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Elusive Frontiers

Borders in Israeli and Palestinian Cinemas[1]

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At the climax of the film *Chronicle of a Disappearance*[2] a Palestinian woman in an East Jerusalem apartment sits singing *Hatikva*[3] to the Israeli police on the PA system of an abandoned radio transmitter. She had just sent the Jerusalem police on a wild-goose chase to track down a non-existent Palestinian trouble. The scene is at once funny, bitter and eerie. The eeriness is in part due to the transposition of the Israeli national anthem to a Palestinian space, even though the scene is geographically grounded in Jerusalem, a city declared by Israeli law to be Israeli in its entirety. Throughout his film, Elia Suleiman challenges the notion of the city as a united, all-Israeli capital of Jewish life. *Chronicle* locates itself in the Palestinian part of East Jerusalem and emphasises the lack of communication or of communal life between the two parts. The woman singing *Hatikva* cannot find accommodation in the Israeli part of town because she is Arab. The Israeli police are seen in pursuit of signs of Palestinian nationalist identity which threaten the Israeli claim that the city is united and unified. So while *Hatikva* is heard alongside images of the Jewish capital, it represents an identity and a country that the people in the film have no access to. The scene then suggests that the same piece of land shared by two nationalities is divided not by a physical border but by a manifest array of social and political practices, as well as symbolic rites.

Palestinian cinema represents borders, liminality and geography, in complex and sober political terms. Israeli cinema instead either ignores the conflict with the Palestinians altogether or when addressing it avoids charting a clear notion of borders.[4] An Israeli desire for a pure ethnic space overrides the realisation that liminality is a permanent state, rather than a temporary phase, for both people. Israeli cinema tends to mirror and reassert cultural and political concepts that stand in the way of any sustainable solution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

CINEMATIC OVERVIEW

Chronicle of a Disappearance is not the only Palestinian film to emphasise that despite the lack of a geographical border – or even with its

1 A short version of this argument was published in Hebrew in *Theory and Criticism* no 18, Spring 2001. This paper addresses films released since the publication of that essay.

2 Elia Suleiman, *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, Palestine/Israel, 1996

3 *Hatikva* is the Israeli national anthem.

4 The scope of this essay is fiction films produced primarily after the Oslo accord and in the second Intifada. Attention to Israeli and Palestinian documentaries would only distract from the central thesis.

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establishment when a Palestinian state comes into being on the West Bank and in Gaza – the two peoples share the same piece of land. In *Divine Intervention*,[5] much time is spent at a checkpoint between the West Bank and Israel where the Palestinian filmmaker from the Galilee meets his West Bank girlfriend. The meeting place, a surreal no-man's zone, is a sterile ground for their failing relationship. The two sit quietly, sometimes holding hands, but unable to build any intimacy under the soldiers' watchful eyes. But this zone is also a reminder that Palestinians live on both sides of this artificial border and therefore this barren place is politically charged. In one bizarre moment the filmmaker releases Arafat's image on a balloon over the checkpoint. The soldiers cannot decide whether the balloon violates the travel restrictions placed on the Palestinian leader (and by extension on his people) and therefore whether to shoot down the balloon or not. The filmmaker exploits the soldiers' confusion to smuggle his girlfriend into Jerusalem, from which she is barred.[6]

Rana's Wedding is even more explicit.[7] Throughout the film (which takes place from morning to dusk) the protagonists cross, bypass, avoid or seek permits for the many checkpoints in and around Jerusalem so that they can get married. The camera lingers on them as they wait in line, are stuck in traffic jams and sweat in the car. These long and relatively uneventful scenes are crucial to convey not only the reality of the Palestinians' movements in and around Jerusalem but also the geography of artificial physical and legal barriers imposed on that community. In the last scene the couple finally wed in the middle of a checkpoint so that all family members and invited dignitaries can be present. This incessant, slow and controlled disruption of the protagonists' movements serves as a constant reminder of the ways in which Palestinians are subject to artificial limits set by Israel even in the territories of the semi-autonomous Palestinian Authority. Around midday the couple relax in East Jerusalem for a brief private moment. But then they locate a nearby surveillance camera and the groom (whose job in the film is professional actor) acts directly to the camera, releasing his aggression but also acknowledging that even on the Palestinian side of town he has no sovereignty.[8]

Ali Nassar's films *The Milky Way* and *In the Ninth Month*[9] address life for the Palestinian citizens of Israel in the Galilee region. Both employ a mythical sense of time; for instance, the military rule that ended in 1966 is mixed into contemporary political domains. Israeli control is not visually presented in these films but made manifest in the sound of helicopters and aircraft. The mythical time and fairytale quality of these small village stories attracted much criticism from Palestinians and Arabs, who would have liked to see Nassar address the political situation more directly.[10] But I would argue that his films politicise viewers by reminding them that, despite Israeli attempts to Judaise the Galilee, Palestinians remain integral to the landscape, a presence that cannot simply be erased.

While Palestinian cinema acknowledges geographical borders, transcending them quickly to deal with other issues, recent Israeli cinema often avoids a localised and concrete sense of space. In the post-Oslo accord period a new genre has emerged, retreating from the politics of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict to focus on internal affairs. These films tend to treat

5 Elia Suleiman, *Divine Intervention*, France/Morocco/Germany/Palestine, 2002

6 Since the signing of the Oslo accord, West Bank Palestinians have no legal access to Jerusalem unless they obtain special permits, a nearly impossible task.

7 Hany Abu Assad, *Rana's Wedding*, Palestine, 2002

8 Other Palestinian films engage with similar restrictions of movement on Palestinians of different status (West Bank, Israeli citizens, foreign citizens). Two films worthy of mention are *A Ticket to Jerusalem* by Rashid Masharawi, 2002, and the short mockumentary *Like Twenty Impossibles* by Anne Marie Jacir, 2003.

9 Ali Nasar, *The Milky Way*, Israel, 1997; *In The Ninth Month*, Israel, 2002

10 In an interview in May 2003, Nassar spoke of his wish to make a universal story but that such a choice would condemn him as insufficiently politicised in the eyes of Arab critics. The universalist aesthetic is present not only in the mythical sense of time and space but also in the hybrid mix of Arab musical instruments with Western tonality.

visual spaces in ways that distance them from concrete reality and from realism as a style, thus avoiding or subverting the issue of liminality. In *Kadosh*[11] there are only a few shots of outdoor locations, mostly within Meah Shearim. The film concentrates on the ultra-orthodox community whose marginality within the physical and social landscape of Israel is very clear, while the outside secular world is only hinted at. The stitch-line is never explored or only vaguely represented. One of the characters leaves the community and secularises himself, but this is shown only at the very end when he returns to the community. The 'other' or outer world therefore remains as mysterious as something across an ocean and not just a few blocks away. Similarly, *Saint Clara*,[12] a tale of ethnic identity differences between yuppie Israeli kids and a Russian immigrant, creates a surreal space with special magic powers by avoiding placing events in a concrete space that can and in Israeli reality does accommodate such differences.[13] And even a realist narrative in *Broken Wings*,[14] which has more outdoor scenes, is set as an urban family drama that could have happened in any city. The film is shot in hyper-modern train stations, music studios, highways and an empty swimming pool, which all convey a familiar sense of urban melodrama rather than a particular Israeli story.[15]

More explicitly political films do exist but these too avoid addressing the concrete geographic delineations of Israel and its borders. *Kippur*[16] and *Yossi and Jagger*[17] provide interesting examples as they both deal with war situations, yet in neither is the space clearly represented, nor do we ever see the enemy. One might claim that Amos Gitai's *Kippur* takes a critical view of the Yom Kippur war of 1973. The main character finds himself recruited to a helicopter squadron evacuating wounded soldiers from the battleground on the Golan Heights. The helicopter lands again and again on muddy and bloodied ground and the soldiers – often under fire themselves – charge out to save others. The film does not glorify fighting but rather focuses critically on war's unremitting suffering and gore.[18] But *Kippur*'s Golan Heights is just a place of carnage where it is unclear who is fighting whom and why. We never see the Syrians, or their tanks, thus the enemy is rendered invisible and that particular war presented ahistorically. Gitai may be making an anti-war film but is not addressing Israel's particular war history.

In *Yossi and Jagger* a more realistic portrayal of an Israeli army bunker is presented. The film focuses on two male officers who are in love but must conceal their affair because the higher-ranking Yossi fears demotion and damage to his credibility if he is 'outed' while Jagger wants to come out to their families and the world. The dramatic conflict involves this personal disagreement. Towards the end, Jagger dies in action against an unidentified and invisible enemy and the secret of his love goes to the grave with him. In the last scene of the film, Yossi watches helplessly as Jagger's mother is told by a female soldier that she and Jagger were lovers. The film never mentions where or when the action takes place and I would argue that this lack of specificity works against its liberal politics.[19] The film is shot in Mount Hermon with the famous Ram pond clearly visible; but the storyline matches the situation in south Lebanon in the late 1990s rather than that of the Golan Heights. A sense of danger reigns but without

11 Amos Gitai, *Kadosh*, France/Israel, 1999

12 Ari Fullman and Ori Sivan, *Saint Clara*, Israel, 1996

13 Other films from this genre are: Shemi Zarhin, *Passover Fever*, Israel, 1995; Julie Shles, *Afula Express*, Israel, 1997.

14 Nir Bergman, *Broken Wings*, Israel, 2002

15 During an introduction to the film at the Toronto Film Festival (2003), Bergman asked the audience to watch the film 'as an international film, and not as an Israeli one'. Indeed, there are no news reports, no mention of terrorism, war or any other markers of daily Israeli life in the film.

16 Amos Gitai, *Kippur*, France/Israel, 2000

17 Eitan Fox, *Yossi and Jagger*, Israel, 2002

18 Raz Yosef extended his arguments from *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema*, Rutgers University Press, 2004 to discuss *Kippur* at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, London, March 2005. Yosef argues that refraining from historical realism serves to strengthen the film's anti-war stance.

19 A film that works to politicise one set of injustices (gender-sexual ones) cannot completely ignore other political issues (such as the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon) without losing credibility. The film did not have to change its focus; but as it erases the historical specificity of the setting, it masks other forms of chauvinism (the same dramatic effect would have been achieved if the protagonist had died in a training accident).

mention of the concrete circumstances that explain the attack on the Israeli soldiers. The film ends in a political vacuum. *Kippur* and *Yossi and Jagger* replicate the situation in which Israel has no recognised permanent borders with its neighbours and this works against the overt leftist position of both directors.[20] Such choices of unspecified spaces and times expose the limits of Zionist liberalism to which both filmmakers ascribe and the ideological inability of the Israeli Zionist left to engage with the thorny questions of borders, occupations and the record of Israeli aggressions.

A Time of Favor[21] deals with ultra-nationalist orthodox Jewish settlers planning to bomb the Muslim holy shrines (Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque) on the Temple Mount. The film centres on a Yeshiva (religious college) at which the students are indoctrinated into messianic ideology by a charismatic rabbi. The rabbi intends a theoretical lesson, which the students understand to be a call for action. Their plot is uncovered and prevented by the rabbi at the last minute. The film moves from the West Bank settlements to the old city of Jerusalem and back, treating the land as unified, nearly empty of Palestinians and all under Israeli sovereignty. This visual treatment is consistent with settler expansionist ideology that sees no room for the Palestinians anywhere in historic Palestine. As such – and unlike *Kippur* and *Yossi and Jagger* – this film is aesthetically honest and compatible with right-wing ideology, which represents the 'whole land of Israel' as unified and entirely Israeli.

Another group of Israeli films can be described as sober awakenings from the Zionist dream, but these do not offer ideological alternatives. The acclaimed *To Walk on Water*,[22] for instance, focuses on Eyal, a Mossad agent who by the end of the film quits the service – on the shoulder of his gay friend he confesses that he cannot kill any more. He joins a kibbutz to grow melons and have a family with the gentile Pia. The film starts with Eyal assassinating a Palestinian extremist and then returning home to find that his wife has committed suicide. His superiors give him a light duty: to follow and befriend two German siblings (Pia, a kibbutz volunteer and her gay brother Axel) whose grandfather is a notorious Nazi escapee. While the film does much to dismantle the homophobic Israeli macho identity, it pays minimal lip service to political analysis. Axel wants to see the West Bank and Eyal obliges by taking him there; but we, the viewers, are never accorded that view, nor do we hear of Axel's impressions of the visit. Similarly, Eyal's crisis seems more personal than political, prompted by his wife's suicide as a response to his job, rather than by remorse over the assassinations he has conducted. The film opens the door to a fresh political view but never actually enters or engages with it.

Even the apocalyptic *Life According to Agfa*,[23] which directly addresses and localises many of the tensions present in Israeli society, places the events in a modern bar in cosmopolitan Tel Aviv. This is a metropolitan place of 'otherness' in which no one truly belongs. The film focuses on one day in the life of a gallery of characters: the bar owner, her cancer-stricken lover and his wife, the waitress and her abusive boyfriend, the Palestinian workers in the kitchen and the customers of the bar. Armed with a macabre sense of humour the film attacks the sacred cows of Zionism, but leaves only destruction and a bleak message for both people

20 An interesting exception is Lebanon, which has recognised borders with Israel. The eighteen-year-long war in Lebanon (1982–2000) was therefore recognised inside Israel as an occupation. Terms are much murkier with regard to the West Bank and Gaza. Fox chose to set his film in Lebanon after a withdrawal prompted primarily by internal pressure due to the high cost in Israeli soldiers' lives. At the time of the film's production, Lebanon was no longer a political issue on the Israeli agenda.

21 Josef Sedar, *A Time of Favor*, Israel, 2000

22 Eitan Fox, *To Walk on Water*, Israel, 2004, winner of the Berlin Film Festival 2004.

23 Assi Dayan, *Life According to Agfa*, Israel, 1992

in its wake. Yet, despite the lack of clear geographical locales, other borders of identity (such as ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, religion, etc) are very present in these films.[24]

THE BORDER AS THEORY

Further exploration of the relationship between physical borders and mental or ideological ones can shed light on the tendency of Palestinian cinema to subvert and transcend geography, and of Israeli cinema to avoid or obscure it.

The border stands as a demarcation between two nations supposedly different ethnically, culturally and religiously. In a discussion of the filmic representations of the border between the US and Mexico, Rosa Linda Fregoso remarks that:

> In the cultural imaginary of both the United States and Mexico, the border figures as the trope for absolute alterity. It symbolizes eroticized underdevelopment – an untamed breeding ground for otherness and the site of unrepressed libidinal energies. Its inhabitants are coded as outcasts, degenerates, sexually hungry subalterns and outlaws. In both Mexican and U.S. cinemas, the representation of the border as otherised territory is symptomatic of a colonialist and racist imaginary. The product of a Western gaze, this representation of frontier territories as abject serves both to define the U.S. and metropolitan Mexico and to shape their national identities.[25]

Cultural theorists often challenge the more absolutist notions of border discourse and instead promote the border as a fertile ground for intercultural exchanges, hybrid communities and a third space or transborder.[26] Indeed, artistic, political and historical discourses from the border regions between Mexico and the US would suggest that a new identity is formed, one that is multi-voiced and intercultural. The border community has two well-defined geographical and national frames of reference, and hence its hybridisation can occur precisely because it is able to reject or accept aspects of each of these cultures, in an intricate negotiation for its own idiosyncratic culture.

Despite attempts to theorise such hybrid spaces positively, border regions also tend to exemplify sets of distinct communal identities. Border residents are very aware of the issues of both racial purity and miscegenation. While border communities may be diverse both ethnically and nationally, the occupants of these communities interact in ways that assert their affinity to or rejection of their sub-communities. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson claims that:

> The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations.[27]

Anderson goes on to show the complex sources of the sense of nationalism and, as the title of his book indicates, his thesis is that a sense of communal identity is imagined rather than experienced as a material set of markers. But he also reveals the depths of this imagined affinity, claiming that 'the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal

24 Other films that belong to the category of politicised, and yet non-specific geographical and political analysis are Raanan Alexandrowicz, *James' Journey to Jerusalem*, Israel, 2003, and Dan Verete, *Yellow Asphalt*, Israel, 2000.

25 Rosa Linda Fregoso, 'Recycling Colonialist Fantasies on the Texas Borderlands', in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place*, ed Hamid Naficy, Routledge, London–New York, 1999, p 178

26 See for instance, Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Aunt Lute Press, San Francisco, 1987.

27 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London–New York, 1983, p 7. Emphasis in original.

comradeship'.[28] Border communities are therefore particularly aware of ethnicity, religion and nationalism even as these are diffused in the everyday reality of border-region life. A beautiful example emerges in *Lone Star*[29] in which a Latina high-school teacher and an Anglo sheriff resume a high-school love affair violently terminated by his father. The woman Pilar spends her days reclaiming Mexican identity politics for her students, while Sheriff Sam Deed is busy sabotaging the aura of his late father, a legendary sheriff in the town. At the climax of the film, Sam realises that he and Pilar are half-siblings, children of the legendary Sheriff Deed Senior. Sitting on the hood of his car in an abandoned all-American drive-in theatre, Sam reveals the news to his lover. Pilar in turn informs him that she had a hysterectomy and therefore the problem of procreation through incest is no longer an obstacle. When Sam asks Pilar what they should do, she replies: 'Forget the Alamo!' The evocation of a decisive historical event at this very intimate moment is typical of border discourse as both public and private identities are woven into a complex web of signifiers and experiences. The physical border stands in complicated relation to mental borders, at once dependent on that material division but also transcending, problematising and subverting it. In the logic of the film, hybridity and incest are collapsed. However, the future of America does not lie in this now sterile union but in Pilar's all-Latino children from her previous marriage.[30] The only way for the couple (or is it America?) to resolve the past and move on is to 'forget the Alamo'.

Border identities are even more complicated for Palestinians and Israelis, who do not have the advantage of a well-defined space that is purely Israeli or purely Palestinian. As the recent second Intifada clearly shows, the two communities live in *one* border region, a country that encompasses both national communities, three major religious systems and numerous ethnic origins. The Palestinian demonstrations inside Israel in October 2000, which resulted in thirteen Palestinian deaths inflicted by the police, emphasise the fragility or impossibility of the idea of a separation between Israelis and Palestinians. This is reality to most Palestinians; but most Israelis have not come to terms with it. Even those Israelis who support a peace treaty with the Palestinians and the establishment of a Palestinian state assume that its territories will consist only of the West Bank and the Gaza strip and exclude the many towns and villages within the Israeli borders of 1948–67. The Palestinian minority in Israel is usually called 'Israeli Arab' and not Palestinian with Israeli citizenship. Their national identity is not expected to be Palestinian but Israeli, while their ethnicity is diffusedly Arab. Accordingly, since the October 2000 demonstrations the loyalty of these second-class Palestinian citizens to the state has been questioned. Furthermore, with the 'security' wall that Israel is now erecting primarily inside the West Bank, the idea of a viable Palestinian state with 1967 borders has become almost impossible.[31] Recognising this, the Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Alla has proclaimed that if Palestinians cannot have their own state they will start demanding Israeli citizenship.[32]

Interestingly, while Israel still rejects the Palestinian as the 'other' not to be incorporated into the domestic sphere, Israeli society acknowledges its own diversity and fragmentation more than ever before. The recent debates between secular and orthodox communities, between Oriental

28 Ibid

29 John Sayles, *Lone Star*, USA, 1996

30 *To Walk on Water* could have similarly politicised the union between Eyal and Pia and the fact that their daughter is a non-Jewish Israeli, but chose not to.

31 The wall is 600 km long, while the 4 June 1967 border between Israel and Jordan is roughly 200 km long. The wall is built almost entirely on confiscated Palestinian lands, thus reducing the size of the autonomous territory by 5000 km^2. The route creates many smaller enclaves to keep settlements connected to Israel but isolates Palestinian villages. The result is three main Palestinian cantons, completely separated from one another, with many smaller pockets of villages.

32 The Apartheid Wall leaves tens of thousands of West Bank Palestinians caught between the wall and the 1967 border, thus making them illegal squatters in their own homes. If the wall remains standing those Palestinians will have to receive legal status in Israel. *Wall* by Simone Biton is a lyrical documentary that represents some of those issues.

and European Jews, and the attitudes of the native Israeli population to the 1990s immigration waves from the former USSR and Ethiopia, have all resulted in an awareness that Israeli society is a multicultural one. For large sectors in Israeli society, Zionism is not the cohering element of their communal identity. In fact, the notion that Israel is one nation sharing a single cultural and historical heritage has been questioned and deconstructed not so much by theoreticians but by actual social and political events (the Der'ei saga, for instance). Films such as *Desperado Square*, which features a neighbourhood cinema screening Indian films to Oriental Jews, *Yana's Friends*, which narrates the trials and tribulations of a Russian immigrant during the first Gulf War, and *James' Journey to Jerusalem*,[33] which looks at Israel from the perspective of an African tourist turned illegal worker – each dismantles Zionist myths and values while expanding the notion of what Israeli society actually is. But this treatment of internal diversity is nonetheless not extended to dealing with the Arab–Israeli conflict.

It is easier now to see why Palestinian cinema foregrounds the problematic relationship between land, border and national identity, while recent Israeli cinema avoids the issue. For both nations, national identity is grounded in an imaginary pure ethnic space. Palestinians have long been aware of the actual bi-national reality of the space, but Israelis, who have begun to downplay the myth of an ethnically pure national state, are now largely avoiding the issue altogether. They represent marginalised groups within Israeli society in unreal spaces or by focusing on the collapse of the Zionist dream but without offering radical alternatives. Israelis not only have to face a lack of clearly defined geographical borders and an absence of liminal markers for insiders/outsiders within Israeli society, but also the internal fragmentation of what was once considered a coherent Israeli identity. The external other, the Palestinian, is still clearly marked and the non-geographical boundaries between the two societies are asserted in Israeli cinema. These boundaries are well exemplified by the taboo of inter-racial romance, a common preoccupation of Israeli films prior to the Oslo accord.[34] In *Hamsin*,[35] for instance, Haled the Arab worker has to die because he is having a love affair with the sister of his Jewish employer. Even though Hava (Eve) clearly initiated the affair, it is Haled who pays for it with his life. In *Fictitious Marriage*[36] there is a fake inter-racial affair in which a Jewish-Israeli painter thinks she is having an affair with a Palestinian construction worker, but in fact Eldi is just pretending to be Arab, so the taboo is not seriously challenged. Thus the Palestinian people are represented as completely distinct from the Israeli people, and the possibility of racial, ethnic or national hybridity is very much negated within the body of these films. In contrast, internal liminality is much more problematic and confusing. Daily life reveals that Israeli society is comprised of hybrid communities, but Israeli films focus more on the uniqueness of different groups than on the areas of contact between them or their transborder relationships.[37]

THE BORDER AND THE BODY

Philosopher Mark Johnson claims that we experience the world around us first and foremost through our bodily experiences, and chief among

33 Benny Toraty, *Desperado Square*, Israel, 2001; Arik Kaplun, *Yana's Friends*, Israel, 1999; Ra'anan Alexandrowicz, *James' Journey to Jerusalem*, Israel, 2003

34 For a fuller discussion of the forbidden romantic relations in Israeli cinema, see Yosefa Loshitsky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001, chapters 6–7, pp 112–68.

35 Uri Barabash, *Hamsin*, Israel, 1982

36 Chaim Buzaglo, *Fictitious Marriage*, Israel, 1989

37 One pertinent example is Danna International, a trans-gender pop singer of Yemenite Israeli origin, who won the Eurovision song contest. Born as Yaron Cohen to a conservative Jewish family, Danna is extremely popular in the Arab world under the name Sa'ida Sultan. For a fuller discussion see Ted Swedenburg, 'Sa'ida Sultan/Danna International', in *Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, by Walter Armbrust, California University Press, Berkeley, 2000, pp 89–119.

them is the experience of the body as a container.[38] This container notion of the body fits nicely with Western notions of subjectivity, rationality and self-mastery. For that very reason, the body becomes a contested site in postcolonial and identity politics discourses. In *Sankofa*[39] the main character is an African-American model on a fashion shoot in a picturesque fortress in Ghana. As the white photographer choreographs Mona's movements by sexualising the encounter between camera and model, they are confronted by a local older man who shouts protests at her in a language she does not understand. Horrified, she hides behind the photographer, her head looking on but her body now veiled by a white male. The filmmaker Haile Gerima uses an interesting cinematic device here: while his main character Mona does not understand the old man's language, the audience gets a translation of his passionate speech. The old man – a *Sankofa* or self-appointed guardian of the castle – accuses Mona of desecrating a holy site. The castle was one of the places on the western coast of Africa from which slaves were sold and shipped to America. The old man repeatedly tells Mona what she cannot literally understand: 'back to your past', and 'return to your source'. Meanwhile he also turns to the gathering of white tourists and tells them this is sacred ground where the blood of people who suffered was spilled and they have no business to be there. The incident ends when a soldier comes and drives the *Sankofa* away while the tourists entreat the soldier in English not to hurt him.

This encounter sends Mona to the dungeons of the castle, and eventually into a spiritual journey connecting her to a past life as a slave. What is important about this scene is that Mona is tied to Africa and to her missing past because of her body or, more specifically, her skin colour. Mona has no access to the *Sankofa*'s language – an essential element that gives coherence to communal identity[40]– but she understands the message that sends her on a journey of self and ethnic communal discovery. For Gerima, an Ethiopian who chose to live in the US, and who set out to resurrect a sense of African heritage for African-Americans, the choice of the body as a marker of difference – possibly the only difference between Mona and the white tourists – is interesting. Her skin colour is the marker that entitles her, but also obliges her, to explore her identity; and like many women in postcolonial films, Mona stands in complex symbolic relation to womanhood, nationhood and race.

But the anchoring of identity to the body is not exclusive to racial-ethnic representation. In Suleiman's films, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Divine Intervention*, the woman appears in symbolic relation to the nation. In *Chronicle*, it is the woman's accent that betrays her as Palestinian and triggers discrimination against her, but it is also her voice that sings *Hatikva* on the police radio. In *Divine Intervention*, the filmmaker's girlfriend takes on numerous roles, from seductress/dominatrix of the soldiers (through her gaze only) to potential terrorist and ninja fighter. She 'stands in' for the nation – occupied but still resisting. The woman is fair, her hair and dress in Western style, and is therefore not easily distinguishable from either Euro-Israeli (Ashkenazi Jews) or Euro-American women. The body-as-container is used here critically to poke fun at the idea of distinct racial purity. In addition, the issue of voice is critically addressed by Suleiman as the silent main character who is a filmmaker (played by Suleiman himself) and the silent girlfriend in *Divine Intervention*. In *Chronicle*,

38 Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind:The Bodily Basis of Reason and Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987

39 Haile Gerima, *Sankofa*, Burkina Faso/Germany/Ghana/USA/UK, 1993

40 For an interesting discussion of the role of language (and access to it or lack thereof) in forming identity in exilic films (to which *Sankofa* in some ways belongs) see Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2001, chapters 1 and 2 in particular.

Suleiman links this voluntary muteness directly to the occupation and its attempts to erase Palestinian identity. In one scene the filmmaker is invited to give a speech, but the microphone rebounds and other technological obstacles render him speechless. Voice and body – traditional Western markers of agency and sovereignty – are constantly subverted to challenge notions of independence or control over one's life.

In her work on Israeli cinema up to the 1980s, Ella Shohat shows that the Palestinian and Arab threat from the outside is presented in order to justify the suppression of the internal other, the Oriental Jew, and to pretend that 'we are all Jews', that is, united.[41] I have shown elsewhere that external and internal otherness (Palestinians and Oriental Jews respectively) is represented by the Ashkenazi film establishment in a manner that gives unified coherence to Israeli identity.[42] Up to a point in the early 1990s, Israeli film production created a wishfully unified body or singular Israeli identity. But this representation has recently collapsed under the weight of a multi-ethnic and multi-vocal Israeli identity. Films like *Shchur* and *Love Sick*[43] foreground ethnicity within Israeli society but do not yet replace that old unified model with a new one. Similarly, *Mr Baum*[44] and the aforementioned *To Walk on Water* present the collapse of the Zionist Ashkenazi masculinity model but do not offer an alternative. In *Mr Baum*, the main character's ageing and sick body is itself the metaphor for an ailing ideology. Mr Baum is played by the film's director Assi Dayan, nephew of Israeli war hero Moshe Dayan, but also himself an iconic Zionist actor who played the lead role in the mythic war film *He Walked Through the Fields*.[45] Thus the intertextual reference to a once-young and all-Israeli Dayan is deconstructed as we see the dying and naked body of Mr Baum taking a last shower. In *To Walk on Water* youthful masculinity is challenged by homoeroticism and a retreat from violence. In both cases it is ultimately the individual desires, achievements and disappointments that matter, not the fulfilment of any national dreams or expectations.

It is important to note that films which do politicise domestic issues tend to show more of the Israeli landscape and harness 'realism' to strengthen their arguments. The most poignant example is Avi Mograbi's trilogy.[46] These films feature a mix of documentary, fiction and farce genres. Mograbi plays himself, his wife and occasionally other characters as well, all addressing the camera and audience directly. While the documentary material is coded as authentic and realistic, sections addressed direct to camera are clearly marked as scripted, fictitious and sarcastic. Mograbi uses his body and adopts various personae to present, deconstruct and challenge different historical and political narratives. This overt comical use of the body to perform multiple identities transgresses the boundaries of fiction cinema (stable identities) and the conventions of documentary cinema (veracity) and arrives at performance and experimental art. It is not a coincidence that Mograbi's politics and not just aesthetics lie outside mainstream Zionist ideology. Mograbi is not alone in this, as other Israeli installation artists (Michal Heyman, for instance) also politicise history through the deconstruction of the body and its other prescribed identities.

Palestinian experimental filmmakers too have addressed politics through the body. In *Chic Point*[47] Sharif Waked designs clothes for Palestinian men crossing the checkpoints. In a fashion show, models

41 Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1987

42 'Orientalism as Alterity in Israeli Cinema', *Cinema Journal* 40:4, Summer 2001

43 Shmuel Hasfari, *Shchur*, Israel, 1994; Savi Gavison, *Love Sick*, Israel, 1995

44 Assi Dayan, *Mr Baum*, France/Israel, 1997

45 Yosef Millo, *He Walked Through the Fields*, Israel, 1967. Based on a Moshe Shamir novel by the same title from 1948.

46 Avi Mograbi, *How I Learnt to Overcome My Fear and Love Arik Sharon*, Israel, 1997; *Happy Birthday Mr Mograbi*, Israel/France, 1999; *August*, Israel/France, 2002

47 Sharif Waked, *Chic Point*, 2003, video, 7 minutes

present see-through or fishnet shirts, multiple-zipper clothes and patched garments designed to show that the wearer carries no explosives. The piece addresses among other things the feminisation of Palestinian male identity by the Israeli occupation. In contrast, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum confronts the very notion of a unified identity by attacking the unified body model. In *Measures of Distance*,[48] the body is the site of dislocation and identity fragmentation. We see the body of the filmmaker's mother as she showers behind a frosted-glass partition. The image is superimposed with Arabic text, and an English voiceover narrates the letters from Hatoum's mother (a Palestinian in exile in Lebanon) to her daughter who has moved to Europe. This visual layering reveals the many facets of the artist's identity as a woman and a Palestinian in exile. The 15-minute video presents issues around femininity, the body and the relationship to her parents. In the end, Hatoum's mother joins together national identity and the lack of homeland as some reasons why her daughter has not married, lives abroad and experiences a cultural rift from her heritage. But this particular text is superimposed on the first images of the mother's entire body in the frame. If at the beginning of the piece we were presented with extreme close-ups of unidentified body parts, now we are made very much aware that we are confronted by a female body.

This embodied approach is one of the markers of what Laura Marks calls 'intercultural cinema'.[49] In her fascinating discussion of a large group of diasporic, transnational and bi-cultural films, Marks remarks that those films appeal to memories of touch, smell and sense, and underplay the importance of visual data. Marks claims that 'in Euro-American societies… optical visuality has been accorded a unique visual supremacy', one which cannot represent the inter-cultural experience.[50] The embodied approach and the appeal to sense memory evoke not only individual but cultural communal memories without asserting clear cultural boundaries. Hatoum's tactic of overlayering images but anchoring them in the concealed and yet naked body of her mother is a political statement on Palestinian national identity without ever marking it anywhere but in the fragmented body. Hatoum resists all the usual markers of liminality by representing even the body itself as fragile and context dependent. Hatoum's position may not represent the many Palestinians who still dream of a piece of land they could call a national home, but it clearly echoes the political sentiment of many intellectuals and politicians (such as the late Edward Said and Azmi B'shara) that a border between Israel and Palestine will not resolve the many problems these two people face since their existence is tied together so closely that no geographical border can separate them.

In anthropology, liminality is considered primarily a temporal phase and only by metaphoric extension a space.[51] The first discussion of liminality appears in the writing of Van Gennep, who defined a liminal phase of rites of passage.[52] The liminal phase is ambiguous and indeterminate but bracketed between more stable societal structures. In border discourse too the liminal space is considered a transitory one that leads to and from defined national entities. But for Israelis and Palestinians the liminal phase or space is not moving either to a purer self-constitution or a uni-national future: liminality is, in fact, the permanent reality of their geopolitical situation. Hatoum, Waked and Mograbi emphasise this

48 Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1988, video, 15 minutes

49 Laura U Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2000

50 Ibid, p xiii

51 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti- Structure*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1969

52 Ibid, p 94

liminal existence by questioning the notion of the body as a stable container. But these artists work outside the mainstream of cinematic institutions and the Israeli–Palestinian political landscape. Therefore their work is experimental, avant-garde, and liminal in the truest sense of that term.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps when Israeli cinema extends its treatment of internal differences to external ones, thus assuming a more complex notion of national subjectivity, a new cultural space may be formed; such a 'third' space, not based on the binary division of an Israeli self and a Palestinian other (or object) would produce an account of actual local identities. According to such a model – multi-vocal in its essence – complex representations would be possible to address hyphenated national identity (Israeli-Palestinians), cross ethnic-national identities (Israeli-Druze) and cross national-religious groups (Christian-Palestinian or Egyptian-Jews). Borders of identity will then be part of a fabric of ethnicity, religion, gender and nationality – a flexible one in which tensions between the different elements of identity often override coherence and more accurately represent the lived experiences of individuals. Once Israeli cinema represents identity (national or other) Israel will then, at least culturally, be ready to negotiate physical, mental and cultural liminality (and its crossovers) with the Palestinian people. And once a dignified and sustainable solution to the conflict is achieved, Palestinian cinema will be able to extend its own treatment of external liminality to the rarely addressed internal diversity of Palestinian society.