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To cite this article: Hania A.M. Nashef (2015): Demythologizing the Palestinian in Hany Abu-Assad's Omar and Paradise Now, Transnational Cinemas, DOI: [10.1080/20403526.2015.1080984](https://doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2015.1080984)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20403526.2015.1080984>



Published online: 29 Oct 2015.



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## Demythologizing the Palestinian in Hany Abu-Assad's *Omar* and *Paradise Now*

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### ABSTRACT

In the past, Palestinian cinema was dominated by a nationalist discourse revolving around refugee ideology, resulting from the trauma of the lost homeland. As the past is generally static, revisiting it became an exercise in nostalgia. The last decade, however, has seen the emergence of a number of transnational Palestinian films telling stories of those who remained in historical Palestine post-1948. This late depiction is no longer one of reductionism but a visual narrative that exposes the daily challenges individuals face under occupation, as they fluctuate between a diminishing homeland and a lost one. These latest films have relied on a personal angle to tell the story, contrary to earlier film portrayals that favoured depictions of a mythical homogeneous society rooted in nationalist, heroic and revolutionary discourse. This article examines two internationally acclaimed films by Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad, *Al Janna Al Aan/Paradise Now* and *Omar*. In both, Palestinians hover between security walls, refugee camps and occupied space, as they deal with issues of betrayal, frustration, martyrdom and treason, portrayals that ultimately demythologize the Palestinian individual.

### KEYWORDS

Palestinian cinema; Israeli occupation; Myth; *Paradise Now*; *Omar*; Hany Abu-Assad; betrayal; treason

### Introduction

In their book, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory*, Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi divide Palestinian cinema into four historical periods, the first (1935–1948), the second (1948–1967), the third (1968–1982) and the fourth starting in 1980 (2008, 11–12). Historically, Palestinian cinema has been dominated by refugee ideology (Gertz and Khleifi 2008, 2). By identifying oneself as a refugee, a person can only access the present informed by memories of the past, as the future remains elusive. The nation itself is suspended. Being in the present does not allow for the construction of new memories, essentially a person exists in the temporal striving for survival (Gertz and Khleifi 2008, 2).<sup>1</sup> Other Palestinian films concerned themselves with the trauma of losing a homeland, which in turn led to an overreliance on historical and political events as sites for narration. As the past is generally seen as static, revisiting it becomes an exercise in nostalgia for a lost homeland, which in turn begins to assume a utopic quality. This act freezes history in a utopian

idyllic past or in an exile that severs the past (Gertz and Khleifi 2011, 187).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as the Palestinian trauma is ongoing finding another form of narration is trying as one is rarely able to step back to observe the here and now.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the Palestinian question has been and is still a reminder to the Arab nations of their consecutive defeats against Israel. This humiliation has translated into a dearth of productions relating to aspects of Palestinian life in Arab media in general and in cinema in particular, resulting in Palestinian presence confined to the realm of news, in which the Palestinians are codified into numbers of deaths, disenfranchised victims or casualties or mythicized into guerilla fighters and later martyrs.<sup>4</sup> Myth according to Roland Barthes is a mode of signification that is capable of distortion and simplification (1957, 107, 120). Myth itself is capable of eternally justifying the subject, and does not need to explain the latter (Barthes, *Mythologies* 1957, 143). Mythical beings also begin to assume sacrosanct qualities that immunize them against criticism. Turning the Palestinians into *mythical beings* is a form of reductionism, a symbol of the lost nation that denies their transnational complexity. Their prevalent image has for the most part led to the romanticizing (a naïveté often associated with the Orientalist gaze [Friedman 2015, 28]) or marginalization of 'the Palestinian' in popular culture.

In the Arab visual media, any portrayal of Palestinians has fixed them in the above roles.<sup>5</sup> The last decade, however, has not only seen an increase in film production by Palestinians but also an emergence of films that concern themselves with those who have remained in historical Palestine post-1948, and Palestinians who are living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This late representation of Palestinians, however, is no longer one of reductionism or oversimplification but a visual narrative that attempts to represent ordinary people trying to survive in testing situations, resisting mythologization. Contrary to the earlier portrayals of a homogeneous society, Palestinians in film depictions of late are portrayed as people who have agency, and who can think and act independently. The later films have moved away from earlier tropes of revolutionary heroism to include the diversity of the Palestinians (Shafik 2007, 233). Nazareth-born Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad remarked in a private interview that Palestinian cinema 'should reflect the heterogeneous nature of the Palestinian society' (Gertz and Khleifi 2008, 8).

This increasing complexity in representational strategies has led to a number of Palestinian films gaining international recognition. The Palestinian film, which started as an anti-colonial enterprise entwined with the politics of the Arab-Israeli conflict, has developed into a sophisticated cinematic presence in world cinema (Shafik 2007, 235). Even though the Palestinian film for the most part concerns itself with the narrative of the homeland, and the hardship of life under occupation, it cannot be viewed as a national cinema, simply because historic Palestine no longer exists, and the issues tackled are human narratives that transcend Palestinian-specific matters. The Palestinian film invites us to fragments of the Palestinian lived experience, whether it exists in the West Bank, Gaza, under Israeli rule or in the diaspora. Internal and external exile has resulted in the emergence of a transnational cinema that narrates the Palestinian story. As with other Middle East cinema, the 'transnational production and exhibition [of Palestinian cinema] has often involved a move out of the region – physically, mentally and culturally – and has taken the form of a combination of co-production agreements and aid' (Friedman 2015, 19). Often times, the production, distribution and exhibition are dependent on a network of European funding agencies, film festivals and broadcasters (Friedman 2015, 18). As Palestine is a notion of a homeland that

can no longer be defined, the Palestinian cinema has since its inception turned to outside sources for funding. Issues of censorship and evading the control of Arab regimes also encouraged the Palestinian directors to look elsewhere. From its very beginning, then, it has been a distinctly transnational cinema (Friedman 2015, 18).

Along with films by another Nazareth-born filmmaker Elia Suleiman, Abu-Assad's films have participated in international film festivals, at times winning awards. This article examines two films by Abu-Assad that made a mark at such festivals, *Al Janna Al Aan/Paradise Now* (2005) and *Omar* (2013). Abu-Assad, who was born in the Palestinian city of Nazareth in Israel, emigrated to The Netherlands in 1981. His films, which offer new depictions of Palestinians, are funded by a number of countries, namely The Netherlands, France, UAE, USA, Germany and Israel. The two films, which take place in the Palestinian territories and Israel, portray the lives of ordinary Palestinian people as they deal with issues of treason and frustrations under a relentless occupation. This runs contrary to earlier problematic portrayals, which rendered the individuals almost inviolable. Abu-Assad's films, which ultimately demythologize the Palestinian, present themes of human anguish that transcend the boundary of a state. The Palestinians in the film fluctuate between a diminishing homeland and a memory of a lost one, as they stealthily move between the occupied territories to Israel, the site of the lost homeland. Images of heroic martyrs and fighters have finally given way to 'helpless patriarchs, rebellious daughters, and self-aggressive young' men (Shafik 2007, 236).

### Angry young men: banality of life

*Paradise Now*, 2005, depicts the story of two men who have been recruited to carry out suicide attacks in Tel Aviv, Israel. The title of the film, which plays on the promise of paradise in the afterlife, and the name of the Peace Now movement, is set in the West Bank city of Nablus. Gertz and Khleifi argue the film hardly deals with the promised eternal life but with the present in which the two young men are currently living (2011, 195). Khaled (Ali Suleiman) and Said (Kais Nashef) who have volunteered to become suicide bombers two years earlier are informed in the opening scenes of the film that they have been selected to carry out a dual suicide mission in Tel Aviv. The selection process, which functions like a myth, claims to be rigorous, and the young men should feel grateful for being granted this 'honour' of martyrdom or 'shahadah'. Neither Said nor Khaled fit the popular image of the Islamic fundamentalist; they are ordinary men, who when together drink tea, smoke shisha, discuss music and women (Honeycutt 2005, 52). Said and Khaled are mostly 'down to earth (...); personal, even banal, and altruistic' (Lewis 2006, 26). On the other hand, even though their future looks bleak, religion and politics seem marginal parts of their lives (Chahine 2005, 73). The film, which won a Golden Globe for best foreign language film in 2006, and was nominated for an Oscar for the same category of the same year, follows what would be the final days together of the two childhood friends from Nablus as their recruiters prepare them for their mission. Both Khaled and Said are told that they have to leave for their suicidal mission the following morning.

Neither of the men appears to have any set ideology. Disgruntled youth, and stifled by the occupation, they are the antithesis of the mythical hero.<sup>6</sup> Michele Aaron argues that the film constructs Said and Khaled as 'dead-already rather than suicidal', and that "'Dead-already-ness" is a pervasive theme, not just denoted by these characters but also attached to the state of occupation itself' (2014, 86). Deadness is the motif that pervades the film. The depicted

landscape around their city, Nablus, is one of destruction and discarded broken objects, a point I will return to later. In a place where there is no freedom of movement, Said refers to his occupied homeland as a prison, an emphasis on his non-functioning nation. In the investigation scene, when Abu Karem (Ashraf Barhoum) tells Said the group can no longer trust him following the botched first attempt at suicide, issues of humiliation and disgrace surface. Said, whose father has been killed by the militants for having collaborated with the Israelis, is keen to become a suicide bomber to erase a history that has disgraced him and his family. Principally, Said's motivation for volunteering to become a human bomb is to 'whitewash his family's reputation because of his father's alleged history as Israeli collaborator' (Shafik 2007, 237). He is neither striving for heroism nor martyrdom. In spite of his mother (Hiam Abbas) repeatedly telling him that his father was only protecting the family, Said is overburdened by the weight of his father's assassination and the shame it brings him. As with a Grecian tragedy, his is a cursed family and the onus is on him to break the curse. Society regards him as a son of a collaborator, and he has to escape this narrative. Said fluctuates between two myths, the would-be martyr and the son of a collaborator, and the director attempts to deconstruct both throughout. Said is hardly engaged with the society around him and even though he 'moves on foot, he is largely disengaged from the society through which he passes. Viewers see him walking through the bustling streets of downtown Nablus but never see those streets through his eyes' (Yaqub 2011, 225). His ambling in the streets of Nablus assume an ethereal quality; he is in the street but not quite there. Said is a more solitary figure than Khaled and due to his predicament lacks autonomy (Yaqub 2011, 225). After the failure of his first attempt, Said briefly returns to his home and watches his mother from the window; sensing that someone is outside, his mother stares out of the window but does not see him, as he is already lost to her, acquiring a ghostly presence (Ball 2012, 96). Said is metaphorically already dead. In addition, his uncanny resemblance to his father is confirmed by his mother when she tells him, 'it's unbelievable how much you look like your father,' a sentence that evokes an angry stare from him as he prunes the tree in front of their house. He tries to find out from his mother if the people's accusations are true, but she asks him to forget, telling him only time will tell.

The line between the collaborator and the traitor is blurry, as treason 'is ultimately a social construct. Definitions vary with circumstances. It depends on who does the defining, how they analyze the political situation, and, of course, what their values are' (Cohen 2008, 5). The thought that his father was perceived as a traitor not only weighs heavily on Said but has also symbolically paralysed him. When Said's mother reads his fortune in his coffee cup, she remarks, 'Oh, my God. Your future is blank,' as she sees only whiteness, a premonition of the later events in the film. Jean Baudrillard argues that the suicide bomber operates within the realm of the symbolic and his sacrificial act defies the system making it collapse under the weight of its own reality (2002, 409). The suicide planners use Said and Khaled as pawns in the impending terrorist acts, which are constructed to 'mirror exorbitantly the system's own violence' by enacting a sacrificial death, which 'is symbolically forbidden to the system' (Baudrillard 2002, 409).

Throughout the film we are exposed to a landscape in ruins whether a consequence of debris following consecutive Israeli bombardments of houses and buildings or as a result of an infrastructure of a city that is barely functioning. The prevalence of broken cars in the scenes is indicative of a breakdown of the social and economic fabric of the Palestinian society (Yaqub 2011, 225). One of the earlier scenes of the film takes place in the garage in

which both Said and Khaled work; an argument ensues between the customer and the two auto mechanics over an uneven bumper.<sup>7</sup> In order to prove that the bumper is straight, Said measures it against the ground, which he claims is not straight either. To end the argument, Khaled breaks off the bumper with an iron rod, an action that costs him his job, an act, which consolidates from the first scenes the link between the land, the life and the cars, as it is not the bumper that is lopsided but the land itself (Aaron 2014, 87). The unevenness is an indication of a society that can barely function under the stifling pressure of occupation. The actual nation prevented from realization has transformed into a mythical idea of the nation and is sustained in textual terms by sacrifice and death, and in commercial terms by transnational modes of production and distribution. Feelings of frustration and the belief that one is helpless can only translate into senseless violence. The film provides an uncomfortable intimate view of the Arab/Israeli conflict, 'an act of remembrance suffused with bitterness' (Jaafar 2006, 63).

Symbolism functions subtly in the film. The film begins with the Huwara checkpoint on the outskirts of Nablus, one of many that dot the West Bank landscape. In the scene, the checkpoint looms large as we see a young woman, Suha (Lubna Azabal), walking towards the checkpoint; it is worth noting that during the search, the garments that the Israeli soldier rummages through are namely black, red, white and green colours of the Palestinian flag, the female being the custodian of the flag.

According to Ali Daraghmeh, the film, which has received world praise, has never been screened in Nablus and was not very well received by some Palestinians as it represented 'the bombers as less than heroic and godless, hesitant in their mission' (2006). The Middle East premier of *Paradise Now* was in the 2005 Dubai International Film Festival edition, and not in the Palestinian territories. The image of the would-be bombers contradicts the myth of the martyr in the popular imagination. Instead, Said and Khaled are average angry young men. Barring their suicide mission, the concerns of these two young men transcend the Palestinian landscape. Said and Khaled are typical of men their age who face unemployment and live in poverty, with no prospect of a better life. Granted, these issues are compounded by occupation but their disillusionment is not unique. The film delves into the psyche of both men as they question their impending mission, the morality of carrying out such an act and the motives behind their volunteering. In an earlier conversation with Said, Khaled equates occupation with death, 'In this life we're dead anyway'. To him, it is a life that is not worth living, and if he cannot be equal in life, at least he can aspire to be equal in death. He tells Abu Karem, 'if they take on the role of oppressor and victim ... then I have no choice but to also be a victim'. Nonetheless, neither Khaled nor Said is able to find one definitive or even convincing justification, least of all to themselves, for their imminent undertaking.

Yaqub argues that *Paradise Now* can be read as an anti-wedding film, as weddings are a potent symbol of a united community (2011, 220). In the photo shop, when Said first goes to get his picture taken for the posters that will be used as announcement following his death, a video of a wedding is playing in the background. When Said and Khaled are prepared for their missions, they are prepared in the manner of would-be grooms. They begin to assume mythical qualities, objects that are 'prey of mythical speech [and once] they disappear, others take their place and attain the status of myth' (Barthes, *Mythologies* 1957, 108), as the likes of Jamal (Amer Hlelel) can prey on younger children. Said, although attracted to Suha, does not consider in his current circumstances that he is entitled to have a relationship. His situation typifies the concerns of young men like him who due to their



economic situation and grim prospects are unable to commit themselves to a relationship. When he visits Suha at 4 am under the pretext of giving her the car keys, he resists any romantic overtures. They are opposites, her father being the respected martyr while his the collaborator; they come from very different backgrounds; she talks of Japanese minimalist cinema, while he talks of the time ten years ago when he was involved in burning the Rivoli cinema in Nablus. Her narrative is constructed on the rebirth of a nation, his is on the impossibility of its birth. Moreover, any attempts by Suha at flirtation are thwarted by Said from their inception. Said only kisses Suha in the car, hours before he leaves for his suicide mission. Aaron states:

The occupation's equation with death is most powerfully manifested through Said's lifelessness, his characterization as a broken man. Relentlessly morose, he is unwilling, if not unable, to smile, despite, for example, the coaxing of a photographer taking his picture or Suha's flirtation. His rejection of romance is established early, whereas the impossibility of it is conveyed throughout. (2014, 88)

In the two serious conversations Suha has with Khaled and Said at different times, she tries to persuade the young men that violent acts are not the solution; she believes that peaceful resistance or *Summud* can achieve more.<sup>8</sup> Being a daughter of the martyr Abu Assaf who was killed by the Israeli Mossad, she sees no valour in acts of violence. Suha, who is also a human rights activist, tells Said that there is no heroism in an armed struggle, and that she would have preferred to have her father alive. The myth of heroism is chosen by a history that does not replicate reality (Barthes, *Mythologies* 1957, 108). Said and Khaled are anti-heroes who fail to incorporate the mythical. According to Suha, acts of suicide bombers can only strengthen the Israelis. In a later conversation with Khaled towards the end of the film, following Suha's learning of their plans, she questions Khaled over his motives, and tells him that what they are planning is only revenge. She even tells him that there is no heaven that awaits him. Failing to justify their impending act, Khaled distractedly answers that they are already in hell, and the act is justified even if heaven only exists in his head. Samuel Thomas argues, 'In the most desperate of circumstances, entombed in a terminal environment, Khaled will surrender his own life (and the lives, potentially, of many others) to a process of metaphorical substitution' (2011, 431). As with hell here, which is substituted by a metaphorical heaven there, life is easily substituted by death. Khaled's response to Suha in a similar conversation is just as evasive; he tells her, 'It's God's will'. In Said's life, everything is preordained.

The film demystifies the role of the heroic martyr, which is perpetrated by the likes of Jamal, the overseer of the mission. Jamal tries to justify the operation to the young men describing it as an act to avenge the killing of Abu Jihad and a young boy who died during the Israeli strike at the same time. Jamal is, 'the ambivalent "fixer" character who also operates as a respected community official ... issues his instructions to the two would-be shuhada without breaking a sweat' (Thomas 2011, 433). As there is no fixity in mythical concepts, Jamal can alter and disintegrate the myth because the latter is a product of a history that can easily be suppressed (Barthes, *Mythologies* 1957, 119). It is ironic when Said's mother who is oblivious to what's going on tells Jamal when he spends the night at her house that she is happy that someone like him is working at the school (a possible venue for recruiting the potential suicide bombers), protecting the young. Another myth is debunked. Jamal, who hardly appears sympathetic to the young men, assures Said and Khaled in a matter-of-fact fashion that their families will be taken care of after their deaths and that their photos will

be plastered on the walls of the city. His comments fail to answer Said's existential question of what will happen after they detonate the bombs as Jamal gives them detailed instructions in the car for their impending suicide bombings. Instead, his infantile response of the two angels that will carry them to heaven, trivializes the lives of these two men, as myth is a value that lacks truth, and its meaning is to present a form, which is there to outdistance the meaning (Barthes, *Mythologies* 1957, 122). Lack of empathy towards the young men is prevalent throughout the film. As the young men are being prepared for martyrdom, they are asked to pose holding machine guns in front of the group's logo, recite verses from The Quran and scripted testimonial sentences. These so-called wills and justifications for their acts will be given to their families following their deaths. As they are being recorded, the other militants watch over nonchalantly eating the sandwiches that were prepared by Khaled's mother.<sup>9</sup> In the film, the mothers revere life as opposed to the recruiters who disregard it; the image of the giving Palestinian mother, who values life, is one that can resonate with an international audience, as opposed to that of the suicide bomber who appears to devalue life, and helps explain the transnational success of the film.

Thomas states that throughout the film

... Abu-Assad even dares to find elements of tragicomic, almost Beckettian slapstick in these darkest corners of contemporary experience—from the continual motif of malfunctioning automobiles, faintly pantomimic symbols of an ever-degrading social and economic infrastructure, to the protracted scene in which Khaled films his martyrdom video before embarking on the mission. Having been asked to repeat his impassioned message of holy resistance after the cameraman leaves the lens cap on during the first take (which essentially functions as an out-and-out gag), Khaled breaks from the script and includes a message for his mother about the cheap water filters available from a local store. (2011, 441)

Jamal's part along with the others' roles is confined to preparing young men like Khaled and Said to become suicide bombers. It is doubtful that they will ever partake in such an activity themselves. Abu-Assad returns to the theme of food when Khaled and Said are asked to join the others for a meal. Their final meal echoes Christ's last supper, as 13 men sit at a long table facing the camera in a tableau that evokes Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The director is using an iconic symbol of Christianity as a reminder that this land, which gave birth to Christianity, has transcended physical borders from time immemorial. Symbolically, the bread becomes the body of the martyrs that would be sacrificed; a myth is stolen to be restored by another (Barthes, *Mythologies* 1957, 124). When the camera fails to record, Khaled is casually asked to repeat his testimony; the men who are recording are oblivious to the mental anguish of the young man reading his final statement. Life and death become inconsequential; this is apparent at the end of the recording when Khaled remembers to advise his mother on camera to purchase another brand of water filters. In spite of his imminent death, Khaled clings to life through the motif of water. It is worth noting that the director returns to the subject of these recordings, which become part of a commercial venture in a later scene. When Said and Suha go to the photography shop to pick up photos he had taken earlier, the video that is now playing in the background is of a suicide bomber. The owner of the shop tells them that he sells videos by suicide bombers and recordings by collaborators before they are killed, and how the latter are more popular with the masses. The repetitive act of watching and playing the videos heightens the mythical dimension associated with martyrs and collaborators. Said's promise of heaven in the afterlife is reduced to an entertainment video rented for three shekels, or sold for fifteen, to keep the myth alive.



Yaqub states: '*Paradise Now* ... uses a planned suicide bombing to explore division and sterility within Palestinian society' (2007, 221). This is evident from the very beginning of the film. The friends who live in the refugee camp and barely survive as car mechanics, are very much frustrated by the trying circumstances of their lives under occupation. Living in the refugee camp implies the loss of the initial homeland, leaving both Said and Khaled haunted by a history of an earlier generation. In addition, a refugee camp exists in no-man's-land, continually suspended in the present, a result of a past but not part of it, and denied the possibility of belonging to a future. Neither character in the film ever smiles; when Said is asked more than once to smile for a photograph early on in the film, he is incapable of smiling. Suha makes a remark on his unsmiling face when they pick up his photographs. Throughout the film, various characters complain of the unnatural and difficult situation they live in under occupation, in which even basic amenities such as clean water are not available. If water is indicative of life, lack of it is indicative of death. The motif of water runs through the film and silently resonates with the commonly quoted verse from The Quran 'We made every living thing of water' ('The Prophets' 1974). In his last supper at home, which includes Jamal, Said's brother asks his mother if she had changed the filter as the water now tastes different.<sup>10</sup> The mother silences him. A global audience can empathize with ordinary people struggling with mundane problems, albeit made harder by occupation and the absence of a nation.

On more than one level, the film functions in binary opposites, death and life, fancy neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv and war ravaged buildings in Nablus. Through a hole in a barbed wire, the two young men make their way from the impoverished third world to the hi-tech Israel of high-rise buildings and freeways (Twair 2006, 59). The film not only exposes the dichotomy that exists between the Palestinian and Israeli societies but also the fissures that exist within the Palestinian societal fabric – the daily banality vis-à-vis the hardship of life under occupation. Before sending the men on their mission, the two men are subjected to a ritual of cleansing; their hair is cut; their faces clean-shaven; they are made to wear elegant suits, which gives the impression that they are either bridegrooms or guests going to a wedding. Jamal tells them if they are questioned in Tel Aviv, they are to respond that they are settlers going to attend a wedding. When Said returns to Nablus in search of Khaled following their first failed attempt, a number of people ask him if he is on his way to a wedding. Abu-Assad is once again juxtaposing life and death (the nation and the non-nation), the wedding being a symbol of rebirth and the mythical wedding signifying the death of a martyr, a rebirth after life. In these situations, traditional mourning is not accepted, a cultural practice the director of the film is questioning. Moreover, Abu-Assad is questioning the whole notion of suicide bombing, which also exists beyond Israel/Palestine. These acts have negated the Palestinian cultural identity, whether within the borders of historical Palestine or in the diaspora, reducing an ancient rich culture to one that glorifies death and violence.

The film ends with Said sitting in an Israeli bus in Tel Aviv on which there are some military personnel, and the explosives are strapped to his body. As he is about to pull the string in order to detonate the bomb, his face begins to dominate the frame as the camera moves towards him (Aaron 2014, 83). The camera settles for twenty seconds on an extreme close-up of his expressionless and unreadable face before the director cuts to white. Said's impenetrable blank gaze is reminiscent of the whiteness we saw earlier in his coffee cup. Nouri Gana argues that Khaled and Said are rendered almost identical in their matching

black suits, and how previously the overflowing coffee pot on the gas stove prefaces Khaled's volatile temper, but the difference in their temperaments is not as defined as previously understood (Gana 2008, 28). Said emerges as Khaled's alter ego, which 'can nuance further an already nuanced ending' in which the hesitant Said transforms into the previously determined Khaled (Gana 2008, 28). By blurring the divide between the two characters, Abu-Assad is not only obscuring the line between life and death, between martyrdom and terrorism, but also the definition of treason itself.

### Which one of us is the collaborator?

Abu-Assad returns to the theme of betrayal and treason in his recent production *Omar*. *Omar*, which was nominated for the Oscar's Best Foreign Language Film of the Year and is a winner of a number of international awards, follows the story of three childhood friends who are affiliated with the Aksa Martyrs' Brigade. The three young men carry out a sniper attack on an Israeli military outpost in Huwara, killing one soldier, which Abu-Assad sees as 'motivated more by a sense of adolescent recklessness than political fury' (2014). Their immature action, typical of youth, is partly meant as proof of manhood, and spearheads a series of tragic and absurd events that bind the participants in a 'web of conflicting loyalties and motives' (Scott 2014). The film begins with Omar (Adam Bakri) negotiating the overpowering separation wall, which cuts across the West Bank, at once severing the houses from the farms, cities, towns and villages from other cities, towns and villages and from Israel. The wall symbolically fragments the already divided country into mini enclaves, aborting any possibility of a state. These isolated areas can only look elsewhere to sustain themselves. As with the colours of Suha's clothes during the search at Huwara checkpoint in *Al Janna Al Aan/Paradise Now*, the graffiti on the wall is in the colours of the Palestinian flag. Omar uses a rope to climb over the separation wall in order to see his girlfriend, Nadia (Leem Lubany), who is also Tarek's (Iyad Hourani) sister. Their third friend Amjad (Samer Bisharat) is also in love with Nadia, a love triangle that is doomed from the start. Following their killing of the Israeli soldier at the checkpoint, the Israeli authorities capture Omar, and try to persuade him through various means to confess the name of the killer. In spite of subjecting Omar to various torments, the interrogators fail to obtain an admission from him. During lunch, Agent Rami (Waleed Zuaiter) introduces himself to Omar as another prisoner, Hasan Ismail from Al Aksa Brigade. He manages to get a half-hearted confession from Omar by pretending to warn him about other prisoners who are in fact Israeli agents. Omar's lawyer (Yael Leyer) later informs Omar that in Israeli courts, his sentence 'I will never confess', which Rami was able to record, counts as a confession, and he faces at least 90 years of life imprisonment.

Sean Stewart argues that Omar

... grows to become essentially about life itself – the twists mirroring its unpredictable nature. In a scene late in the film Nadia explains a decision by saying, 'Life got too big for me.' This is, in many ways, the tragedy of each character in the film ... As the lines grow fuzzy, each character makes decisions of ambiguous morality and motive, the repercussions of which are ... permanent. (2014)

Life is indeed too big for the three friends, as their circumstances resulting from lives under occupation are a heavy burden to bear. They are too young to understand the implications and consequences of their act; their play at heroism backfires. We see them as normal

teenagers in any given country making jokes about Marlon Brando and Brad Pitt; Omar and Nadia dream of travelling to Paris for their honeymoon. The friends like adolescents elsewhere indulge in future dreams that involve the freedom of mobility denied to them; they exist in their isolated enclaves but their aspirations extend beyond. As the film progresses, the viewers witness how these inexperienced youths end up serving as ‘pawns for military players on both sides’ (Lacey 2014). Following his first arrest, Omar is released from prison for one month on the understanding that he would lead the Israelis to Tarek. Naively, Omar believes that he will be able to outsmart the Israelis. In a conversation with Nadia by her school, he tells her, ‘Don’t be worried. Everything is under control. Just hold on and we’ll be together ... I promise ... I’ll fix everything. Promise.’ Once again, we witness the hubris of youth, believing that he is in control. The dialogue between Omar and Nadia is not a simple elucidation, but a sequence of messages and meanings that are not to be found in the scene itself (Barthes, *Image Music Text* 1977, 41). We later learn that he cannot fix anything. When the Israeli security guards chase Omar, we are exposed to the West Bank’s landscape of narrow alleys and densely populated houses, which adds to the claustrophobic existence of people living under occupation. Scott argues: ‘The embattled topography of the area – desolate hillsides shadowed by barbed wires and high concrete security barriers – is both a backdrop and a living presence, a constant reminder that every aspect of local existence is intensely politicized’ (2014). With such an existence, any possibility of a normal life is not conceivable.<sup>11</sup> Even the streets ‘teem with cynicism, conspiracy and corruption’ (Scott 2014). Distrust between people escalates with the progress of the film; everyone becomes the victim of suspicion; everyone is a potential traitor. The prison-like feeling of the place adds to these feelings of suspicion and mistrust; the objective is to survive.

Following the failed ambush of the Israeli soldiers in the café, Omar is arrested again and told by Agent Rami that they can no longer trust him. Omar persuades Agent Rami to release him, and he is released after being fitted with a tracking device. Omar survives on the hope that he can protect his and Nadia’s love, but like everyone in the film, he is vulnerable to doubt, which the Israelis succeed in heightening (Kennedy 2014). Having been shaped by occupation, the three friends who had to grow up much faster than others of their generation remain for the most part immature. More accurately, the friends are constantly fluctuating between the worlds of adults and teenagers, which as the film progresses evolve into a commodity they are deprived of more and more as circumstances force them to grow up. The shooting of the soldier becomes the initiation into adult life and a rude awakening of their lives under occupation. Omar owns a bakery, and saves money in order to be able to marry Nadia; however, on a number of occasions in the film, he and Nadia exchange little notes expressing their feelings, an action reminiscent of childhood. Omar shows Nadia the place which he hopes to rent for them when they get married; in play like fashion, he points to the divisions he has created in the empty space, which includes a place for his kitten. Nonetheless, when Agent Rami coerces Omar into becoming a collaborator, the youth loses, as he cannot compete with the cunning Israeli investigator in the world of adults. Agent Rami is always one step ahead of Omar. Even though Omar is convinced that he is not a collaborator, everyone at home, including Nadia, assume that he is one, and is labelled as such. His status of potential hero is thwarted early on. Hillel Cohen argues:

... the definition of treason was ambiguous, elusive, and a matter of dispute. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize when a person was reviled as a traitor only by a specific political group,

and it is not always possible to distinguish between national interests and personal, political, and family interests when the label was applied. (2008, 51)

Agent Rami plants in Omar's head the idea of a possible relationship between Amjad and Nadia, which is later confirmed by Amjad. Omar decides the only way to protect Nadia is to persuade her brother to sanction a marriage between her and Amjad. When an accidental bullet from Tarek's gun leaves him dead during an argument, once again the unfolding events prove that life is indeed too big. Omar is instrumental in persuading Nadia's father to accept Amjad's marriage proposal. By handing over his savings to Amjad, he is trying to break away from his past. During Tarek's funeral, Omar tells Amjad, 'From now on you don't know me and I don't know you' (Abu-Assad, *Omar* 2013). When later in the film Omar finds out that Amjad was the traitor amongst them, and he was acting solely to win Nadia over, Omar decides to sever all ties with him, falsely believing that he is in control of his life, and is able to start anew.

Abu-Assad describes the film simply as 'a tragic story about a lover who makes a bad choice' but such themes the director adds are bigger than us (Covert 2014). In addition, Abu-Assad says *Omar* tackles human issues of friendship, trust and betrayal (Covert 2014). These issues are not confined to people living under occupation, but ones that humanity has to contend with. Nonetheless, the director is showing us a world from which all trust has vanished, and every relationship carries in its fold the potential of betrayal (Scott 2014). Even though their world is marked by occupation, the characters in *Omar* have their own human shortcomings to contend with, and through such individualizing strategies, international audiences are able to connect with characters who thus move beyond common mediated stereotypes. Occupation stifles and dehumanizes the people who live under it. It restricts normal human development and deforms those it touches. In *Omar*, every character is disfigured, the occupier and the occupied. Omar finds out towards the end of the film the lies that he has been fed by Agent Rami, and consequently by Amjad who deliberately made them in order to marry Nadia. Omar also discovers that he will never be free of Agent Rami who returns after two years demanding another 'favour' of Omar asking him to help them find 'Muhsin Ali-Taha' (Abu-Assad, *Omar* 2013). The promise that Omar secured earlier from Agent Rami believing that he is finally free of the Israeli agent is short-lived. Agent Rami tells Omar that he does not have many options, and if he refuses to collaborate, they will destroy him, Amjad and Nadia. Omar realizes that he can never be free of them. After persuading the Israeli agent to give him a gun, the two meet in a field of cacti, the plant that in spite of everything continues to grow out of the earth, and which has become a symbol of Palestinian resistance. In spite of the loss and frustrations, Omar proves to be as resilient as the cacti. He does not respond to Rami's question about the person, but instead, he asks him Amjad's earlier question to him and Tareq, 'Do you know how they catch monkeys in Africa?' before shooting him dead (Abu-Assad, *Omar* 2013). According to the anecdote narrated by Amjad, sugar cubes are used to entice the monkeys; once the animals become addicted to sugar, the hunters place cubes in holes with small openings in the ground. The monkeys' fists are stuck in the holes, and they cannot pull them out, worried that they will drop the cubes. The hunters then throw in their nets. Figuratively, the entrapped victims cannot pull their wrists out of the hole. His earlier conversation with Nadia of being in control and his belief that he can fix anything is shattered by the shot at Agent Rami. The shot also discredits the myth of the all-powerful Israeli savvy agent.

## Conclusion

A few scenes earlier, Omar is not able to climb the wall, and this weakness brings tears to his eyes. He can no longer reconcile the two fragmented worlds. An old man eventually aids him. In his final visit to Nadia after two years, he learns of Majid's lie to him when he finds out the birthdate of the child. He realizes that being in control and having the choice and will to live his life are commodities he never possessed, as there 'is no more discussion, no more honour, no more religion. All that remains is a disintegrating idea' (Mozaffar 2014). Life is indeed bigger than all of them, and the separation wall that he could no longer climb unaided stands as a painful reminder. In both his films, Abu-Assad has not only succeeded in providing an alternative narrative to tell the Palestinian story but also by resorting to a 'personal angle' he has escaped the old storylines that ignore the diversity and the mundane matters that reflect the Palestinian lives (Gertz and Khleifi 2011, 191). The director has successfully presented to a world audience images of Palestinians that defy the prevalent stereotypes, which has long robbed them of their humanity. Even under occupation, Palestinians have to contend with issues that are not unique to the Palestinian situation, but are informed by it, daily lives that bring with them hardships, betrayals and treason. Abu-Assad's character portrayals, which have successfully resisted mythologization, depict a priori ordinary humans caught in the labyrinth of occupation. Moreover, the current portrayals are no longer frozen by ideologies that have long stunted the development of Palestinian cinema and denied it an international presence. It can be argued that Palestinian cinema has matured to enjoy its rightful place on the world stage.

## Notes

1. Gertz and Khleifi argue that the violence of the present was often linked to the violence of 1948, and linking the trauma of the past with the present helps in establishing a national identity, at a time when 'Palestinian society was fractured into various diasporas, classes, generations, and religious groups. The memory of the common past and shared place, along with the revival of that past in the present, functioned to foreground unity rather than dwelling on differences and controversies. Palestinian cinema generated one history revolving around a single, crystallizing memory shared by all' (2011, 188).
2. Kamal Abdel-Malek lists the main themes of Palestinian cinemas, occupation, identity formation, refugees, exile, return, women, 1948 or Nakba, Arab Palestinians who are citizens of Israel, reconciliation and peace, forbidden love and international solidarity with the Palestinians (2005, 116–117).
3. Livia Alexander also argues that the focus of Palestinian cinema changed in the 1980s, and more dynamically following the first Intifadah in 1987 (2005, 154).
4. Palestinian films were shown at Arab and international film festivals but were rarely circulated commercially in Arab countries (Gertz and Khleifi 2011, 190).
5. One exception was *The Invasion (Al Ijtayah)*, (2008) – a Jordanian TV series that won an Emmy award.
6. In an interview with Linda Butler, psychiatrist Eyad El Sarraj states the reason that propels some to become suicide bombers is 'despair. The hopelessness that comes from a situation that keeps on getting worse, a despair where living becomes no different from dying. Desperation is a very powerful force – it's not only negative. It propels people to actions or solutions that previously would have been unthinkable' (2002, 72).
7. Suha is constantly encountering car trouble, 'Taxis are decrepit; the window in Suha's doesn't close, and the door in Sa'id's is jammed' (Yaqub 2007, 77).
8. *Summud* is a term used to describe steadfastness in the land, resisting eviction.



9. Yaqub writes, ‘They are bearers of culture and sustainers of life; both Said’s and Khaled’s mothers, Umm Said and Umm Khaled, are shown lovingly preparing food for their families and busy with the chores that keep a home functional’ (2011, 222).
10. Yacub states, ‘Environmental degradation is suggested by the motif of water filters running through the film. In a sign of the intrusion of crass commercialism into the private reaches of Palestinian homes, Sa’id’s brother quotes a radio ad for filters. Sa’id’s taxi driver uses the ad as an excuse to complain about the Israeli settlers’ pollution of West Bank water (thereby effectively politicizing the environment), and Khaled interrupts the filming of his own martyr’s video to advise his mother on where to purchase better filters’ (2007, 77).
11. Kennedy writes, ‘In the midst of this smartly paced tale of coercion and betrayal – political but also personal – Abu-Assad offers glimpses of a more routine life in the Palestinian Territories. Omar makes pita at a bakery. Nadia heads home, smiling and laughing with her female classmates. Like young guys everywhere, Tarek, Omar and Amjad shoot the breeze in a backyard’ (2014).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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