



University of East London Institutional Repository: <http://roar.uel.ac.uk>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require purchase or a subscription.

Author(s): Bresheeth, Haim

Article title: A Symphony of Absence: Borders and Liminality in Elia Suleiman's Chronicle of a Disappearance

Year of publication: 2002

Citation: Bresheeth, H. (2002) 'A Symphony of Absence: Borders and Liminality in Elia Suleiman's Chronicle of a Disappearance' Framework 43 (2) 71-84

Publisher link: <http://www.frameworkonline.com>

A Symphony of Absence:

Borders and Liminality in Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance*

Haim Bresheeth

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

I'm encircled by giant buildings and Kibbutzes. As if that was not enough, my collar is choking me. An odd bond unites me to those people, like an arranged marriage, with this lake as a wedding ring. Not long ago, those hills were deserted, at night, when I gazed at the hills from the monastery, I contemplated a particular spot, the darkest on the hills. Fear would grab me, a fear with a religious feeling, as if this black spot were the source of my faith . . .

Then, they settled on those hills, and illuminated the whole place; that was the end for me, I began losing faith . . . I feared nothing any longer, now my world is small . . . they have expanded their world, and mine has shrunk. There is no longer a spot of darkness over there.

(Russian-Orthodox Priest speaking by Lake Galilee in Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance*)

Missing boundaries

This article discusses Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) on the background of the Al Aqsa Intifada. The film was chosen not only because of its innovative aesthetics but also due to its prophetic, as well as, disturbing political analysis of the Zionist enterprise embedded within its unique cinematic style.

From its inception, the Zionist project has set itself no clear territorial boundaries. Thus while historical Palestine is a definable territory, that of Zionism is not.¹ Consequent Israeli governments, both left and right, have continued this ideological policy of territorial ambiguity, conquering and occupying new territories, disrespecting the legal status of internationally recognized borders, and making territorial claims for Palestinian lands.

Examining Palestinian existence against the backdrop of Zionist colonization, presents us with an ongoing process of loss of land on the one hand, and of the purchase on reality on the other. The two processes are locked together in a cruel dynamic of interchangeability—the *Ingathering of the Exiles* to Israel, mirrored by the parallel process of the Nakba,² and the spreading waves of Palestinians refugees—millions since 1948—all over the middle East, and later, further afield. In this process, in which one side's gain is the other side's loss (as is evident from the Priest's speech in Suleiman's film) both dynamics are locked together; Zionism has gained a territory, while the Palestinians have lost most of theirs, and its very heart—the whole of the coastal plain, with cities such as Jaffa, Haifa and Acre, much of Jerusalem, and after 1967, the rest of the country; the various maps drawn by Israel daily, representing possible planned partial withdrawals, excel in drawing tight boundaries around all cities to be returned to Palestinian control—Gaza, Hebron, Nablus, Ramallah and Jenin. The flashpoints of this struggle become the hundreds of roadblocks and checkpoints—the forced separations of conflicting entities, of identities in conflict. In this way, the two nations are now mortally locked in a struggle around boundaries, in which the subtext is a struggle about identity. Boundary struggles are always struggles about the *self*, and its separation from the *other*.

This kind of Israeli-Palestinian existence in a borderless, liminal territory, has been the topic of a few Israeli films which have tackled the border zones of identity—from the early ideological border epics *Hill 24 Does Not Answer* (Thorold Dickinson, Israel, 1955), and *They Were Ten* (Baruch Dinar, Israel, 1960), to the mature *Khamsin* (Danny Wachsmann, Israel, 1982), *Avanti Popolo* (Rafi Bukai, Israel, 1986), and *The Cherry Season* (Haim Buzaglo, Israel, 1991). In all these films, the plot takes place in liminal zones—a hill defending the frontier, a desert between battling armies, or the Lebanese hinterland in which the Israeli army roams, an aggressor finding itself under attack, everywhere, and nowhere in particular. It is interesting to note that in those films the ground fought over is almost always hostile to the Israelis—the Lebanese lush countryside is no less inhospitable than the Sinai desert—both embodying the struggle against Zionist expansionism. Both landscapes become killing fields full of obstacles and traps for the Israeli occupiers who find themselves besieged by the new hostile territory, recalling the mental siege experienced by the American soldiers in the hallucinatory and nightmarish jungle of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (U.S. 1979).

If much of Israeli cinema deals with the liminality of the process of *becoming*, it befits Palestinian film to deal with the liminality of *loss* and *disappearance*—of country, of the people, of the Self. In no other Palestinian film are these processes of loss and disappearance more beautifully captured than in Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance*. Using a diary format, the film tells the story of a visit to Palestine by a film director (played by Suleiman himself).³ The first part of that *diary* is mainly shot in Nazareth and the Galilee, and is titled 'A Personal Diary'. The second part, mainly shot in Jerusalem, is entitled 'Political Diary.' Throughout, there is use of self-reflexive mechanisms such as written titles and non-diegetic music, which separate this film from a 'normative' feature film. It would be most difficult, maybe even futile, to try and define the genre of this film. As pointed out by Hamid Naficy (1999, 125-150), the type of film he terms 'exilic' is by definition liminal, ranging across cinematic genres, but neatly avoiding classification within any of them. It is as if the extreme and disturbing situation giving rise to such films, forces its transient and liminal nature on the discursive forms themselves, creating a hybrid of a kind difficult to fit into normative taxonomies.

Liminality in Chronicle of a Disappearance: the outer surfaces of inner realities

Even given the liminality of film *per se* as a *medium*, Suleiman's film is an extremely liminal affair. It travels along and above boundaries of generic identity, never to settle on either side during this cinematic journey. Its fields of cinematic reference (and reverence) are complex—from Tati of *Mon Oncle* (Jacques Tati, France/Italy, 1958), on the one hand, to Moretti's *Caw Diario* (Nanni Moretti, Italy/France, 1994) on the other. The silent skills of Tati are here perfected by the Keatonesque Suleiman himself, not to be heard throughout the film. Instead of the moving and humorous VO of Moretti, he restricts himself to ironically laconic inter-titles: 'The Day After' . . . 'Few Days Passed'—reminiscent of the use of chapter titles by Fielding or Cervantes, cited by Robert Stam (1992, 147)—at once offering us 'information,' but also reflecting or commenting on the incredulity of such a practice. Like Tati, he constructs the physical domain in which to express, and like Moretti, he never misses an opportunity to use reality as a backdrop, or even a set, speaking its own absurdities. His references are not limited to the ones mentioned—he also builds in *homages* to Jost and Gitai, especially in the long tracking shots from a moving vehicle. Side by side we find here scenes that can only be termed as documentary, together with docudrama, fiction, and scenes straight out the *Theatre of the Absurd*. This veritable hybridity, reminiscent of Godard at his best, is but the liminal envelop of the film; its structure, subjects, topics and techniques all deal with, and are expressed through, liminal means. The pre-titles sequence is

the one to introduce the theme—the camera travels over some dark and rocky terrain, completing a half-circle, and revealing, by its gradual tracking out, the face of an old man, Suleiman's father. Only gradually do we realize that this is a double journey—not only over a human face, but also, by proxy, a poetic journey over the countryside of Palestine. This journey around facial landscapes is but one example of the film dealing with liminal experiences—the outward appearance, the outer skin, the unspeaking. Throughout the film, Suleiman makes us fully aware of the closure of his father's universe, and also of his awareness—both his parents are seen but seldom heard—his father talks mainly to his dog, and to his canaries, in both cases through a border, a wire mesh of sorts—the canaries are caged, the dog locked inside a fenced pen. When the father is seen on one occasion hand-wrestling with a line of younger men, the scene is shot through the window of a bar, while we usually gaze at his parents through doorways, most of their bodies obscured by the various structures of the space termed 'home'. The preoccupation with the skin of things is clear in the kitchen scene, in which both parents are preparing an enormous pile of little fish for dinner, by scraping their skin, or in the scene quoted in the motto to the article, where the tourist excreta has become the skin of the lake water. In another scene, the women who came to visit Suleiman's mother, are all discussing at great length the finer points of peeling garlic, and the best time to get rid of its skins. The changeability of surfaces and surface appearances is further enhanced in two long scenes on the fishing boat, where the surface of the water is mated to the *surface of things*, in a funny and sad conversation. Through it, Suleiman shapes his criticism of the Palestinian society. In the night scene, a conversation between two of the fishermen turns around the various *khamulas*, or clans, in the Galilee. The main speaker lists them one by one, carefully ascertaining his friend is not related of any of them, before extolling their negative qualities nastily. Coming to one *Khamula* to which his friend is indeed related, he hastens to add superlatives, ending with: 'against them, no one can say anything . . .' The humor is poignant and painful.

If the Jewish-Israeli society is for Suleiman a distant and bizarre manic order, a physical and aesthetic manifestation of hysteria, then the Palestinian society appears moribund, trapped in its past and its social tradition, crystallized in a web of inertia. While the Israelis are seen to evaporate through manic and absurd hyperactivity, Palestinians are shown as static, almost to the point of disappearance. In most of the shots in the director's home, there is hardly any movement: the film starts with the face of the sleeping father, and ends with a shot of both parents sleeping in front of the television. In many shots the father is seen sleeping or resting, and Suleiman himself, joining his cousin at his tourist shop, becomes inert and motionless—waiting, like the rest of Palestine.

This is expressed by linking the various scenes through the main character, Elia Suleiman, a film director, coming back from 'his forced exile, to make a film about the peace'. In a scene resounding of Beckett and Ionesco's silent speech-makers, Suleiman is invited to speak of his work, and 'of his use of the cinematic language', to a crowd in an East-Jerusalem cultural center. Try as he might, battling with the microphone, he totally fails to utter a single word, defeated by out-of-date, feed-backing technology. Through the speechless Suleiman, his father, cousin, and friends, a certain feature of Palestinian reality, a reality of being throttled, of being silenced, is being spoken here by passages of expressive silence.

Here is a richly reflexive, even *Brechtian* cinema at its most poignant. Typical machineries are used to establish this character. The film is subdivided by titles into parts—the first part being a 'Personal Diary— Nazareth', with the second one called 'Political Diary—Jerusalem'. Suleiman is equally-distanced from both environments, but in very different ways. Nazareth, his Nazareth, is seen as home, as hive, as tribe, as total stasis—his parents and tourist-shop owning cousin representing the various aspects of death and decomposition, intimately and lovingly portrayed. In his Nazareth, there is no space occupied by the Israeli Jew, by the IDF, by Hebrew. The only evidence is in the tourist shop—the postcard rack is loaded with two kinds of postcards—Christian-ritualistic, and Zionist-stereotypical. Apart from this incursion, his Nazareth is Arab and Christian. Being the largest center of Palestinian life within Israel, Nazareth is not just home, but a tangible piece of the lost past, a frame grabbed out of time. Suleiman is shooting his film during the first phase of the painful conflict in Nazareth between Christians and Moslems—a conflict so bitter, that at times it seems to obscure the bigger conflict with Zionism. Indeed, this fraternal inner conflict is seen in many scenes, by showing couples of Arab men in bitter and meaningless conflict—father and son, two friends, men at a restaurant—in all cases we are mystified by the reason to their aggression, but also realize its utter irrelevance. This inner conflict within Palestinian society, reflected elsewhere—Bethlehem, Jerusalem⁴—is an integral part of Suleiman's critique of his own milieu, close to it as he might be.

Suleiman's Jerusalem, on the other hand, expresses a world of difference. It is the locus of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the place where it is kept alive. It is, of course, the historical capital of Palestine, the capital now lost to Zionism almost entirely—an open, festering wound, a lacuna of searing pain. In Jerusalem, Suleiman moves precariously and furtively. Apart from his rented rooms, he scans the city like a stranger, avoiding its public sphere and thoroughfares, meeting few people if any. He calls this part 'Political Diary' because in Jerusalem he is finding it increasingly difficult to act as the *person*, to act *personally*, the way he did in Nazareth. If the Israelis, and the Israeli army, are missing from the Palestinian city of Nazareth, Jeru-

Jerusalem is a space reverberating with the occupation and its iniquities. His picture of the holy city is a Jerusalem-of-the-Absurd, in which Israeli police vans scour the night with flashing lights and blaring sirens, searching aimlessly, leaving their searing mark on the dark expanses which are broken, never to return to peaceful silence again. In an iconic scene, a police van careens wildly into an alleyway, emptying its cargo of robotic police-clones, who immediately line up meticulously along a wall, and piss in total unison, again leaving their mark on Arab Jerusalem. The event is over even before we have fully captured the image, and the crazed crew⁷ is on its way, reporting on the radio 'mission accomplished'. The phased-out Elia Suleiman, a silent witness to this absurd scene, notices that the police clones have left behind them a military-type communicator, which will end up as one of the main symbols of the film—a small object, hiding behind it the huge and invisible machinery of oppression and control. Suleiman picks it up, not sure what he might do with it, or indeed, what it may do to him. Later on in the film the communicator will be used in a way which it was not intended for: A'dan, a young Palestinian woman who Suleiman meets at the Arab estate agent in East Jerusalem, is using it towards the end, in an unforgettable scene, to give the radio command in Hebrew: 'All units, vacate Jerusalem immediately! Jerusalem is no longer *united*. Jerusalem is *not* united!' Having done this, she then softly sings to the units, presumably now leaving Jerusalem, the Israeli national anthem, *Hatikva*. Thus, through a montage sequence of unique power, inter-cutting the singing A'dan, the police vans careening through empty streets, and an Arab dance troupe in a funerary dance, the sequence inverts the meanings, both of the communicator and the anthem—what has been a tool of oppression now becomes a vehicle of liberation, and the anthem of the oppressor (itself speaking of liberation and homecoming) is used by the oppressed. This filmic device offers great power, and derives this power from the very act of transgressing, of breaking boundary lines, of stepping into Hebrew, into the national anthem of Israel, of Zion. This cinematic transgressive device is similar to the ones discussed by Yosefa Loshitzky in her recent book on identity in the Israeli cinema (Loshitzky 2001, 112-153) where she identifies forms of transgression, especially sexual transgression, as typifying its recent output. Such subversive and deconstructive use of objects, of speech, of iconic music, of iconic symbols as the Israeli flag, is strewn throughout the film as pointers, as signposts, as devices of liminality. A grenade and a gun, both on A'dan's desk, turn out to be cigarette lighters; a mannequin in ethnic attire, in the same room, ends up being arrested in A'dan's place, after the police agents have mislaid the real woman. They seem not to notice the difference. In a scene at the tourist shop in Nazareth, we see Suleiman's cousin filling the Holy Water bottles straight out of the tap. No tourist is ever seen entering the shop or buying anything. Reality is seen here not as the order of things, but the device undermining reason and

logic. In a country where reason is no longer viable, Suleiman uses it as an ironic and deconstructive tool.

The economy of pain: mourning and melancholia

Suleiman's is no easy message—it mourns the impossibility of the reversal of events, while brimming with contempt for the naked power and brutality of the occupation. Despite their humor, the scenes in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* described above display clear traits of melancholia. One such example is the beginning of the second part of the film, 'Jerusalem: A Political Diary'. It starts with a very long tracking shot from a car, travelling down from the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem's walls, and specifically, towards the Gate of Mercy.⁵ During this moving and effusive shot, we hear on the soundtrack the Palestinian song 'Why Do We Fight'. The first lines of it are:

*'Why do we fight?
We used to be friends once
Listen to your heart,
And you'll hear the truth
Listen to your heart,
It holds the truth
'Why do we fight?
We used to be friends once.*

This revealing choice of music is of great interest. The film is shot during Netanyahu's derailing of the peace-process by, a time when all hope is lost. The song mourns that other time, in which 'we were friends', knowing it is unlikely to return.

In Freud's key work on mourning and melancholia, (Freud 1917, 247-273) written in 1915 and finally published in 1917, he talks 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 here 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. But Freud distinguishes between mourning—a normal process that duly ends, and melancholia—a pathology that may destroy the subject. Indeed, this article is thought by Peter Gay (Gay 1988, 373), Freud's biographer, and others, to

have marked Freud's transition towards allotting part of the self a special, censorious role, later to be called the *superego*, and marks an important stage in the development of his model of the mind. The ability to rally against *oneself*, to criticize oneself almost to death (and sometimes practically to death)—as is the case with melancholia, has given Freud (Freud 1917, 256) a new direction to his thinking. It is interesting to note that it was during the early period of the war, when its destructive scope became known, that this essay is written, as if it is his reaction to the self-destructive nature of the societies around him. That same self-destructive mode is obviously of great interest to Suleiman in his film—many are the scenes in which, as mentioned above, two Palestinians are fighting each other for no apparent reason. This process of criticizing, or fighting oneself, is a debilitating and paralyzing one, as is often the case in this film. In the end, one has to disappear, as happens in pathological cases of melancholia leading to suicide.⁶

One of the most interesting differences Freud notes between the mourning process and the pathological loops of melancholy, 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 the melancholia is not necessarily a death, or total loss, but a loss akin to the one we are discussing in this film. The loss of one's country, real as it is, is different from death. 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. Freud reminds us that melancholia contains 'something more than normal mourning. In melancholia the relation to the object is no simple one; it is complicated by the conflict due to ambivalence' (Freud 1917, 266).

In an article about the melancholic content of memory in recent exile Armenian documentary cinema, Kassabian and Kazanjian attribute the concept of melancholia to the mental and pro-filmic processes in the films they discuss (Kassabian and Kazanjian, 1999: 202-209). But the experience is mostly that of exiled Armenians, and the land of Armenia is now, at least partially, a political entity controlled by Armenians. In the case of *Chronicle of A Disappearance*, the loss is not one which *has happened*, but one which is still *happening*. This continuing loss is ambivalent—*living in the lost country*. Mourning is not adequate here—melancholia seems to set in as pathology.⁷

Although personalization of Palestinian losses does not absolve Israel of political responsibility, understanding them in terms of melancholy provides new insight into the state of stasis, where resistance is temporarily disabled, delaying the process of mourning and healing. The healing process seems to be bound up with storytelling—it has been so ever since Freud has

developed the 'talking cure.' Here the therapeutic process is centered around telling one's own story, or, if we wish, a structured *return of the (political) repressed*. Going back to the roots of it all, to the moments of crisis and trauma, actively working out the details and the 'deeds done,' seems to provide a close approximation of the psychoanalytical process. But here, more is at stake. The dispossession brought about by occupation is even deeper and more painful than 'just' losing home and country. The ultimate loss is that of losing your story, your identity, losing the right to tell your own story, your own history. That loss is different from the physical loss—Freud distinguishes (Freud 1917, 254) between mourning and melancholia in an additional way—mourning is a process that is wholly conscious, while the loss in melancholia is mainly unconscious. If the loss of the land is a conscious loss, the loss of identity is not—it operates in the twilight zone, hence its greater destructive power. For people affected by deep melancholia lose their voice—they no longer are able to speak for themselves, as their main argument is *against* themselves. This tendency in melancholia, and its intrinsic connection to narcissism (Freud 1917, 261) are two qualities much in evidence in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, a film steeped in melancholia, also built around the self-image of the director. This observation may well relate to the Lacanian nature of the self-image in this film, something that is well beyond the scope of this piece. Suffice it to say that the film clearly serves Suleiman as some kind of pictorial, emotional and conceptual mirror, and through him, the Palestinian people. The laconic Elia Suleiman of the film is an iconic Palestinian clown, there to be affected by whatever is happening, as both a messenger on our behalf, and a scapegoat. Thus, by looking at his unchanging countenance, we see also ourselves—this was always true about film clowns, from Chaplin to Moretti and Benigni. After all, Lacan tells us that in the mirror, everything looks much clearer—the baby sees the mirror image as perfect and coordinated, as having some logic of its own, lacking in him, the source of the image.

Exilic cinema and its inherent liminality

If we accept Freud's notions about melancholia as having some value when relating to the complex and multifaceted processes involved in the Palestinian loss since the Naqba, and specifically in relation to Suleiman's film, then the very *liminality* of the 'genre' of *exilic* cinema becomes an expression of the conditions of the nation and the individual alike. Naficy's assumptions (Naficy 1999, 127) on the nature of such cinema, discussed above, are a further development of the liminal natures of cinemas once called 'independent' or 'Third cinema'—forms of cinematic creativity bound up with extremes of *loss* or *lack*, through the processes which range from 'good old' cultural imperialism, to the complexities of globalization. The methods which are then carved out by filmmakers out of this new real-

ity are contradictory—the onset of the power which robbed them of identity—Globalism, Imperialism, Zionism—has also meant some new forms of expression and dissemination have become available. Nancy points this out, reminding us the complex nature of exilic cinema (Nancy 1999, 128-9)—he defines the two modes powering the exilic production as 'dependence' and 'autonomy'. Hence the very nature of this cinema, its existential drive, is deeply liminal and contradictory. All this has been clearly identified in Suleiman's film above. The silencing and 'dependence' are powering both active resistance and fatalistic silence, with A'dan and Elia Suleiman being their respective engines in the film. Both are telling the story of silence in their different ways—Elia Suleiman (the main character) by perfecting his silence, then disappearing, while A'dan perfects her *voice*—she transmits it further than it could ever reach, by using the army communicator, and also by using the enemy discourse with all its reverberations—talking and singing the anthem in Hebrew.

So, Elia Suleiman, Mohammed Bakri, Nizar Hassan, Azza Hassan, Ra-shid Mashrawi⁸ and their filmmaking colleagues in Palestine must fight for the right to—at least—have their own voice, tell their own story, and history, in their own way. Conceptually and ideologically, they 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. Suleiman himself is an example of this interstitial existence—he divides his time between New York and Palestine, and his film is a co-production: Europe/Palestine is given as its place of origin, in terms of production partners. This interstitial mode of production⁹ 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, by the virtue of power relations, 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/Hebrew name places, because no road leads to them, and they are not connected to the electricity grid. They are called 'unrecognized settlements' and 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. The Hebrew place names are but a smoke screen—in most cases, they hide behind them the Arab former name, like some hidden crime from a dark past.¹⁰ All existence in Palestine/Israel is double existence.

So there are two virtual countries within the same space, two parallel universes disregarding and disparaging 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 justified.

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 the current control of it by Israel. The normal 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 as it were by non-existent people whose non-existent settlements have filled the non-existent gap.

It is on this background that the film operates—the doubled-up reality whereby the Palestinian is there and not there, is present and absent, all at the same time. 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 start reading the absent *other* into the collapse of realities; The absent other of Zionism,¹¹ 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 life in Jerusalem, under control of the occupying power. 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 the endless and aimless sitting by the shop, waiting, waiting . . . then not even waiting anymore. It is in the slow 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 national anthem, with the Israeli flag waving; it is there in the Jericho scene, in which Elia Suleiman 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; the cafe lights, which were put on to mark the passage of day into night, fail badly, and 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, and would not go out, but keep blinking with a will and rhythm of their own. So obvious is his absence, that when an Israeli SWAT team is searching his Jerusalem flat, they do not seem to notice him, though he does all he can to get noticed. At the end of the film, the exiled director chooses to disappear altogether, with a proverbial suitcase, reminding us of the famous poem of Mahmoud Darwish, in which 'home is a suitcase'. Suleiman's alter-ego in the film, the young A'dan, is staying on to fight, representing, like his parents, the *Zumud*, adherence to the land, resistance and survival. If the struggle of the old generation is by powerful passivity, A'dan chooses the active road. To fight an enemy like hers,

one must adopt some of its tactics, some of *its* methods, use some of its machinery. Hence she operates through the ether, using the found communicator for her messages to the enemy, delivered in Hebrew, using the military nonsense-codes so beloved of the IDF. As an ultimate weapon, she uses the Hebrew National anthem, speaking of the hope 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. Liminality is fought with liminality. Those without means, deprived of everything, have to use the power of their oppressors in order to survive, in order not to disappear.

How can one make a film about people and places that are disappearing, about the fragility of this subconscious process? Memory is not enough. It proves nothing. The foundation of *homeland* must be fortified by one's own story and storytelling. Yosefa Loshitzky quotes the poet Mahmoud Darwish, speaking to Batia Gur in newspaper interview (Loshitzky 2001, 171) saying: 'Whoever writes the story (of the place) first—owns the place.' Hence, the identity and the narrative must be regained, the *community must be imagined* anew, in order to exist in the future. The place of home is now taken by narrative icons of the lost *heimat*, recreated for and by the film, such as the stories told by the priest or the writer Mohammad Ali Taha.¹² Palestinian cinema therefore exists on a series of exilic interstices—between fact and fiction, between narrative and narration, between the story and its telling, between *documentary* and *fiction*.¹³ Insofar as it parallels the existence afforded by most Palestinians, facts are not enough, this film seems to tell us. In order to have some space to live in, to bring an end to personal and political melancholia, one must employ fiction and imagination, one must tell stories, even stories of disappearance.

Professor Haim Bresheeth is an author, filmmaker and a film studies scholar. Since 1970 he has lived London, taught cinema studies in London and Israel, made a number of documentary films and published work. Until recently, he was Dean of the School of Media, Film and Cultural Studies at the Sapir College, Israel. Currently, he is Chair of Cultural Studies at University of East London.

Notes

- 1 It is interesting to note that the great debate in the history of Zionism centered around the very choice of territory (or even continent) for the enterprise to settle in.
- 2 *Nakba*—the name given by the Palestinians to the 1948 loss of most of Palestine to the emergent Israeli state, meaning *catastrophe*.

- 3 In order to differentiate between the director of the film, and his main character by the same name, played by him, I use Suleiman when referring to the director, and Elia Suleiman when referring to the film character.
- 4 Suleiman makes his film during a year in which tension between the Christian and Moslem communities in Nazareth is at its height. This tension was frequently used by Israeli governments to base their control of the city. During the last few years, this has centered around the Moslem community trying to build a large mosque few yards away from the Church of the Nativity—a decision hotly contested by the church.
- 5 In Jewish tradition, the Gate of Mercy will remain closed (as it now is) until the coming of the Messiah.
- 6 This approach may offer a new explanation to the phenomenon of suicide bombers which the Al Aqsa Intifada has brought about in great numbers, and which differentiates the Palestinian liberation struggle from most others in history. Commitment to a cause in itself cannot explain this phenomenon, while the melancholic condition offers an interesting proposition. Indeed, Freud himself was aware that that his theory of melancholia had a wider field than just the personal psychoanalytical domain.
- 7 This issue is further developed in another article I wrote about storytelling in recent Palestinian film (Bresheeth, 2001).
- 8 All leading Palestinian filmmakers.
- 9 As termed by Hamid Naficy, in Naficy, H (ed) 1999 *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. London, Roudedge, pp. 125-50.
- 10 This is most common. I myself grew up in a small Palestinian town to the south of Jaffa, called Jabalieh. The post-1948 name for it became Givat Alyia, but it did not catch, and the Arab name continued to be used.
- 11 The refugees of the 1948 war were declared 'absentees' by Israeli law, if they were not at home on the specific date, when most Palestine Arabs fled their homes. Those returning were not allowed into their homes and villages, and termed 'present absentees'! One wonders what is necessary for such inane concepts to continue in existence for over five decades—the Israeli government refused the inhabitants of two villages Ikrit and Biraam, who were 'present absentees'—return to even some of their land, even though the Israeli High Court, the highest judicial authority, has decreed that they should be allowed back, some fifty years ago.
- 12 I have written elsewhere about the role and nature of storytelling in Palestinian cinema (Bresheeth 2001, 24-39).
- 13 Suleiman himself has termed his film as 'very Iranian, because of its crossing of documentary with narrative approach', when debating the film on the web. (message board of the Jewish-Palestinian Encounter Site, quoted in <http://us.imdb.com/chronicle> of a disappearance.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined communities*. London: Verso.
- Bresheeth, Haim. 1989. Self and Other in Zionism: Palestine and Israel in Recent Hebrew Literature. *Khamsin # 16—profile of an occupation*. London: Zed Books: 120-52.

- Bresheeth, Haim. 2001. Telling the stories of *heim* and *heimat*, home and exile: recent Palestinian films and the iconic parable of invisible Palestine. *Xeu' cinemas Vol. 1 # 1*, November: 24-39.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1917. Mourning and melancholia. *On metapsychology*. Penguin Freud Library, Vol. 11. London: Penguin Books (1991).
- Gay, Peter. 1988. *Freud: a life for our time*. London: McMillan.
- Kassabian, Anahid and Kazanjian, David. 1999. Melancholic memories and manic politics: feminism, documentary, and the Armenian diaspora, eds. Waldman, Diane and Walker, Janet. *Feminism and documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 202-223.
- Loshitzky, Yosefa. 2001. *Identity politics on the Israeli screen*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Naficy, Hamid. Ed. 1999 *Home, exile, homeland: film, media, and the politics of place*. London: Routledge.
- Nichols, Bill. 1991. *Representing reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Russell, Catherine. 1999. *Experimental ethnography: the work of film in the age of video*. Durham: Duke University Press: 76.
- Shohat, Ella 1989. *Israeli cinema: East/West and the politics of representation*. Austin. Texas University Press.
- Stam, Robert. 1989. *Subversive pleasures: Bakhtin, cultural criticism, and film*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press.
- Stam, Robert. 1992. *Reflexivity in film and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Winston, Brian. 1995. *Claiming the real: the documentary film revisited*. London: British Film Institute.