

The Continuity of Trauma and Struggle: recent cinematic representations of the *Nakbah*

Lecture By Haim Bresheeth at the Kyoto University, Feb1st, 2009

This article examines the cinematic narratives of loss and trauma, centered around the 1948 *Nakba*, and their relationship to the continuing traumas of occupation and oppression by the Israeli forces. The prevalence of *Nakba* themes in recent Palestinian cinema, and the connections made in those films to the second *Intifada*, seem to point out that the *Nakba* is not a mere memory, or a trauma of the past; instead, these films seem to suggest both a *continuity of pain and trauma*, ranging from the past and reaching into the heart of the present, as well as a *continuity of struggle* – the losses of the *Nakba* firing the continued resistance to Israeli occupation and subjugation. The resolution of trauma is the struggle itself, the films seem to tell us. Thus, this article will examine the links between memory, trauma, and identity in the context of *Al Nakba*, but also the *Intifada* as the icon for the continued Palestinian struggle for liberation. As these lines are written, it seems clear that the struggle of Palestinians to liberate their country and rebuild their society has become the iconic struggle of the new millennium – equaling the special place occupied on the international arena by the

Anti-Apartheid campaign¹. This struggle seems to have become an icon of anti-Globalization, and the struggle against the New American Century project, thus its implications spread far beyond the Middle East.

The Economy of Pain: Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*

Memory is at the root cause of trauma, Freud tells us, but is also the source of its resolution. In one of his later works (Freud, 1920), he outlines how the pain of reliving the events leading to the trauma, may in turn hold the key for a gradual return to the normality of the Pleasure Principle. Mourning, and the mourning work, Freud tells us (1917), is crucial for the return to the normal life. Those who are not able, or not allowed to mourn, may well lapse into a pathological state, such as melancholia. Freud writes of “the economics of pain” when designating mourning as a reaction “to a loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (Freud, 1917:252). In analyzing the causes and course of the mourning process, he outlines the self-denial which is socially-normalized into it, and sanctioned by society, contrasting it with the same manifestation in the melancholic, where this denial has become pathological, fixated, and damaging to the self, instead of being an agent of healing, as in the case of the “mourning work.” The link made by Freud between the self, a loved person, and “one’s

country” and “liberty” is of special interest to us when examining films that also juxtapose such entities in their narrative structure. Freud clearly distinguishes between mourning – a normal process that duly ends, and melancholia – a pathology that may destroy the subject.

One of the most interesting differences between the mourning process and the pathological loops of melancholia, is the fact that the latter may well be triggered by a loss of what he calls an ‘ideal kind’: “...one can recognize that there is a loss of a more ideal kind. The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love.” (Freud, 1917:253) Hence, the loss that may trigger melancholia is not necessarily a death, but a loss akin to the one we are discussing in the films under discussion here. After all, the country is still there, and thus the loss continues, gets fixated, cannot be mourned and done with, as in the case of death. The loss of one’s country *never ends*. It is even more pronounced when the loss is experienced *in situ* – while living in the lost country.

So what would become of whole societies where mourning is prevented? Where coming to terms with the loss is not an option? What of societies whose loss and catastrophe have been covered up, hidden away and systematically erased?

One such example is clearly the Palestinian society; it has been reeling from its great loss of country, freedom and autonomy ever since 1948 - since the formative event in its history, the *Nakbah*, or the great catastrophe, took place.

Recent Palestinian cinema and the memory of the *Nakbah*

In this talk I shall be relating mainly to six films produced by three Palestinian filmmakers, all Israeli citizens², dealing with recent history, memory and narrative. By examining such films emerging around the 50th anniversary of the Nakba, we can identify common characteristics and definitive factors, relating them to historical data – the history of telling and retelling the *Nakbah*. The films discussed here are - **Ustura**, (Israel, 1998) **1948** (Israel, 1998) **Chronicle of a Disappearance**, (Europe and Palestine, 1996), **Jenin, Jenin** (Israel/Palestine 2002) **Egteyah** (Israel/Palestine, 2002) and **Divine Intervention** (Palestine, 2002); They were chosen because they demonstrate special interest in the *Nakbah* and in cinematic storytelling, using it as a unifying device, while still operating roughly within the boundaries of documentary film. It is true that many other Palestinian films have similar concerns, but in the interest of clarity, a small number of the better known films had to be selected.

For many years, the representation of the Nakba in Palestinian³ or Arab films was mainly noticeable by its absence. This is far from surprising; the images of loss and destruction, meted out by the Israeli forces to the many hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, are far from easy for Arabs, and especially for Palestinians. A long time had to pass until the Nakba could become a live topic within Palestinian cultural life, serving both the need to purge the trauma, as well as the needs of identity-construction. Hence, a whole generation of Palestinians had grown up with hardly any cinematic representations of the great catastrophe of 1948, as well as the many historical acts of resistance.

In a sense, this reminds us of the similar attitude (though for different reasons) in Israel towards the Holocaust, during the 1950's. The images of Jews led to the slaughter were an abomination for the Zionists of post-World War II Palestine – the Old Jew of Europe has always been an embarrassment for Zionism, a motivating negativity which propelled it into the construction of the *New Jew*, the Israeli Zionist⁴. Thus, visual representations of the Holocaust, and especially, cinematic representations, were very rare in this formative period of Israel⁵.

The important exception to this demeaning condition of the European Jewry, is, in Zionist eyes and texts, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and the other smaller uprisings, and the struggle by Jewish partisans against the Nazis. Such armed

resistance is seen and hailed as the precursor to the activities and existence of the IDF, the armed forces of Israel. It is therefore interesting to note, that Palestinians also saw the Warsaw Ghetto struggle as iconic. Indeed, at many points, Palestinian organizations and individuals have made reference to the Holocaust events. One such reference is the visit in 1983 of a PLO delegate to the Warsaw Ghetto monument, laying of a wreath and pronouncing: “as the Jews were then justified to rise up against their Nazi murderers, so now are the Palestinians justified in their own struggle with the Zionists”⁶. While this fact, like some other instances of Palestinian references to Holocaust events is mentioned by James Young, he manages to overlook, in a work on the texture of memory, some interesting facts. When describing Zionist memorializing projects, such as the many forests which were planted to ostensibly commemorate Holocaust victims, he does not mention that most of these forests form part of the active destruction and erasure of hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns taken over in 1948. Those were mostly destroyed during the 1950’s, bulldozed over and planted with trees, so as to remove all signs of earlier habitation, and past occupants of the land. It is also fascinating to note, that the trees used are in the main also foreign, as were the ones who planted them – the trees chosen were mainly firs of European origin, not native to Palestine, hence covering up the evidence of an earlier,

Mediterranean ground cover, removing the memory not only of humans and their habitations, but also of the natural environment. Such forests cover and hide, for example, the location of the town of Saffouri, which some of the films dealing with the Nakbah feature. It seems the construction of Zionist memory requires erasures of earlier memories, is actually built on such erasure and denial.

A Tale of Two Towns – Saffouri (1948) and Jenin (2002)

The practice of using a storyline in documentary is as old as the genre itself. What this section proposes to discuss is the unique relationship- between storytelling *within* a film, to the story *told by* the film. This relationship is germane especially to a fundamental function of documentary cinema as a discourse of identity-formation – that of representing social and cultural *Self* and *Other*⁷. This argument could quite justifiably be extended to fiction film, and definitely to the fiction films under discussion here.

On a more detailed level, the films also lend themselves to comparison because, due perhaps to an uncanny coincidence - (or to the centrality of the Palestinian town of Saffouri in Palestinian accounts of the *Nakbah*) - three of them feature Saffouri, forcibly evacuated in 1948 and later destroyed by the IDF, as a means of exploring the loss of *Heimat*. Arguably, Saffouri has become an icon of the nakba

and the totality of its loss. In at least two of the films, **Ustura** and **1948**, Saffouri's story serves this iconic function – it stands for the story of Palestine. Elia Suleiman's film, **Chronicle of a Disappearance**, also uses the famous Palestinian writer and native of Saffouri, Taha Ali Mohhamad, who appears also in **1948**, where he speaks of his home town.

Behind **1948** hides another Palestinian storyteller, the late Emille Habibi, a writer, intellectual and leftist politician. Habibi's ironic, harsh, and humorous novel, *The Opssimist* (also called the *Optipessimist*) has served Mohhamad Bakri, director of **1948**, as the reference and starting-point for a rambling theatrical production by the same name. This show, which Bakri, also an accomplished actor, has delivered many times in Arabic and Hebrew to packed audiences over a number of years, tells the story of the invisible Palestinian minority of Israel, its *Nakbah*, its subsequent marginalization, oppression and mistreatment in the newly-formed state of Israel, and its aspirations for freedom, equality and development, all dashed by the harsh realities of the Zionist entity.

Of the three newer films, all completed in 2002, two deal with the another iconic event of the second *Intifada*, the destruction by the IDF of the centre of the Jenin Refugee camp, an event of such brutality as to still command international anger.

Both **Jenin, Jenin**, (Bakri, Israel/Palestine, 2002) and **Egteyah** (Hassan,

Israel/Palestine, 2002) – two documentaries which explore the Israeli invasion in revealing (though very different) visual discourses - have led to complex scenarios in Israel⁸ and abroad, and their treatment of the Jenin Refugee Camp punitive destruction in 2002, and have used the framework of the *Nakbah*, and its remembered/memorialized acts of destruction as a referent. Arguably, Jenin has become, like Saffouri before it, iconic of the terrifying wanton destruction which has become so normalized across Palestine, and on screens the world over. While **Jenin, Jenin**, leaves the telling of the destruction to the inmates of the camp, and especially, to a young and impressive girl, and a deaf-mute man, the film **Egteyah** tells the story mainly through the eyes of one of the Israeli D9 bulldozers, who is telling it as a narrative of a 'difficult job that has to be done'. Both films expose an Israeli soldiery of a kind that most Israelis continue to deny, yet here they are presented with a clear mirror image of a society which has brutalized itself, before going on to brutalize and devastate the Palestinians.

The newest of those films, Elia Suleiman's **Divine Intervention** (Palestine, 2002) is, like his earlier film discussed here, a heady combination of fiction, documentary and agit-prop, moving freely between formats, and even building in a fantasy musical scene, combining the Hong Kong action-movie with a musical agitprop... While this film does not deal with the Jenin incident specifically, it does deal with

the second *Intifada* in general. The film is set, like his earlier **A Chronicle of a Disappearance** (1996), in his native Nazareth, as well as in the liminal spaces between the Israeli and Palestinian entities. This grey zone in which Palestinians now exist is his main interest – he sets the most remarkable parts of the film in the car park of the A-Ram checkpoint⁹, near Jerusalem. The enigmatic Suleiman, silent throughout the film like in his last one, is seen with his girlfriend – an iconic Palestinian relationship – she comes from the Occupied Territories, while he lives on the Israeli side of Palestine, so the only place they can meet with relative impunity is in the no-man’s-land of the checkpoint¹⁰. The two help us remember that the *Nakbah* has separated the Palestinians since 1948, and continues to do so now. In a scene shot after Sharon’s calamitous visit to the Haram Al Sharif (Dome of the Rock) in September 2000, a visit which triggered the second Intifada, he blows up a red balloon, with the image of Yaser Arafat on it, and sends it flying across Jerusalem, past the checkpoints, until it reaches the same Golden dome and lands on it. In this pastiche of Arafat, a pumped-up balloon, with obvious cinematic references, he also connects the hopes of Palestine to the symbol of its identity, the Al Aqsa mosque, which also gave the name to the Intifada in Palestine and beyond.

I would like to show you one scene from this marvelous film.

Show Divine intervention Film Clip 1 here

It may be useful, at this point, to return to Freud through the creative agency of Cathy Caruth, in order to illuminate some of the devices in the films discussed. In a recent piece (Caruth, 2001), Caruth discusses the famous *fort/da* episode in Freud's ***Beyond the Pleasure Principle***, and draws out of his article some hidden meanings crucial for discussing trauma and representation.

In this rereading, Caruth parallels the form and content of Freud's famous essay, showing that the interplay (*Spiel*) between the death drive, and the life energy, are at the heart of the little *fort/da* story, and give the whole piece its structure. By rephrasing Freud's questions in his piece, she manages to reframe the work, to bring it up to date and make it useful again. She transforms "the original questions of trauma – *what does it mean for life to bear witness to death? And what is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?* – into an ultimately more fundamental and elusive concern: *what is the language of the life drive?*" (Caruth, 2001:14). In Bakri's film, *Jenin, Jenin*, another child, this time, a young girl, takes us through her traumatic experiences of the invasion. At a point in her account, she says to the filmmaker, and through him, to us: The Israelis can kill and maim, but they cannot win... all the mothers will have more children... and we will continue the struggle...". How much more frightening must Gaza be for its children now...

The movement charted in this sentence, from the death and the trauma of destruction, to the new life which will bloom and bring salvation, is what Caruth unearths in Freud's article – the constant seesawing between the polarities of the death drive and the life drive, between deep despair and new hope – both are actually inseparable, in the girl's story, as they are in Freud's story; the font of hope lies in the obsessive return to the 'scene of crime', to the locus of pain. Representing the trauma in a story, a *spiel* (*game*, but also *play* in German) is the mechanism chosen by all, to deal with the various traumas they are facing – death, parting, loss, and devastation.

This throws a new light on the many stories of woe told in the films under examination, and on the whole practice of storytelling of the Nakba – a tradition richly represented by the many films selected for examination. Even the structure of the films is deeply affected by the storytelling function. Like his earlier film, Suleiman's **Divine Intervention** is also divided into chapters, as is the film **Egteyah** by Nizar Hassan, who names the chapters: *The Dream, The Passage, The Guest House*. Such strategies are just part of a wide variety of storytelling techniques, integral to all the films mentioned here. Two of the films even start as a children's fable would – **1948** starts with the director/actor, Mohhamad Bakri, playing the role of Habibi's central character, Sayid Abu Al-Nahs, telling the story on stage:

Show 1948 Film Clip 2 Here

This is obviously, as the title suggests, the story, or stories, of the *Nakbah*. The framing device of the many stories of Palestinians who were driven out of their homes, is a fable about the betrayed Palestinian, whose father/leader trusted Israeli double-dealing, or at best, false promises. That the stories are not just about houses, wells and trees, is beautifully clarified by Taha Ali Mohammad, speaking later in the film about what Saffouri means to him:

...Saffouria is a mysterious symbol. My longing for it is not a yearning for stone and paths alone, but for a mysterious blend of feelings, relatives, people, animals, birds, brooks, stories and deeds... When I visit Saffouria I become excited and burst out crying, but when I think about Saffouria the picture that forms in my mind is virtually imaginary, mysterious, hard to explain...

Like Freud's little boy, with his game of *fort/da*, the writer returns to Saffouri/a – the town which lies perfect in his memories, but also totally destroyed in reality – telling the stories is his way of dealing with the unimaginable – the totality of destruction and loss. What was lost during the *Nakbah*, then, is not just

houses and stones – but the life of a nation – the country, the people, their homes and gardens, their animals and birds.

Story follows story in **1948**, interposed by Bakri riding a broomstick on stage, interpreting, contradicting, complementing the tales. The storytelling is disarming – both Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews in the audience fall into the trap – disarmed, they listen with compassion, understanding, even anger.

Nizar Hassan's **Ustura** also starts with the director's voice-over, telling us the story of Saffouri, another fable told with irony, humour, but mostly, with pain:

Show *Ustura* Film Clip 3 here

Hassan is not only telling us this 'fable' – he partakes in it: in the prologue. Later in the film, he is seen seated with the three sons of Fatmeh, facing her in the large family room in which the whole family is seated, listening to the mother's story. Hassan relates to this story personally – his own mother told him a similar story when he was a young child as he told an Israeli reporter (Ben-Zvi, 1999:80). By sitting in line with the sons, Hassan becomes a son too, and his presence (and the presence of his camera crew) transforms the private event into a public one.

Factually, **Ustura** narrates the story of a Palestinian family, the Nigim clan, from the Galilee. When the film begins, the family is living in a town called Saffouri

before 1948, and is expelled by the Israeli forces. Some of the family stay behind in Palestine, trying to get back to their home town, while the others are trapped in Lebanon, and not allowed back by the Israeli authorities, now in control of the whole Galilee, then as now mainly populated by Palestinians. The family is never to reunite again. As the Lebanese exile gives birth to other exiles – Jordan, Syria, Europe, the United States – the family is dispersed over the whole exilic spectrum of the Palestinian Diaspora. It must be clear even from this limited description that the film is iconic, because the family experiences chosen here are representative of the Palestinian people, and their continuing plight after the *Nakbah*. The *Nakbah* in these films is the *beginning of the story*¹¹ of Palestine, and in some sense, also its tragic end.

But nothing becomes truly universal, before it is specifically particular, and this is a film about the specificity of a particular family. The family flees from Saffouri after a bombardment by the Israeli forces, and starts on the well-known refugee trail, first to the Lebanese border, then to Ba'albak, where they stay for a couple of years. Only the old Patriarch, grandfather Musa El-Khalil, stays behind, while his wife Amneh El-Qasem¹² flees with the rest of the family – her son Mohammad Musa, his pregnant wife Fatmeh, their son Saleem and daughter Khadrah, and the aunt Khadeejeh, daughter of old Amneh. During their stay, granny Amneh decides

to return home. Taking with her grandson Saleem, and her daughter Khadeejah the three steal the border back into Palestine, now called Israel, intent on returning to their home town, Saffouri. The town, however, has since become the Israeli *Zipori*; most of the houses were destroyed by the Israeli army, with some of the remaining houses populated by immigrants. Since there is no way back home, the family settles clandestinely in the local convent, and Amneh, whose husband still lives in the town, registers her small grandson Saleem as her son, on her Israeli ID. Thus does the family become exiles in their own *Heimat*, illegal infiltrators into Israel. Thus their story becomes the iconic Nakbah story, combining the loss of home, town and country in one powerful narrative.

In returning to her town, despite, Amneh El-Qassem displays not nostalgia, but strong resolve to survive in her homeland. Despite leaving her keys behind, Amneh El-Qassem has another key to her homeland. The boy Saleem will become the key to reuniting the family in Palestine. Saleem, growing up away from his parents, with two adoptive mothers - his granny and his aunt - is sent to a prestigious Jewish preparatory school, numbering many Israeli leaders as former students. In the 1960s, through trying to get his family back from Jordan, where they settled in the meantime, he finds out that his brothers, Mahmoud and Yousef, who were born since the separation from the family, are the reason for

the rejection of his application for family reunification. He is advised by the Israeli security forces to remove the names of his brothers from the application. After ten years, and with the assistance of Shimon Peres, he succeeds in reuniting with most of his family, with the exception of his brothers. The first meaningful reunion of most of the family takes place because of the shooting for Hassan's film, and a very painful event it is. By that time, the family is anywhere but in Saffouri – the new patriarch, Saleem, now lives with his family and mother and aunt in Nazareth, his brother Mahmoud lives in Germany, where he married a German woman, and his brother Yousef and sister Khadra live in Irbid, in Jordan. Saffouri itself is no more – it suffered the same fate as did over 500 Palestinian villages and towns, eradicated by the Israeli authorities. For all intents and purposes, it had never existed.

Here is the place to ponder about an unusual quality of **Ustura**. Despite the fact that all information regarding the characters and their travails is presented, the film does not yield this information easily – one could even say it is unwilling to part with it, or to use a phrase coined by Jeffrey K. Rouff (Rouff, 1999:287), it is a “text at war with itself.” This form of narrative un-clarity is an important departure from normative documentary practices, and a clear indication of its exilic and “interstitial” structure, to use Hamid Naficy's term (Naficy, 1999:125-150). The

film opens with a prologue, lasting a mere 3 minutes, cramming into this short period a number of seemingly unconnected utterances by yet-to-be-identified characters of the drama, and moves at high speed through an argument clarifying itself before the end of this prologue. By the end of it we are clear about one feature – the family that lost its home in Saffouri has also lost its Heimat – Palestine. It is the story of *Al Nakbah* in microcosm.

The film's title **Ustura**, (*fable* or *story* in Arabic) appearing after the prologue, presages the stories that the film tells. This mode of storytelling is not just a product of the Palestinian/Arab oral tradition of storytelling, but also a substitute for the lost *Heimat*. If we recall Steiner's reference to the *text* as the "homeland of the Jew" - then the story told to the family is the homeland of the Palestinian. When asked about the rationale for telling a political story as myth, Hassan takes us back to his childhood, and more specifically, to his mother. Mothers are the family storytellers, in his and other Palestinian films (Ben-Zvi, 1999:80), as the *Nakbah* becomes an inseparable part of his cultural heritage:

My clearest meeting with the Palestinian history as a story, a narrative, and not as a collage of isolated incidents, I owe to my mother... I was six or seven years old - and my mother took us to our bedroom. She sat on the bed and we three sat in a circle

around her (which is what gave me the idea for the central scene in **Ustura**, in which Um-Saleem tells her story) - I only remember her telling the story without any tragic note, without victimhood, but with dramatic sense of survival. She was full of anger, a strong will and much hope...we went to bed, and for the first time in my life I felt *grown up*, not just 'a big boy', but grown up, like kids think about grown ups. I understood that I live in my homeland, Palestine, that I belong, I am Palestinian, and no one can take that away from me.¹³

Here as in the other films analysed, the story is the anchor for identity, personal and national – the story of family meets and overlaps the story of nation. The story includes secret coding, what Hassan describes as: "...a Palestinian discourse... I wished to discover its hidden codes," (Ben-Zvi, 1999:76) when speaking of one of his earlier films, **Istiqlal** (Israel, 1994). By discovering the codes, interiorising them, one internalises the identity of Palestine, of the Palestinian. The story is the secret of making sense as a person, as part of a larger unit. Narrative and myth are here seen as the 'organisers of reality and of the past,' what Grierson terms "the creative treatment of actuality" (Rotha, 1952, p. 70). The stories of the Nigim clan and Hassan's own family history are closely related and intertwined. Hassan

succeeds in relating this through engaging the ‘social actors’ very intimately: “Without the participation of social actors, the documentary form known as direct or observational cinema could not exist. Without the informed consent of the subjects, the form lacks ethical integrity.” (Anderson and Benson, 1991, p. 151)

The stories that start **Ustura** and **1948** act as framing devices, offering irony, a sense of humour, a perspective from which to view. In both, it is the filmmaker who directs our attention to details. This colours the documentary material that follows, affording and dictating a Brechtian positioning for the viewer – a spectatorship which is active, in which judgments are to be made by the viewer, who is not allowed to passively consume.

The third film, Elia Suleiman’s **Chronicle of a Disappearance**, is peppered through with storytelling, coming to a high point with a story *about* storytelling, told by the same writer we see talking about Saffouri in **1948**, Taha Mohammad Ali. The quality of the film’s stories is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s *Angel of History* who, looking backwards over history, can see only the piles of rubble and destruction, a cacophony of massacres and privations. But the stories here go somewhat further. They seem to indicate that memory is the material of myth, and myth is the foundation of the identity of nations. Benedict Anderson points out that the conditions for the growth of national narratives are traumatic: “All

profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.” (Anderson, 1983:204). While it is impossible to assume amnesia in the case of Palestinians living in Israel after 1948, a sort of forced *public amnesia* was experienced for a number of decades within the Palestinian community in Israel – the conditions for remembering and commemoration did not exist – Israel has prohibited any such activity. Only gradually, with the ending of military rule and the establishment of the PLO in 1964, and especially after the shock of the 1967 war, did a narrative begin to evolve and grow to its open manifestations of the last three decades.

If the first two films discussed perform the task of unearthing evidence, making visible that which was erased and hidden by Zionist occupation, Suleiman’s **Chronicle of a Disappearance** tells the actual story of disappearance – that of Palestine as an entity. A series of stories outline the situation; a story told by a Russian Orthodox priest, with the Sea of Galilee in the background, clarifies the process of disappearance by encirclement:

Show *Chronicle of a Disappearance* Film Clip 4 SoG here

The two entwined worlds that of the Priest, representing the disappearing old pre-Nakbah Palestine, and the 'Kibbutzes' representing the growing sphere of Zionism, are a graphic representation of the conflict. This undoubtedly is not documentary footage, but a staged scene, yet it frames the documentary footage with which the film plays.

Towards the middle of the film, the weight of the scenes, autonomous in a true Brechtian fashion, starts adding up to a critical mass - we begin reading the absent *other* into the collapse of realities. The absent other is Elia Suleiman, coming from exile in New York to a double exile at home in Nazareth and ending up in a worse exile yet - that of Jerusalem under occupation. Instead of finding an old and cherished self, Suleiman is gradually and painfully disappearing - a simile of the disappearance of Palestine, and of the Palestinians. This disappearing act is everywhere - in his endless and aimless sitting by his cousin's souvenir shop, waiting, waiting... then not even waiting anymore; in the slowness and frailty of his parents, who, in the last scene, fall asleep in front of the television, while the Israeli TV channel is broadcasting the closing item of the day - the Israeli flag waving, as the national anthem plays in the background; in the Jericho scene, in which Elia sits alone in a Palestinian cafe on a fine evening, in liberated Jericho, with a flag of Palestine beside him, in a further attempt to find the missing

Palestine; when the cafe lights, put on to mark the passage of day into night, keep arcing away as he looks at the darkening town, causing him to appear then disappear. In a similar scene, at the rooms he rented in Jerusalem the lights also fail, but instead of going out, keep blinking with a will and rhythm of their own. At the end of the film, the exiled director chooses to disappear, with a proverbial suitcase, reminiscent of the famous poem by Mahmoud Darwish, in which home is a suitcase. Suleiman's alter-ego in the film, the young Ad'an, a Palestinian woman choosing to fight the occupation, represents, like his parents, the *Zumud*, adherence to the land, resistance and survival. If the struggle of the old generation is by powerful inertia, Ad'an chooses the active road. To fight an enemy like hers, one must adopt some of its tactics and methods, use some of its machinery. She thus operates through the ether, broadcasting in Hebrew to the enemy, using a found army radio to send her messages, coded in the nonsensical fashion so beloved by the IDF. As an ultimate weapon, she uses *Hatikvah* – the Israeli national anthem, which speaks of the hope residing in every Jew for a return to Jerusalem - it is then read in its original sense - an anthem of the oppressed who have lost Jerusalem, who have lost the land, who have disappeared; only this time it is the Palestinians who hope for return and liberation. Those without means,

deprived of everything, have to use the power of their oppressors in order to survive, in order not to disappear.

The Al Aqsa Intifada films

The films which have appeared since the start of the second Intifada have used similar strategies, with one crucial difference: if the films before 2000 treat the 1948 Nakbah as the ultimate catastrophe, some of the people speaking in the recent films see the events unfolding before them as an even worse turn, and this has intensified since 2005, and Israel continued attacks on Gaza, culminating in the latest massacre of almost 1500 Palestinians few weeks ago; The Nakba is seen as an unending loss.

In Bakri's **Jenin, Jenin** (2002) we hear the story of an old man, who has followed the orders to vacate the houses given by the IDF soldiers, only to be shot at close range in his hand and foot in an apparent attempt to kill him. Speaking on his hospital bed, waving his mutilated, bandaged arm, he cries and says:

“In '48 we tasted the same pain, but nothing like this! All that we have achieved – we built a house, had children – all gone in a single hour! So Bush can be really satisfied, him and his friend the murderer. Abu Sabra and Shatila¹⁴”

The mention of the *Nakbah* in earlier films, including in Bakri's 1948, is normally used in order to recall the greatest catastrophe of all; but in this new crisis, the residents of Jenin realize that what they are now going through is indeed even worse. In most of the films, memory of life after the Nakbah has been one long tale of pain and suffering for the people interviewed. Nizar Hassan's **Egteyah**¹⁵ (2002) starts with reminding us on the opening titles, that the 14,000 residents of the Jenin refugee camp, are actually refugees from 56 different towns and villages in 1948 Palestine. Some of them were refugees for the second, or third time, before settling in Jenin. Losing the Jenin camp has become the epitome of despair, a Nakbah which continues for a whole lifetime, getting worse with time. The woman speaking about this, originally a resident of *Zereen*, a village long gone and erased by the IDF in the 1950's, has ended up in Jenin, thinking she may have some respite there. But of the intervening years she says:

“Since '48...I haven't had one good day, only fear and horror [...]

Our story with the Jews is a long one... since they arrived we have lived in suffering and bitterness”.

But if the old people have experienced some peace and quiet before the 1948 disaster, the young residents of the camp only know its dusty alleyways and rickety shacks, now all destroyed by the US-made, mammoth D9 bulldozers of the

IDF. A young girl, the main speaker for the camp in Bakri's **Jenin, Jenin**, amazes us with her concise logic and unfailing commitment to the camp and its inhabitants. Israel cannot win, She tells the viewer: Palestinian women will bring other babies to replace the dead ones, the camp will be rebuilt, and there can never be peace with those who have done this to her people, country, camp, and family. She notes that while the Israelis may well be able to shoot, kill and maim, destroy houses and whole neighborhoods, their deeds reek of fear rather than bravery, of weakness rather than strength. The moral fiber she instills in her story is the foundation of a redemption narrative. As Hassan told us, being able to control your story is the fountain of strength of the dispossessed.

Storytelling as Defensive Practice: Stories of Palestine vs. the Story of Zionism

In the period following the Oslo Accord of 1993, the main struggle between the dominance of Zionism and the emerging nationhood of Palestine passed from the arena of armed struggle, to that of culture and memory, until the start of the Second *Intifada*. The narratives of Zionism, both annulling Palestine and its oppression by Israel, and telling the unitary and one-sided story of Zionism as a liberation movement, have decimated the space for Palestinian cultural work, after eradicating the physical space which was Palestine, by first conquering and subduing it, then by renaming and reassigning it, thus erasing its past, its history,

its story. Fighting the injustice and oppression of such narratives has to take place in the cultural arena – not as a replacement for the arena of the physical, but as its complement.

In each of the films mentioned, a number of characters tell stories – mostly stories of the family that are inseparable from the story of Palestine itself, and form the film's idiom and structure. Hence the 'documents' in these documentaries are really the oral stories told. This raises the most important typological observation about the three films: they deal with the story of Palestine as a strategic, defensive move, a move designed to recapture ground lost to Zionism and its dominant narrative.

The narrative of Palestine in the cultural arena carved by Zionism is, first and foremost, a story of erasure, denial and active silencing by historians and intellectuals. The first casualty is the very word Palestine itself. After 1967, when the whole of Palestine was occupied by Israel, it became *de rigueur* to replace the historical term Palestine with the nationalist and expansionist Hebrew phrase *Eretz Israel*. The use of the Hebrew phrase acted as a marker of ideology - it denoted the very absence of Palestine – the country, the people, the language and history. The phrase provided a virtual and false connection between the biblical existence of the land, and its current occupation by the Israeli state. Here also we

can clearly see the historical amnesia in action, of the type slated by Anderson (1983). This erasure is not applied only in the case of texts which deal with the area and its recent history, but is applied as a blanket term, even when its use is patently nonsensical¹⁶. The use of the term *Eretz Israel* to replace and erase Palestine, is not peculiar to the right wing of Israeli politics, as it once was, but is equally rife in the left of the political spectrum, and has become a peculiar test of conformity and political correctness, seemingly impossible to attack, question or analyze. Similar codes, embedded deeply into Israeli public discourse are the terms used to describe the wars in the Middle East: the 1948 war is referred to as the *War of Independence*, The 1956 war is known as *The Sinai Offensive*, the 1967 war is termed The Six Day War, 1973 is called the *Yom Kippur War*, and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 is quaintly called *Operation Peace in the Galilee*. Any departure from such terminology is understood as a dangerous deviation, 'opening the door' to arguments about the moral justification for any or all of those military campaigns, and ultimately, to justifications for Zionism itself¹⁷. The daily papers, whatever their political leanings, have accepted and adopted such terminology without question, as have the various broadcast institutions, thus normalizing the use of Zionist Newspeak designed to cover up and erase the full story of Palestine, of the Arab Palestinian other. In the face of such thorough

suppression, erasure and socialized forgetfulness, the Palestinian response seems to be centered around unearthing the story, telling it firstly to the Palestinians themselves, always in danger of losing their story, but also to Israelis who may listen. This telling of the suppressed story is not only crucial for Palestinian identity, but may also serve as a way of bridging the aspirations of both communities, by trying to bring understanding and compassion through recognizing each other's pain. This need was first pointed out by Azmi Bishara, the political scientist turned politician, in an article on the Holocaust and the Arabs (Bishara, 1995:54-71). The importance of understanding the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust, and the importance of empathizing with such suffering, as a precondition to the demand and expectation of the same consideration offered by Israeli Jews to the Nakbah, was an important departure from the more usual denial or indifference displayed by Arab intellectuals. Bishara argues for a mutual empathy that one may develop through familiarity with the story of the other, as a precondition for long-term relationship of neighborhood and equality. In a sense, what is argued here is a reversal of historical/political amnesias on both sides as a precondition for a common future.

The erasure and eradication practiced by Zionism in Palestine are multi-layered, and affect each Palestinian on at least four distinct levels, all referenced in **Ustura**.

The first level is that of the nation/country – the level most responsible for the production of melancholia. The second level is much less abstract, and even more traumatic – that of the locale – town or village occupied, destroyed and erased from memory, as if the *self* itself was erased. The third layer is that of the family – each family in Palestine has suffered directly, in many ways, during and since the 1948 *Nakbah*. The family has, in many cases, been dismantled as the basic unit of social organization – it has been disbanded, fragmented both mentally and geographically, and has lost its cohesion and efficacy. This is conveyed by the central role attributed to the family and the mother in Hassan's work (Tal Ben Zvi, 1999:80). The last and most complex layer, affected by all the latter is the individual Palestinian – Saleem (**Ustura**), for example, or for that matter filmmaker Hassan himself, real people who have had to continue and to fight mental as well as military occupation by the forces of Zionist myth and army.

Hence the dispossession brought about by conquest is even deeper and more painful than just losing home and country. The ultimate loss is that of losing your story, losing the right to your own story, your own history. In the film, precisely this happened to Saleem, who became the hero of a Hebrew short story for children, about the little Arab boy. But the retelling of one's own story, which brought tears to Odysseus's eyes, is here barren and distant. In the scene with the

author, Saleem is so disturbed by the written (Hebrew and Zionist) version of his life story, that he departs, leaving filmmaker Hassan alone with the author reading aloud. His story was also appropriated, as were his land and country before.

So Hassan, Suleiman, Bakri and their colleagues in Palestine must fight for the right to at least tell their own story, and history, in their own way. Conceptually and ideologically, they must operate on the interstitial space between cultures: the Israeli and Palestinian, the Palestinian in Israel and the Palestinian in the occupied territories, the Palestinian in Palestine and the Palestinian in the Diaspora, Palestine and the Arab world, and Western Vs Oriental discourse. This interstitial mode of production is forced and justified by the normative state of Palestinians in Israel – living on the seams of Israeli society: they always are situated between two other points, Israeli and Hebrew points, on the virtual map of Palestine. The names of their habitations are missing from the road signs, as is their language, an official language of Israel, noticeable by its absence. Some of their habitations are not even midway between Israeli name places, because no road leads to them, and they are not connected to the electricity grid. Termed “unrecognized settlements”, they receive no assistance from any government agency – they simply do not exist, however large and populous they may be. But of course the Palestinians see this relationship in reverse – all the Jewish

settlements are either built on the remains of Arab settlements, or lie between such remains, however difficult to discern. When Hassan takes the family back to Saffouri, trying to locate the old house, all that Saleem can find, are some foundation stones of his birthplace. Significantly, the map he uses to draw the route of the refugees in 1948, early in the film, is a map showing the Arab names of the Palestinian habitations, disregarding the Hebrew names of Jewish settlements. So there are two virtual countries within the same space, two parallel universes disregarding each other, and yet, totally bound to each other. The deeper irony is that the victorious newcomers are also refugees, claiming this as the justification for that which cannot be justified¹⁸. In one of the scenes Hassan discusses with Saleem's Jewish ex-headmaster the fact that it is their homeland that the Israelis occupy. The headmaster says he has a very short answer to this accusation: "Auschwitz." Here Hassan is heard saying "cut," ending the scene abruptly. Not only are there two parallel universes superimposed on this landscape, but the powerful occupiers also project a third – that different planet of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, so that the Palestinian interstitial existence is now situated on the space between two universes of Judaism, rather than in their own country. They are also situated on another interstice – that of the space between the Jewish distant past in Palestine, and their current control of it. The

normative use of language in Israel, as well as its dominant ideology, connects both instances into a continuum, despite the two thousand years that gape between them, filled by non-existent people whose non-existent settlements have filled the non-existent gap.

Common and recurrent features of the films

In thinking about the six films and their representation of trauma, we are again reminded of Freud's question, in the beginning of *Beyond the pleasure principle* (Freud, 1920). Cathy Caruth sums up Freud question thus: "What does it mean for the reality of war to appear in the fiction of the dream? What does it mean for life to bear witness to death? And what is the surprise that is encountered in this witness?" (Caruth, 2001:8). One can make the case for all the films discussed here as trauma agencies, as trauma-resolution social mechanisms of the Palestinian society.

It is hardly surprising then, that all films are marked by trauma and melancholia. In **Ostura**, in a deserted park in Germany, the director Nizar Hassan is offered "the only fig in Germany" by Mahmoud – a token of the lost *Heimat*, and also a biblical token of home – "under your vine and fig tree". Yet the only fig is a barren fig – not to be eaten, never to be continued, like the exile Mahmoud who has no children

himself. And while he talks of his existence in Germany as merely temporary, he is destined to die in exile, under someone else's fig. In one of the film's last scenes, Saleem is discovered by Hassan sitting high on the branches of a carob tree, the tree of his lost childhood in the convent. Sitting on the tree, he talks of his childhood with no parents, without his siblings, without his people, a childhood spent in exile within the Jewish Israeli community, away from Palestine, while in it. In a terrifying end to Bakri's **Jenin, Jenin**, the little girl who is the main commentator throughout the film, together with the deaf-mute who leads Bakri through the ruins, says this of her life, whilst holding a large, twisted metal casing from an Israeli bomb which has destroyed her home and her community:

“I saw dead bodies, I saw houses destroyed, I saw sights which cannot be described...and now, after they ruined all my dreams and hopes – I have no life left!”

So the girl, who claims to have no fear of Sharon and his tanks, like another boy described in the film by his father, may not be fearful¹⁹, but is frighteningly mature, too mature, to utter such sentiments, which more than any physical damage ever could, damn the continued occupation and its inhumanity. So, melancholia is not the only disturbance which mars the Palestinian social

landscape. The film, and through it, the little girl, who, one must assume, is *also dreaming* of what she speaks of, is a kind of psycho-social equivalent of dreaming, of dealing with the trauma encountered. The girl's repetitive return to the trauma, like that of others in the film – the deaf-mute man, the children playing in the devastated landscape (in this film as well as in Hassan's ***Egteyah***) are all reliving moments of trauma, in a desperate search of a relief, which is obviously unavailable, as the trauma continues and intensifies. This is true of the many people telling their stories in all the other films under discussion.

Another common factor to all the films, is the fact that they were made by Palestinians who are citizens of Israel, and hence enjoy greater freedom of movement and expression, though not equal to Israeli Jews', far greater than experienced by Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. The three directors are hence sensitized to the very fracture lying at the heart of Palestinian existence since the Nakbah – the division of their people into three distinct groups, and maybe even four. Edward Said has enumerated (Said, 1979:116-118) the various parts of the Palestinian nation, separated by the Nakbah: The '1948' Palestinians (those who stayed and ended up as Israeli subjects), the rest living in Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza Strip) and the many others living in the Arab countries as refugees (mostly in Jordan and Lebanon). To those one need to add the many

Palestinians living in the diaspora which sprang out of the Nakbah: The Gulf countries, Europe, North and South America, and elsewhere. Hence, if the events of 1948 have brought Jews from all over the world to live in Palestine/Israel, the same events have dispersed Palestinians into a diaspora similar to that left by the Jews emigrating to Israel. One immediately is reminded of this separation forced by Israeli occupation, in the many scenes in Suleiman's **Divine Intervention**, when the two protagonists, divided by the Israeli checkpoints, can only meet at the checkpoint car park, or in Hassan's **Ostura**, in the vast, green and peaceful German park strewn with *Sans Souci* sculptures, where the "only fig in Germany" is discovered by Mahmoud. All the films are dealing with the various parts of the Palestinian existence, and, in a sense, are one of the most powerful means of bringing the distinct groups together, sharing in the collective memory of the Nakbah, and the many atrocities which followed in its wake. The very act of making such films is an active reclaiming of their Palestinian identity by the directors, an act of sharing the fate of the divided nation and community, of bridging and combining memory.

How does one make a film about people and places that 'do not exist', whose life has been destroyed? Whose hopes and dreams have been desecrated, their eyes exposed to taboo sights, to inhuman suffering? Memory is not enough. The

foundation of *heimat* must be fortified by story and storytelling. Palestinian cinema exists on an exilic interstice – between fact and fiction, between narrative and narration, between the story and its telling, between *documentary* and *fiction*, not to mention between Israel and Palestine, and between life and death. Insofar as it parallels the existence afforded by most Palestinians, facts are not enough, these films seem to tell us. In order to create a space to live in, to bring an end to personal and political trauma and melancholia, one must employ fiction, one must play (*spiel*) in the Freudian sense - one must tell stories.

Notes

¹ It is of interest here to note the name given by the Palestinian media for the Israeli 'Separation Wall' – it is called by all media outlets 'the Apartheid Wall'! Of course, the Israeli authorities have missed out on the fact that *Apartheid*, in South African speak, meant exactly *separation*...

² Not by choice, of course, but by dint of being born in the Israeli-controlled part of Palestine before 1967. Some of the films actually appear as Israeli films in various catalogues, including the website of the Israeli Film Fund. This is obviously misleading, as the proper denomination would be Palestine. I have used the current denominations, but found it useful to explain here the travesty behind such a system of definition.

³ It is important to remember that until at least the first *Intifada*, the ability of Palestinians to produce films independently was almost non-existent. Film production is one of the hallmarks of a developed, independent society. The Israeli occupation made this almost impossible for many years. Only the Oslo process in its early stages, and some important technical innovations in video production and especially post-production, made it possible for Palestinians to produce films of quality in great numbers.

⁴ This New Jew was a creature of a modernist *grand narrative*, the result of deliberate cultural identity construction, a synthetic projection denoting the very opposite of the Ghetto Jew. Hence, military and physical prowess are seen as essential for this New Jew, as essential as the intellectual qualities and commercial acumen have been for the old Jew. As the Zionist project and its official (and unofficial) mythology has depended, and has contributed to a process of grabbing and controlling of land in Palestine, connections to the land and to tilling the land have also become crucial elements of this new ideological projection. If the Old Jew was *landless* and *de-militarized*, as argued by Boyarin, living and existing not on the *land*, but *in the word*, as Steiner has put it (Steiner, 1985), then the new Jew was living on and in the land, depending on his military might. The myths and realities of Zionist existence in Palestine, and later in Israel, would, it was argued by Zionist polemicists, somehow purge the New Jew not only of the shame and humiliation of the Holocaust, but of the whole period of living in the Diaspora, rootless and lacking a national identity and a land base. Zionism is thus seen as a massive national therapeutic project, a social-engineering of national identity in a people which is deemed to have lost it, and must regain it

⁵ I have dealt with this in detail elsewhere (Bresheeth, 2001)

⁶ Quoted in Young (1993:180)

⁷ I Have dealt with this issue elsewhere (Bresheeth, 2001: 25-26)

⁸ **Jenin, Jenin** was banned by the Israeli censorship a sort while after its release, and this banning was contested at the Israeli Supreme Court. This film has caused enormous disquiet in Israel, with the brutality of the Invasion fully exposed in graphic terms, and with powerful montage. The banning followed action taken by some of the soldiers who took part in the invasion, and claimed the film has desecrated the memory of soldiers who were killed during the operation. Such banning is a most unusual act of political censorship, almost unthinkable until quite recently, and bearing witness to the deep decline in the Israeli political scene.

⁹ Obviously, he was not allowed to film there, and had to reconstruct it as a set elsewhere

¹⁰ This is no longer the case – Israeli soldiers do not allow such meetings between both checkpoints to take place any more

¹¹ Those are the very words used by two of the filmmakers at the start of their films!

¹² It is an Arab custom to call the married woman also by her maiden name, a progressive habit related to the special rights a woman has in Islamic cultures, despite the lack of other, more customary rights in Western cultures.

¹³ Indeed, the achievement of a widely-recognised national identity despite all odds, is presented as the main achievement of the Palestinian liberation movement by Rashid Khalidi (Khalidi, 1997:201-209) in the concluding chapter of his exacting work on the topic.

¹⁴ Abu Sabra and Shatila – a clear reference to Sharon, the one responsible for the Sabra and Shatila massacres, even according to the official commission of inquiry, which has forced his sacking as Defense minister.

¹⁵ *Egteyah – Invasion* in Arabic

¹⁶ One such recent case of replacement of the English Palestine with the Hebrew *Eretz Israel* has occurred in the translation of Eric Hobsbawm's *Century of Extremes* into Hebrew, and pointed out by Yitzhak Laor in Ha'aretz, 12th May, 2000.

¹⁷ Please see the discussion of *naming* in Rashid Khalidi's book, where he looks especially at the naming of Jerusalem/Al Quds and *Haram Al Sharif* (the Temple Mount) (Khalidi, 1997:16)

¹⁸ On the same topic, see Bresheeth (2003)

¹⁹ Again, Freud and Caruth illuminate this point – it is exactly the lack of fear, and the lack of preparation (the impossibility of preparation) for what they have experienced) which causes the trauma in the first place. Not being fearful does not protect from trauma, but causes it... (Caruth, 2001:10)