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Temporal and Topological: Two Ways of Living Israel/Palestine

Abstract

Elia Suleiman and Amos Gitai are two Israeli filmmakers, Palestinian and Jewish respectively. Gitai's first film, *House* (1980), was censored by Israeli Television—the producers of the film—due to its sympathetic portrayal of Palestinians. Elia Suleiman's debut film, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996), was criticized at the Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia for a sequence showing an Israeli flag and Suleiman himself was accused of being a Zionist collaborator. By comparing the ways in which these two films deal with the political and social implications of the Israel-Palestine conflict, this article highlights two distinct methods of relating to facts on the ground: the topological and the temporal. While Gitai, the architect-turned-film maker, focuses on the former, building his film around a house inhabited by the Arab workers who are renovating it, Suleiman develops his film along a temporal axis marked by the chapters of his chronicle.

This article considers the history of Israeli Jews and Palestinians through the lenses of time and space and claims that the contemporary obsession of the former with space and the latter with time threatens the permanence of both peoples on the land.

Keywords

Israeli cinema, Palestinian cinema, identity, Diaspora, memory, conflict, Judaism

Author Notes

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Introduction

Even if increasingly deterritorialized in a world of diasporas, transnational social spaces, and migrations, identities still need to be rooted in a place (be it real or imagined). As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson wrote: “Displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality.”¹

Chantal Ackerman’s romantic comedy *A Couch in New York* (Un divan à New York, Belgium, 1996) is about two strangers who fall in love with each other after the male protagonist swaps his Manhattan loft for the female protagonist’s bohemian attic in the heart of Paris. On arriving at New York’s JFK airport and traveling into Manhattan, the latter, after looking out of the window, exclaims “I’m crazy about this New York sky!,” to which the immigrant taxi driver replies, in his thick Eastern European accented English, “Sky is sky, it’s the same as everywhere.” Smiling, the passenger contradicts him, “That’s not true and you know that,” and the driver looks back at her through the rearview mirror approvingly.

This brief dialogue between an immigrant and a traveler highlights both the role of space in the fabrication of one’s own identity and the possibility of building a new home in the country of one’s migration/diaspora. In the case of the Palestinian partial Diaspora²—with Palestinians gathered mainly in the Arab countries surrounding Israel and the Occupied Territories—the lack of political, social, and economic integration has prevented the building of a new home in

the host societies, while memory (real or mythical) functions as a connection with the lost homeland, with what Gupta and Ferguson called the “remembered places” serving “as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people.”³

The Palestinians’ remembered places are also the territory of the Jewish state. Exiled Jewish communities returned to the land of their ancestors to build a national home in Zion, the Promised Land, and a new identity was forged, based on possession of the land. “We came to the land to build and be built by/in it” goes a Zionist folk song quoted by Eric Zakim.⁴ The concept behind these verses is the complete identification of the Zionist Jew with the land now transformed into “a quintessentially Jewish space.”⁵ By draining the swamps and making the desert bloom, the Jewish pioneers not only took physical possession of the land but also created a novel image of the Jew,⁶ an image that would better serve the Zionist discourse and, at the same time, obscure the diasporic dimension of Jewish identity. The resulting masculinized Hebrews—now farmers and fighters—shed all the oriental connotations associated with Jews in Europe;⁷ although located in the Levant, they were firmly positioned in the Western camp.

Israeli Jews and Palestinians “measure their nation’s character by how they take, hold, and husband the land”;⁸ although both are present on the land, they do not, however, have the same access to it, and this, in turn, results in different modes of relating to the space. By examining two first films—Amos Gitai’s *House* (Bait, Israel, 1980) and Elia Suleiman’s *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (Segell Ikhtifa, Israel, 1996),⁹ I aim to identify two different

ways of living in Israel/Palestine: the topological and the temporal respectively. The former is based on the actual possession of the land, while the latter is powered by the memory of its possession. These two modes are not mutually exclusive and both national groups can be seen to oscillate from one to the other, revealing the inherent instability of each other's position. Because of their radical fragility, neither community seems able, ultimately, to guarantee its political future. The Palestinians, detached from their space, see their dream of nationhood slipping away; Israeli Jews tighten their hold onto the entire land but risk losing the Jewish character of their state.

Amos Gitai's *House*

Having completed his doctorate in architecture at Berkley, the Israeli Jew Amos Gitai returned to his native country and started working on documentaries, becoming part of that wave of Israeli cinema that Amy Kronish sees defined by its focus on Jewish-Arab relations.¹⁰ He made his first film, *House (Bait* in Hebrew¹¹), in 1980. With only a small crew, Gitai filmed the renovation work on an old building on Dor Dor ve Dorshav Street in Jerusalem's Germany Colony,¹² formerly owned by the wealthy Palestinian Christian Dajani family and now belonging to Chaim Barkai, an Israeli Jewish professor of economics, and being partially rebuilt by Palestinian workers.

The initial sequences of the film are shot in a quarry in the vicinity of Hebron from where the mostly Palestinian laborers extract the Jerusalem white stone with which the entire city of Jerusalem is clad.¹³ The camera zooms in on

the hands and faces of the workers wrapped in keffiyehs to protect them from the dust. The persistent sound of the hammers hitting the scalpels gives a monotone quality to their gestures, repeated day after day.¹⁴ It is these same blocks of white stone that may end up being used in the renovations of the old Dajani house. In this powerful initial sequence, the images are intensely suggestive, referring simultaneously to forced labor, combat, performance, and the archaic, with effects that can cause one to think of “kaffiyeh-clad men engaging in brutal acts.”¹⁵

Amos Gitai enters the symbolically charged space of the house—“both a symbol and something very concrete”¹⁶—and turns it into an archaeological site in order to uncover and expose events from the last century, which, buried in the ground, cover one another: the expansion of Jerusalem outside the borders of the Old City, the rise of an affluent Palestinian bourgeoisie under the British Mandate, the establishment of the State of Israel, the flight and expulsion of Palestinians, and the waves of Jewish immigrations. Traces of all these historical events are revealed in the history of the building. Indeed, Gitai seems to suggest that spaces and buildings have a memory that can be accessed through the lens of the camera: the house reads like a palimpsest, a document that has been written on more than once with all the earlier incompletely erased writings still legible.

All these stories, generators of identities, come to life through the voices of the film’s protagonists. Standing at the center of the frame like a ruin, the house, according to Teshome Gabriel, is the location of “a perpetual state of

rehearsals—in a state of continuous screening of memory-images and memories of even those things, events, and peoples who are long forgotten.”¹⁷ The Palestinian builders and stonecutters remember the original owner of the house and, while familiar with a landscape that is no more, they are also strangers to the present one. In their stories of eviction, defeat, and loss, they recover that which has disappeared forever, that which has been erased, covered, and transformed. Discussing the making of *House*, Gitai revealed:

The workers were filmed on the last day of shooting. They resisted and did not speak. The last day, we got the impression they wanted to unburden themselves as if to get rid of that pain. For them, building a house on top of an old one is bad. In a few years, the house will collapse. It is an Arab house and it will remain so, that is the idea at the heart of the resistance.¹⁸

On top of this first Palestinian layer sits an Oriental Jewish layer comprising an Algerian Jewish couple who were given half the house after the war of 1948, when the newly established State of Israel allowed Jewish refugees to settle in vacant properties located in different Arab neighborhoods of West Jerusalem. The mansions of the Palestinian middle class were divided up into small units, and where once a family lived, four or five families were installed. This Jewish couple from Algiers—Jewish refugees with their own stories of forced migration and dispossession—found shelter in the home of a family with

whom they shared a similar fate. Gitai invites the now elderly couple onto the building site, and the camera trails behind them as they enter the rooms under renovation. They walk along an invisible path that is engrained in their memories, exploring a space that has ceased to exist: “this was the living room...here we watched television on the cold winter nights.” In this way, the Arab Jew¹⁹ took the place of the Palestinian; one memory replaced another and a new narrative reshaped the space but without modifying the architecture. The destitute Algerian Jews settled lightly in this Palestinian house, respecting its spaces as if honoring the past memory of the building. During their interview with Gitai, they described letting Dr. Dajani, the previous owner of the house, visit the home of his childhood, when he arrived one day accompanied by a few friends and showed them around the property.

Yet another Middle Eastern character appears on the scene. This is the building contractor who, together with his son, runs the building site. His family immigrated to Jerusalem from Baghdad. Thus, an Iraqi-now-Israeli Jew is in charge of the renovation of a Palestinian house that now belongs to an Ashkenazi Israeli Jew. The Palestinian workers on the construction site travel every morning from refugee camps located in the West Bank, while in front of the house, the Algerian couple who lived there for more than twenty years, comment on the new architecture. Gitai’s camera moves inside the spaces, following the characters and weaving together the different narratives: the Palestinian, the Oriental Jewish, and the Israeli Jewish. Because the first two belong to the past, it is the Israeli narrative which takes hold of the place,

deconstructing and reconstructing the architecture, all the while creating a new receptacle for its own narrative. Discussing Gitai's film, Hamed Naficy wrote: "Ruins, like monuments, are powerful metaphors for creating an individual and collective identity. Understandably, their rebuilding also acquires gravity, especially in such cases as this house, in which possession and renovation function as metaphors for the ownership and occupation of the homeland."²⁰

House documents the reconstruction of three different houses: the concrete one, the house of memories, and the filmic house. We see how the same structure can bear various competing histories and meanings for differently placed individuals. Writing about *House*, Serge Daney pointed out: "Gitai has succeeded in giving us one of the finest things a camera can register 'live': people who look at the same thing yet see different things. And this vision is a moving one."²¹

The superimposition of all these meanings turned the house of stones and Gitai's house of celluloid into a radical structure that proved too overwhelming for Israeli Television that censored the film. As Gitai noted: "Israeli Television did not want to admit that Palestinians have memories, attachments, and rights in this part of the country. Such a recognition would mean, on a political level, that a political situation must be found for the Palestinians, not just as individuals but as people."²²

The film does not show the end of the work; the house remains unfinished, taking on the shape of a ruin and becoming a signpost for the multiplicity of histories that have converged at this particular site without being

reduced into a unique story. *House* begins and ends with the same shot: the quarry near Mount Hebron from where other rocks will be taken out to build new houses and settlements. The Zionist enterprise reshaped the geography of the land, erasing villages, building new centers, renaming places, making voids. The new Israeli house filmed by Gitai is part of this process of remapping the space, sanctioning its possession by activating the Israeli Jewish connection to the land of the Bible.

Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance*

If the Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi's award-winning *Wedding in Galilee's* (Urs Al-Jalil, France/Belgium 1987) "thick description and documentation of Palestinian culture and agriculture provides a counter-narrative" to "the Zionist project to deny the existence of a Palestinian people,"²³ the other Nazareth-born filmmaker Elia Suleiman brings to the screen the disconnection between the Palestinians and their lost homeland, the tension created by living in a place but not owing it. In his semi-autobiographical film *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (hereafter *Chronicle*), Suleiman narrates his return to his home in Nazareth, after spending a lengthy period of time in the United States in a kind of self-imposed exile.

While Suleiman's short films produced in New York, *Homage by Assassination* (1991) and *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), present the marks of the exile, his first feature film, *Chronicle*, is neither a trumpeted return back home nor "a total rejection of the old country."²⁴ In the

surreal interstices of life, Suleiman finds places to inhabit temporarily: the front door of the souvenir shop, a fountain on the beachside, his rented apartment in Jerusalem.

At the beginning of the film, the camera frames a computer monitor on which the following text is typed: “The first morning home after a long absence I’m awakened by the clicking of my aunt’s heels. She’s going with my mother to pay condolences.” The computer serves as a diary, its screen opening each of the different sections of the film: “Nazareth, Personal Diary,” “Jerusalem, Political Diary,” and “The Promised Land.” As he moves from the personal to the political, Suleiman explores with his camera the *décalage* between the facts on the ground and the expectations of his community, between the space available and life, between the private and the public. Like a diary that is structured in daily entries and chapters, the film incorporates an autobiographical dimension that, nonetheless, speaks for an entire community. *Chronicle* is, in fact, the documentation of the dissolution of an imagined community: Palestine.

With his trademark surreal and dark humor, Suleiman describes the life of his own Palestinian Christian community of Nazareth. As the public political space is the prerogative of the Israeli Jewish other, members of this community conduct most of their daily affairs indoors, inside the safe spaces of the houses (kitchens, living rooms, balconies) or in those liminal locations between public and private like cafés and stores. It is here—inside or on the border—that the acts of everyday life are repeated in an affirmation of existence that translates

into an act of national resistance. Having lost the battle for the control of the territory, community life continues in the protected environments of the semi-private, where a homogenous Palestinian way of life can be defended, albeit with some interruptions such as the television set which brings Hebrew language and culture into the Palestinian space. Outdoors, in fact, that same life is disappearing, undermined by its disconnection from the land. In a context where “political action is fully absorbed in the organization, transformation, erasure and subversion of space,”²⁵ the Palestinians of Nazareth confront the reality of living in a space that is shrinking with the passing of time. Constantly under siege, Suleiman’s community lives with its identity on the brink of oblivion; marked by repeated episodes of baseless violence that function as outlets for the frustration that stems from a sense of powerlessness, life goes on in an attempt to push back the disappearance.

At the very beginning of the film, members and friends of the Suleiman family are introduced to the viewer. The aunt enters the living room, sits on the couch, and talks about family matters. In another room, the father, smoking a water pipe, plays backgammon on a computer. The camera documents moments during which nothing really happens, just an endless repetition of actions that lead nowhere. Analyzing Suleiman’s cinema, Janet Harbord wrote: “For each day is predictable in its routine events, a ritual order, yet the order has no meaning in its accumulated state. Each event can be shuffled, placed randomly in a set of predictable actions. Action as repetition, repetition as inertia.”²⁶ The stillness of the photography matches the inertia on the set, as if the movements

of the characters are restrained, unable to reach any kind of resolution. In the same way, Suleiman and a friend sit idly in front of the door of the Holy Land Souvenir Store. By doing this, they seem to be trying to hold on to a place that is becoming less and less real for them: a Holy Land for tourists and Israeli Jews, where the Palestinians play the role of extras confined to the background.

In this Palestinian Christian community (a minority within a minority) life seems to proceed like everywhere else in the world: a funeral with the bells of the church tolling, housewives talking about cooking and shopping, an old man watching television. As Owen Bicknell explained: “There does not need to be a complex plot for any assertion of existence, indeed it is necessary that there is not one. A complex plot would only detract from the fundamental assertion that there is, separate from the political or ideological dimension, life continuing for the Palestinians.”²⁷

While his family and friends live their lives in the private spaces of the houses, businesses, and courtyards, Suleiman discovers that there is no public space left. Closed in his surreal silence, he traverses places that he does not own, finding spaces where he can rest. Most of the film is shot in long takes, the camera is still, and the characters go in and out of the frame, as if it too represents a limitation that is no longer bearable. The repetition of actions in front of the camera, aside from their comic and surreal effects, represents a tentative act of resistance, a declaration of being in the space, the testimony of a presence.²⁸ But it is a presence that, despite the resistance, becomes weaker and weaker until it completely disappears. This is why Suleiman does not talk

or act but remains silent. As suggested by Haim Bresheeth, the gradual disappearance of the director becomes a metaphor for the disappearance of the Palestinian collective: “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.”²⁹

While speech is silenced, the eye too is blocked. Suleiman can only look at the fragmented space around him through barriers, windows, doors—devices that, like the frame of the camera, limit the field of vision, constrain the movement of the eye, and trap the bodies. The only moments in the film when Suleiman finds himself in an open space occur during the driving sequences. In these, the protagonist and the camera move together along the roads and the spatial fragmentation is suspended in favor of the continuum line represented by the straight road. The film thus turns into a road movie with all the associated connotations of freedom, endless possibilities, and escapism.³⁰

There is a constant tension in the film between the Palestinian memory of the place and its actual reality, a tension that produces the feeling of not belonging that is shared by Suleiman and his Christian community. During a visit to the Sea of Galilee, Suleiman meets a Russian Orthodox priest. The image of tourists water skiing in the very place where, according to tradition, Jesus Christ walked on the water is the backdrop to the priest’s words, as he laments that there is no mystery in the land anymore, with every inch of space occupied and every spot illuminated: “Now my world is smaller, they have expanded their world and mine has shrunk. There’s no longer a spot of darkness out there.”³¹

Like the priest, Suleiman's religious identity, like his national identity, feels progressively less anchored to the land. Encircled by Jews and Muslims, the Palestinian Christians endure a double exile: one from their homeland and the other from the locations of their faith.

The film suggests that the Holy Land—part Israel and part Palestinian Authority—occupied, fragmented, and hollowed out, has become a space so full of contradicting narratives and symbols that it has turned into a cliché, like the images on the postcards sold at souvenir shops: camels, palm trees, Bedouins, religious Jews, beaches, and pilgrims. In this transformed environment, as seen in the case of the renovated building on Dor Dor ve Dorshav Street, the homeland of the Palestinians can exist only as a memory, both personal and communal. In an interview with Sabine Prokhoris and Christophe Wavelet, Suleiman explained: “You know...for me, there is no homeland. The only homeland that I have is memory and memory is first and foremost bodies.”³²

The houses of Jaffa, Ramle, and Lydda, the orange groves, and the olive trees that have been erased continue to exist in another temporal plane to which the Palestinians can connect through commemoration, memorialization, invocation, and narration. Dr. Dajani sees the house of his childhood through the lens of memory, while, in front of his eyes, a new house is being erected. Generations later, Suleiman, having not personally experienced the loss of the homeland, tries to reconnect to the land through the repetition of movements—the performative expressions of nationhood³³—that generates stories and

memory. But his chronicle leads him only to disappearance; as the Israeli Jews take possession of the land, the Palestinian connection gets weaker by the day.

In the final sequence of *Chronicle*, we see Suleiman's parents fast asleep in front of a television screen on which the image of the Israeli flag, accompanied by the notes of the national anthem, announce the end of the day's programming. Right before the film's credits, a dedication reads: "To my father and mother, the last homeland." The family, composed of individuals with their own habits and rituals, resists the growing presence of the Israeli Jewish collective by holding on to a piece of the land. It is a strategy of resistance that does not contemplate any variations, a continuous repetition which can slow but not halt the process of disappearance.

Time, Space and National Identity

These two films express two different modes of identity: *House* tells the story of possession and of being in the space, while *Chronicle of a Disappearance* tells about the search for the vanishing traces of a lost country whose memory is fading away. They thus represent a topological identity versus a temporal and memory-based identity respectively. Reading the two films together shows how these two modes of identity were reassigned with the establishment of the Jewish state: Jews acquired a land, while Palestinians kept their connection to the land through memory.

For thousands of years, Jews lived in the Diaspora and kept their distinct nationality thanks to—Ghetto walls and anti-Semitism aside—a stateless and

portable religious/national identity built on time so that it could be performed anywhere in the world. After the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE, the central role that it had played in the life of the community was taken over by the daily cycle of prayers whose timing recalled the sacrifices carried out in the Temple. Indeed, the architecture of the Temple—its courtyards, structures, and buildings—was replaced by “an architecture of time,”³⁴ with the Sabbath becoming Judaism’s “great cathedral.”³⁵ Jerusalem, shedding its earthly connotation, turned into a signifier of the Messianic Age: the return to Eretz Yisrael would be announced by God and coincide with the end of History. For the religious Jew, who observed rituals and commandments, Judaism became a path leading to God’s timeless realm. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.... Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year.”³⁶ The invocation of the biblical narrative, the connection to a metaphysical Eretz Yisrael, and the destruction of the Second Temple allowed the Jews to live their Jewish identity wherever they resided. While the rabbis transformed the practices of the Temple-based religion into ceremonies and acts to be carried out at specific times of the day anywhere, the Hebrew Bible provided, borrowing the definition of Jacob L. Wright, “a pedagogical project of peoplehood,”³⁷ containing instructions for the establishment of a political community that could survive without statehood and territorial sovereignty.

Jewish reality was changed by the European Enlightenment on the one hand (which torn down the walls of the ghettos and gave the Jews civil rights) and anti-Semitism on the other. Assimilation and the danger of physical annihilation made Zionism a real option: many believed that the creation of a Jewish state would guarantee the future of the Jewish people. With the establishment of the State of Israel, Jews living in Eretz Yisrael replaced their time-based, stateless Jewish identity with an Israeli Jewish identity that was centered on settling the land. The regeneration of Diaspora Jews had to pass through a revitalizing connection to the land of their ancestors: working the land became the ultimate expression of this need and the kibbutz the temple of this new civilization. Being a Jew in Israel meant reactivating the ancient Israelites' relationship with the territory of their nation. As a result of this renewed connection, Jews would be like all other nations, forgoing once and for all their exceptionalism in order to embrace normality: "indeed [normality] is the essence of the Zionist dream—a normal existence for the Jewish people, living in an independent country in which a majority of the citizens are Jewish."³⁸

With the establishment of Israel, Palestinians, who had lived in the area for generations, left or were forced to leave. In order to keep their national identity alive, they had to switch to a time-based identity, powered by the memory of the lost homeland. The Palestinian identity became diasporic when the Jews established a state. Despite this dramatic shift, neither of the two communities has its future guaranteed. While the outcome of Suleiman's fading memory may be his and his community's disappearance, Israeli Jewish identity

risks losing the land due to the fragmentation of its various components (Oriental Jews, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Secular Jews, etc.), the physical destruction of the state, and the occupation of another people.³⁹

Both films point to these outcomes not just by assigning to each national community a specific mode of relating to the land—temporal for the Palestinians and topological for the Israeli Jews—but also by showing how these categories can be inversely applied to criticize the political strategy of each group. In *House* Gitai documents the possession of the land by Israeli Jews and certifies the fragility of that possession by showing that material ownership fades with time. By filming the past owners of the house, Gitai inserts the category of ownership into the temporal dimension, declaring de facto that the current owner of the building will meet the same fate as his predecessors. The present constitutes just another layer of a story that will continue to unfold in the future. By intersecting the topological with the temporal, Gitai offers a moral lesson about the transient nature of human construction and the temptations of hubris; be it buildings or countries, possession of the land cannot guarantee perpetuity.

The very fact that the house in the film stands on Dor Dor ve Dorshav Street is also significant here. The title of historian and Talmud scholar Isaac Hirsch Weiss' major production,⁴⁰ the Hebrew expression that gives the name to the street translates as “every generation has its interpreters,” meaning that the interpretation of the Jewish traditional texts changes according to historical circumstances and implying that each generation has its teachers to whom it

looks for guidance. Inserted in the context of the film, these Hebrew words not only invite the viewer to accept the stories/interpretations of the Palestinians (being one of the generations that lived in the house) but also to look at the act of settling on the land through the lens of time, thus revealing its temporary character and subjecting the narrative justifying it to many opposing interpretations which can potentially invalidate it.

By filming the memory of his homeland, Suleiman, on the other hand, meditates on the space and the possibilities that it offers for personal and communal resistance and regeneration. If Gitai's Israeli Jewish characters forget the effects of time, Suleiman's Palestinians are not always ready to exploit the possibilities that the land affords. At times they disuse the space, as they are stuck in their temporal dimension, trapped in the apathy that is caused by the repetition of gestures. While this repetition may be comforting because it invokes memories of the past, it can hinder new ways of actively living in the space in the present.

After the Disappearance

In Raphaël Nadjari's *Tehilim* (Israel, 2007) a middle-class Jerusalem family disintegrates when, following a minor car accident, the father disappears into thin air leaving no trace. Did he leave of his own will? Was he forced in some way? Was he hurt? The family is paralyzed; unable to find a plausible explanation, they try to live their lives while, at the same time, haunted by the father's disappearance. Friction and tension start to mount between the secular

Tel Aviv-born mother and her religious Jerusalemite father-in-law whose reaction to the disappearance of his son is to recite Psalms (*Tehilim* in Hebrew) and confide in God. In the middle of this tense relationship are the two sons: a delicate teenager in a clumsy body and his little brother. This family stands as a microcosm of Israeli society with its internal divisions, its lack of leadership (or father-like figures), and the restlessness caused by an uncertain future. The teenager, Menachem, wanders frantically around the unwelcoming urban space of a Jerusalem that is slowly leaving behind the bloody years of the Second Intifada and struggles to come to terms with the sudden incompleteness of his reality.

It can be assumed that *Tehilim* continues the discourse inaugurated by *House* and *Chronicle*. The disappearance of the father in Nadjari's film coincides, in fact, with the realization of a trajectory that was already outlined by Gitai and Suleiman; by filming the act of privileging the temporal or the topological in the construction of an Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian national identity, the two filmmakers presented the possibility of disappearance for both communities. *Tehilim* films the aftermath of that disappearance: reconciling to their past and rediscovering the traces of their presence in the urban space, the protagonists of the film can reestablish their lives and thus continue living on the land.

Conclusion

Zionist identity, as discussed above, was constructed on a strong identification with the land. The now stateless Palestinians have based their national identity on the memory of the homeland and the hope of returning one day to their lost places. This movement of return becomes more problematic year after year because that land no longer exists; it has become Israel. On the other hand, the exclusive Israeli possession of Eretz Yisrael, in many ways already problematic, is not sustainable in the long term because it could set the conditions for the establishment of a new political order which may disavow the tenets of Zionism.

In their respective films, Amos Gitai and Elia Suleiman show the complex workings of national identity, described as developing along the axis of time and space. In the context of Israel and Palestine, these identities are fragile, damaged by the imbalance of the two components. Besides working as an antidote to one group's obsession with land and the other's with time/memory, the two films propose, more importantly, considering the stories of the other as a means of strengthening one's own identity.

¹ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 10–11, <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1992.7.1.02a00020>.

² Sari Hanafi, "Rethinking the Palestinians Abroad as a Diaspora: The Relationships Between the Diaspora," *HAGAR International Social Science Review* 4, no. 1–2 (2003): 157–182.

³ Gupta and Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture'," 11.

⁴ Erik Zakim, *To Build and Be Built: Landscape, Literature, and the Construction of Zionist Identity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1.

⁵ Zakim, *To Build and Be Built*, 1.

⁶ “The ‘rejection of the Exile’ led the Zionist labor movements ideologues to devise an ideal ‘new Jew’ or ‘new man’ they sought to create in the Land of Israel, at times through coercion,” Tom Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem: Post-Zionism and the Americanization of Israel* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 25.

⁷ A reflection of the Jews’ perceived “orientalist” connection can be found in the many synagogues built in Moorish or Assyrian Babylonian styles, such as the main synagogues of Rome and Florence or West London Synagogue in London.

⁸ Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht, *To Rule Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

⁹ It should be noted that Elia Suleiman and Amos Gitai shot a documentary together, *War and Peace in Vesoul* (1997), when they were both invited to attend a film festival in Vesoul, France. The film, which is a conversation about their lives as an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian, is filmed first on the train from Paris to Vesoul and then on the site of the festival.

¹⁰ Amy Kronish, *World Cinema: Israel* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 120–138.

¹¹ “The Hebrew word means both home and house....The distinction between the space enclosed by walls and its surroundings, earth, soil, landscape, whether rural or urban, is lacking....For Israelis, Bait stands for Home (the land, the state of Israel, the space, the building). It is just as metaphysical as concrete,” Irma Klein, “An Architectonics of Responsibilities,” in *The Films of Amos Gitai: A Montage*, ed. Paul Willemen (London: BFI, 1993), 29.

¹² “Jerusalem plays a very specific role in Amos Gitai’s work. As a geographical place, it is present only in *Berlin-Jerusalem* but it is there all the time as an invisible sign, organizing the very structure of the films,” Mikhail Iampolski, “The Road to Jerusalem,” in Willemen, ed., *The Films of Amos Gitai*, 19.

¹³ For more on the history and the significance of stone cladding in Jerusalem see “Jerusalem: Petrifying the Holy City” in Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), 25–57.

¹⁴ Repetition can be found in Suleiman’s film to represent an aspect of the Palestinian condition.

¹⁵ Anselm Franke, *Amos Gitai News from Home* (Berlin: International Film Festival in Berlin, KW Institute for Contemporary Art and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006), 157.

¹⁶ Serge Daney, “Amos Gitai, Ce Soir,” *Libération*, January 16 and January 17, 1982, 24.

¹⁷ Teshome Gabriel, “Ruin and the Other: Toward a Language of Memory” in *Otherness and the Media: The Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged*, eds. Hamid Naficy and Teshome Gabriel (New York: Harwood, 1993), 219.

¹⁸ Willemen, *The Films of Amos Gitai*. 82.

¹⁹ “The Jews within Islam had thought of themselves as Jews, but that Jewishness was interwoven within a larger Judeo-Islamic cultural geography. Under pressure from Zionism, on the one hand, and Arab nationalism, on the other, that set of affiliations gradually changed,

resulting in a transformed cultural semantics,” Ella Shohat, “Postscript to Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation” in *Deeper than Oblivion: Trauma and Memory in Israeli Cinema*, eds. Yosef Raz and Boaz Hagin (New York: Bloomsbury, 1993), 29.

²⁰ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 171.

²¹ Daney, “Amos Gitaï, Ce Soir.”

²² Willemen, *The Films of Amos Gitai*. 82.

²³ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 167. “[Michel Khleifi] forcefully posits that Palestinian Arabs are there on the ground, and that like the Israelis they are capable of making the desert bloom. By so integrally linking the Palestinians to the land and to its cultivation, the film creates an agricultural idyll before occupation and expulsion,” Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 167–168.

²⁴ Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 236.

²⁵ Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 7.

²⁶ Janet Harbord, *The Evolution of Film: Rethinking Film Studies* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 157.

²⁷ Owen Bicknell, “The Cinematic Experience in Elia Suleiman’s Films,” *The Middle East in London* 4, no. 1 (2007): 15.

²⁸ “These routine activities are what Homi Bhabha has called the ‘performative’ expressions of nationhood, the everyday, unofficial representation of the nation. These expressions take higher significance when the nations either coming into being or being lost to exile—both of which are true with Palestinians,” Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 116.

²⁹ As cited in Nurit Gertz and George Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 176.

³⁰ “Like many journeys in Palestinian cinema, they also draw a blurred image of the map of the land its length and breadth, thus conveying the organic connection with the landscape and control over it,” Gertz and Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema*, 176.

³¹ Assaf Amir. (Producer), & Elia Suleiman. (Director). (1996. *Chronicle of a Disappearance* [Motion Picture]. Israel: Dhat Production & Norma Productions.

³² “En fait, vous savez, pour moi, il n’y a pas de terre-patrie; la seule ‘patrie,’ c’est la mémoire, et la mémoire, ce sont d’abord des corps,” Sabine Prokhoris and Christophe Wavelet, “Exils en Palestine: Entretien avec Elia Suleiman,” *Vacarme* 8 (1999): 67–72, <https://vacarme.org/article107.html>.

³³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 212.

³⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 8.

³⁵ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 8.

³⁶ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 8.

³⁷ Jacob L. Wright, "A Nation Conceived in Defeat," *Azure: Ideas for the Jewish Nation* 42 (2010), <http://azure.org.il/include/print.php?id=553>.

³⁸ Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem*, 6.

³⁹ The television series *Hostages* (Bnei Aruba, Israel, 2013–2016), created by Omri Givon and Rotem Shamir, is another metaphor of the fragmentation of Israeli society and of the destructive violence that simmers underneath it.

⁴⁰ The five-volume opus *Dor Dor ve Dorshav* by Isaac Hirsch Weiss, published between 1871 and 1891, is a history of Jewish law from biblical times until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1482. The Hebrew phrase of the title is a direct quotation from the Talmud appearing in Bavli, *Sanhedrin 38b:10* and *Avodah Zara 5a:9*.

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