Palestine. In fact, apart from the interviews mentioned above, the film is very silent, and when there is speech, it is often in the form of a monologue. This highlights a unique aspect of film – the possibility of representing the non-verbal story, which Suleiman masters. Information and meaning are not offered to the viewer without a process of piecing things together. It is rather through an analysis of structure, editing and reading in between the frames, so to speak, that we may catch a glimpse of meaning. The images and sequences are deliberately made so that they can be interpreted on various different levels. Hamid Dabashi sums it up concisely in *Dreams of a Nation*:

> By opting for an active dismantling of all teleological manners of storytelling, [Suleiman] disrupted all the stories that had ever been told – all resolutions, conclusions, certainties. He dismantled the very act of storytelling.[iii]

3. Negative Space

Suleiman's films crack open the Palestinian story, directing the camera at the spaces between the cracks, and thus accessing what can be called the 'negative space' around the more commonly narrated moments of Palestinian life. Negative space is the idea in art that a shape can take on its form by shading around it rather than drawing or painting the shape itself. The interviews discussed above do not aim to 'fill us in' on the conflict, but are more concerned with an existential and psychological excavation of the present. The present is of course dependent on the past, however, there is a distinct absence of a sense of monumental history or past in Suleiman's films. Both *Chronicle* and *Divine Intervention* (which has the subtitle "a chronicle of love and pain") are chronicles of a present rather than a past. The intense focus on the present, including the very mundane present, creates a series of 'anti-moments' that do not usually make it into the narratives on the lives of the Palestinians, mainly because they are overpowered by other moments that are considered more urgent subjects for representation. These strings of anti-moments skirt around the story of the conflict, which is, in many ways, told by not being told in the conventional narrative style.

Suleiman's films seek a return in terms of filmmaking to a fresh canvas where characters, images and scenes of Palestinian and the Palestinians do not carry the burden of national representation. The representation of the nation or ideas of nationhood are not character-based in Suleiman's films. There are no obvious correlations between characters and national tropes they might represent. There is a move away from character-based narratives towards more experimental representations of ideas through structure, camerawork, soundtrack and the selection of scenes. This process disperses meaning across all levels of filmmaking, which then requires an engaged and thoughtful viewing process. **[Figures 23 and 24]**

Presence by virtue of absence

In Suleiman's films, the story of the Palestinians is present by virtue of its narrative absence. In dedicating so much time to seemingly ordinary events, Suleiman is recording the minute details of Palestinian existence. Stringing together scenes of the ordinary (the anti-moments), Suleiman gives form to the story he does not want to

narrate. In this way, Suleiman signifies the presence of something by recording its supposed absence. This is a structural pun on the absurd idea of Palestinians who are considered by an Israeli law as "present-absentees." This law applies to one quarter of 1948 Palestinians who are present in Israel but are considered absent as far as their property is concerned, and by extension, their existence[iv].

     Using this reverse logic, in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* Suleiman is in effect recording existence, not disappearance. Suleiman sets up the equivalent of a visual pun on the Zionist slogan of "a land without a people for a people without a land" in the comic raid scene, where Israeli policemen break into ES's Jerusalem flat but do not seem to notice him. In their assignment report the Israeli policemen seem more interested in ES's property than him. After the raid, we hear the following police report over the transmitter:

> Crow to One: two front doors, four doors, four windows, a balcony, a fan, a phone, a picture with a hen, four seats...old wooden chairs, a computer, a stereo, a desk, two wicker armchairs, a Japanese textbook, a painting with tulips, a white painting, Sonallah Ibrahim...Carver, Karl Kraus, a fishing kit, Mustapha Qamar, Samira Said, Raghib Alama, nylon curtains, a guy in pyjamas. Over.

The Israeli police are in effect recording ES's non-existence despite his presence on the screen by giving more importance to objects in their report. ES is listed last, "a guy in pyjamas" last in the hierarchy after "nylon curtains." The Israeli policemen hijacking the soundscape, via reports exchanged on the transmitter after the raid, with their own subjective version of what they saw. However, we, as viewers also witnessed the scene and become aware of the disjunction between the visual and the oral, i.e. the difference between what we see and what we hear.

     This scene problematizes the question of whose disappearance the film is chronicling, and who the chronicler is. These questions, in typical Suleiman fashion, are left open, and also give rise to a larger question: how do you chronicle disappearance? [**Figure 25 -27**]

4. On Time

With the conflict not yet the sole property of history, the past merges into the present, creating a new tense, an ongoing "eternal present," while a sense of the future or even a vision of the future remains absent. There is a telling shot in *Homage by Assassination* (1991), Suleiman's short film, which gives the sense of being in a time warp. It is a shot of two clocks on a wall, one is set on New York time and the other to Nazareth time. The camera comes back to these clocks on the wall throughout the film and we realize that time has not moved at all despite the fact that we hear the incessant ticking of a clock in the soundtrack. Time passes, but, paradoxically, does not move.

This tension of a present that is bearing all the weight of history and the past, as well as under pressure to produce a future, is mirrored in Suleiman's non-linear structure and the perpetual layering of repetitive scenes. The present is not sustainable, it is bursting at the seams with the pressure of the other two tenses using it as a place of refuge. It is bound to explode, but, when, and how? The last scene in *Divine Intervention* is a warning. It opens with ES and his mother sitting in the kitchen looking at a pressure cooker on the stove. His mother finally says, *bikaffeeha*, "it's had enough." **[Figure 28]** The repetitive structure of both *Chronicle* and *Divine Intervention* draws attention to an alternative, cyclical, vision of time as opposed to linear time. The notion of cyclical time resonates with the concept of return (*al-'awda*), which has been important in Palestinian literature and film. In fact, this dream of return remains very much at the heart of Palestinian society and is central to the right of return of refugees.

Suleiman treats the notion of return more overtly in his short films. In both *Homage* and *Cyber Palestine* (2000) he experiments with a virtual return. In *Homage*, which was made during his exile and set during the first Gulf War, we see ES in his New York apartment inseparable from all his communication devices, his computer, fax machine, phone, etc., which, unfortunately, are not able to connect him to his parents in Nazareth. Being in exile, ES experiments with the idea of a virtual return – if only it is as simple as pressing the "return" key on the keyboard. In an extreme close-up, we see ES tapping the "return" key on the keyboard to the voice of a Gamal Abd al-Nasser in a speech about "*tahrir al-ard al-muhtalla*" (liberating the occupied lands).

In *Cyber Palestine*, a tale of a modern-day Mary and Joseph, we see Joseph searching on a Yahoo! search page for "cyber Palestine." The camera focuses on the

computer screen and we see an advertisement flickering, "Get your Web Address before someone else does." The webpage "Palestine" is "Under Construction," we discover. When Joseph gets a message from Gabriel (via mobile phone) to take Mary back to Bethlehem where she will give birth, he clicks on "Home" on the web browser, which takes him to the Palestine webpage, and then grabs a large old key and takes off with Mary on a motorcycle. In this modern adaptation of the story, Mary and Joseph are in Gaza, the modern-day Nazareth, and make a journey through checkpoints to Bethlehem. With the scattered Palestinian territories and the difficulties of a journey from Gaza to Bethlehem (also recalling the difficulties of the New Testament version), Palestine becomes a virtual entity. But even on the web Palestine is not whole and is under construction, and thus the concept of a virtual return is also difficult.

By the time of *Divine Intervention* a treatment of the concept of return is more strained. Suleiman strips the concept of '*awda* to its present day form, and his feature films raise the question: "what does the concept of '*awda* mean today?" The repetitions and the cyclical time mostly return to the same scenes or a deterioration of those scenes, especially in the Nazareth sections, and do not lead to a return to a pre-1948 Palestine. It seems that the concept of return is suspended in time, just as time itself seems to have become suspended in an ongoing present.

Conclusion

Elia Suleiman's idea of overt and psychological occupation inform his film style and structure. The checkpoint, for example, has become a staple image of overt occupation in the flurry of Palestinian documentaries since the second Intifada. In Suleiman's *Divine Intervention*, the presence of the checkpoint is resisted through a highly controlled film image, where the love story between ES and his West Bank girlfriend takes precedence over the inhumanity and cruelty of the checkpoint.

Suleiman's feature films explore the psychological depths of the less visible occupation – that of the Palestinians inside Israel. I have used the example of the anti-interview in Suleiman's films to demonstrate the blurring of documentary and fiction genres and a marked resistance to storytelling, which challenge our expectations as

viewers. We are not presented with a silver platter of images and told "this is Palestine, and these are the Palestinians." In fact, we as viewers need to fill the gap between the image, the content of what is recounted, and shuffle through possible meanings of those interview scenes. In the interview with his mother, Suleiman reveals an interest not in excavating the past but in interrogating the present. Through a layering of shots of the old monastery, with images of huge modern structures along Lake Tiberias, and the buzzing drone of jetskis on the lake, the Greek Orthodox priest tells us of the stripping of holiness from the Holyland. The Holyland is but a souvenir shop, and the Palestinians a relic. I also looked at the scenes of the appointment with the writer, the real-estate agent and, finally, the land itself, which reveal that meaning is not overt and is not available at the surface of an image or in the content of a dialogue.

Suleiman chooses to represent the cracks in the story – the negative space – rather than the story itself. He uses visual puns to challenge the absurd idea of the "present-absentees" and "a land without a people" – recording disappearance is in fact recording existence. This is highlighted in the comic raid scene in *Chronicle*, where ES is considered by Israeli police as secondary to his property and belongings and deemed almost non-existent despite his presence on the screen.

Finally, I suggested an unsustainable merging of tenses into a Palestinian present where the past and future have sought refuge. The idea of "return" that most Palestinian refugees hold on to dearly creates a sense of cyclical time as opposed to linear time. Suleiman experiments with the idea of a virtual return, however, even as a webpage Palestine is "under construction." In *Divine Intervention*, Suleiman's re-interrogation of the concept of the '*awda* reveals a loss of temporality as it gets stuck in an ongoing Palestinian present.

Refqa Abu-Remaileh *is a DPhil candidate in Modern Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford, working on the films of Elia Suleiman and the literary works of Emile Habibi.*

Appendix

Figure 1: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). (Feature film). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 2: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 3: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 4: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 5: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 6: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 7: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 8: Rana's Wedding (al-Quds fi Yawm Akhar). Dir. Hany Abu Asad, 2002

Figure 9: What's Next? (Doc) Dir. Ghada Terawi, 2006

Figure 10: What's Next? (Doc) Dir. Ghada Terawi, 2006

Figure 11: Divine Intervention, 2002. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 12: Divine Intervention, 2002. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 13: Divine Intervention, 2002. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 14: Divine Intervention, 2002. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 15: Divine Intervention, 2002. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 16: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 17: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 18: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 19: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 20: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 21: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 22: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 23: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure24: Divine Intervention, 2002. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 25: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 26: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 27: Chronicle of a Disappearance, 1996. Dir. Elia Suleiman

Figure 28: Divine Intervention, 2002. Dir. Elia Suleiman

---

[i] Elia Suleiman, "The Occupation (and Life) through an Absurdist Lens," Journal of Palestine Studies, vol. 32, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 70.

[ii] A recent example is Enas Muthaffar's *East to West*, 2005.

[iii] Hamid Dabashi, "In Praise of Frivolty: On the Cinema of Elia Suleiman," in *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema,* ed Hamid Dabashi, (London, New York: Verso, 2006): 160.

[iv] This law meant that Palestinians who fled their homes during the 1948 war but were able to come back after the war could not go back to their own homes and villages which became property of the new state of Israel. Thus, they were considered, paradoxically, present on the land but supposedly absent from their homes.