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The Nakba Projected
Recent Palestinian Cinema

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This article examines the cinematic narratives of loss and trauma centred on the 1948 Nakba and their relationship to the continuing occupation of Palestinian land by Israel. The connections made in these films to the second Intifada demonstrate that the Nakba is not only a memory of the past but a *continuity of pain and trauma* reaching from the past into the heart of the present, as well as a *continuity of struggle* in which the losses of the Nakba fuel the resistance to Israeli occupation and subjugation. The resolution of trauma is the struggle itself, these films strive to tell us. The struggle of Palestinians to liberate their country and rebuild their society has become the iconic struggle of the new millennium – equalling the special place once occupied in the international arena by the Anti-Apartheid campaign.[1] This struggle has also become representative of anti-globalisation and opposition to the New American Century project, its implications spreading far beyond the Middle East. The current conflict over control in Iraq, and generally in the Arab world, is seen as being of great symbolic significance in this respect.

THE ECONOMY OF PAIN: FROM FREUD'S MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA TO CARUTH'S TRAUMA WRITINGS

Memory is at the root cause of trauma, Freud tells us, but is also the source of its resolution. In one of his later works,[2] he outlines how the pain of reliving the events leading to the trauma may in turn hold the key for a gradual return to the normality of the Pleasure Principle. Mourning, and the mourning work, he tells us in a piece written some years before,[3] is crucial for the return to a normal life. Those who are not able – or not allowed – to mourn may well lapse into a pathological state, termed *melancholia*. Mourning the dead is an essential need of human society and of the individual within it. Freud writes of 'the economics of pain' when designating mourning as a reaction 'to a loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of

1 The name given by the Palestinian and all other media outlets to the Israeli 'Separation Wall' is 'the Apartheid Wall'. The Israeli authorities have missed the fact that *Apartheid* in Afrikaans means *separation*.

2 Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' [1920], in *On Metapsychology*, Penguin Freud Library, vol 11, Penguin Books, London, 1991, pp 269–337

3 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1917], in *On Metapsychology*, Penguin Freud Library, vol 11, Penguin Books, London, 1991, pp 247–73

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one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on'.[4] In analyzing the mourning process he outlines self-denial, which is socially normalised into it and sanctioned by society, contrasting it with the same manifestation in the melancholic in whom 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 and 'one's country' and 'liberty' is of special interest to us when examining films that also juxtapose such entities in their narrative structure.[5]

This is indeed one of the most interesting differences between the mourning process and the pathological loops of melancholia: 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.'[6] Hence, the loss that may trigger the melancholia is not necessarily a death, or total loss, but a loss akin to that dealt with by the films under discussion. The loss of one's country, real as it is, is different from death. After all, the country still exists, and thus the loss continues, gets fixated and cannot be mourned and 'done with'. The loss of one's country *never ends*. It is even more pronounced when the loss[7] 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.'[8]

What becomes of whole societies in which mourning is prevented? Where coming to terms with loss is not an option? What of societies whose loss and catastrophe have been covered up, hidden away and systematically erased? Palestinian society has been reeling from precisely such a loss of country, freedom and autonomy since 1948 when the formative event in its history, the Nakba or the *great catastrophe*, took place.

RECENT PALESTINIAN CINEMA AND THE MEMORY OF THE NAKBA

The films here have been chosen with the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba in mind,[9] which coincides with Israel's own fiftieth anniversary as an independent state. I shall examine mainly six films produced by three Palestinian filmmakers, all Israeli citizens,[10] and each dealing with recent history by using cinematic storytelling as a structuring device while still operating within the boundaries of documentary. The films discussed here are *Ustura* (Nizar Hassan, Israel, 1998), *1948* (Mohamad Bakri, Israel, 1998), *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (Elia Suleiman, Europe and Palestine, 1996), *Jenin, Jenin* (Bakri, Israel/Palestine, 2002), *Egteyah* (Hassan, Israel/Palestine, 2002) and *Divine Intervention* (Suleiman, Palestine, 2002).

For many years, the representation of the Nakba in Palestinian or Arab films was noticeable by its absence.[11] This is not surprising. Images of loss and destruction, reflecting the actions of Israeli forces on hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, were difficult to digest for Arabs and especially for Palestinians. A whole generation of Palestinians grew up

4 Ibid, p 252

5 See Anahid Kassabian and David Kazanjian, 1999, 'Melancholic Memories and Manic Politics: Feminism, Documentary, and the Armenian Diaspora' in *Feminism and Documentary*, eds Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp 202–23

6 Freud, op cit, p 253

7 On the same topic see Haim Bresheeth, 'Givaat Aliyah as a Parable: Three Aspects' in *Space, Land, Home*, ed Yehouda Shenhav, Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, 2003, pp 251–56 [in Hebrew]

8 Freud, 1917, op cit, p 266

9 See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, and Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington, DC, 1991

10 Not by choice but by birth in the Israeli-controlled part of Palestine before 1967. Some of the films actually appear as Israeli films in various catalogues, including the website of the Israeli Film Fund, although the proper denomination should be Palestinian.

11 Until at least the first Intifada, the ability of Palestinians to produce films independently was almost non-existent. Only the Oslo process in its early stages, and some important technical innovations in video production and especially post-production, made it possible for Palestinians to produce films of quality in great numbers.

with hardly any cinematic representation of the 1948 catastrophe and the many acts of resistance which are part of their history. This situation has changed since 1994 with the setting up of an autonomous Palestinian authority in part of the territories occupied by Israel in 1967.[12]

A TALE OF TWO TOWNS – SAFFOURI (1948) AND JENIN (2002)

It is no coincidence that three of the films I discuss feature Saffouri, a town forcibly evacuated in 1948 and later destroyed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), as a means of exploring the loss of *Heimat* (Homeland).[13] Saffouri has become the symbol of the Nakba and the totality of its loss.[14] In *Ustura* and *1948*, Saffouri's story serves this iconic function. Elia Suleiman's film, *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, enlists the famous Palestinian writer and native of Saffouri, Taha Ali Mohhamad, who also appears in *1948* in which he speaks of his home town.

1948, a film produced for the fiftieth anniversary of the Nakba, conceals another Palestinian storyteller, the late Emille Habibi, a writer, intellectual and leftist politician. Habibi's ironic novel *The Opssimist* (also called the *Optipessimist*) has served Mohamad Bakri, director of *1948*, as the reference and starting-point for a rambling theatrical production of the same name. This is a one-man show that Bakri, an accomplished actor, has performed many times in Arabic and Hebrew to packed audiences over a number of years. It tells the story of the invisible Palestinian minority of Israel: its Nakba and its subsequent marginalisation, oppression and dispossession in the newly formed Israel, its aspirations for freedom, equality and development all dashed by the harsh realities of Zionist occupation and control. This bittersweet story of human suffering, survival and hope in the face of Zionism is the source of the novel's name – a blend of optimism and pessimism.

Of the three more recent films completed in 2002, two deal with an iconic event of the second Intifada – the destruction by the IDF of the centre of the Jenin Refugee camp. *Jenin, Jenin* and *Egteyah* are the two documentaries made in 2002 that explore the Israeli invasion through revealing but very different visual discourses, leading to scenarios of public debates in Israel and abroad;[15] both recount the punitive destruction in Jenin using the framework of the Nakba and its memorialised acts of destruction as a referent. Jenin, like Saffouri before, has become a symbol of the terrifyingly wanton destruction by Israeli forces, which has come to seem normal across Palestine and on television screens around the world. While *Jenin, Jenin* leaves the telling of the destruction to the inmates of the camp, and especially to a strong-willed young girl and a deaf-mute man, *Egteyah* tells the story mainly through the eyes of one Israeli operator of a D9 bulldozer whose narrative is the well-known one of a 'difficult job that had to be done'. Both films expose an Israeli soldiery of a kind that most Israelis (and others) continue to deny. Here they are presented as a clear mirror image of a society that has brutalised itself on its way to brutalising and devastating the Palestinians.

Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* is, like his earlier 1996 film, a heady mix of fiction, documentary and agit-prop. It moves freely between genres and builds to a fantasy scene that combines the Hong

12 Arguably, this is the beginning of the postcolonial era in Palestinian history. But as Ella Shohat argues in 'The "postcolonial" in Translation: Reading Said in Hebrew', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Spring 2004, this is a term that cannot yet be applied to the Palestinian situation as colonisation is hardly over.

13 On this issue see Haim Bresheeth, 'Telling the Stories of *Heim* and *Heimat*, Home and Exile: Recent Palestinian Films and the Iconic Parable of Invisible Palestine', *New Cinemas*, issue 1, 2001, pp 25–6. See also Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 2001, on the Palestinian as the Israeli other in recent cinema. And see Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington, DC, 1992, and *The Palestinian Nakba – 1948: The Register of Depopulated Localities in Palestine*, compiled by S H Abu-Sitta, Palestinian Return Centre, London, September 2000, and Michael Palumbo, *The Palestinian Catastrophe*, Quartet Books, London, 1987

14 It may be even more important than that other famous icon of the Nakba – the massacre of Deir Yassin.

15 *Jenin, Jenin* was banned by the Israeli censors shortly after its release, although this was contested in the Israeli Supreme Court. This film caused enormous disquiet in Israel with the brutality of the invasion fully exposed in graphic terms. The legal action to ban was taken by some soldiers who took part in the invasion and who claimed the film desecrated the memory of those soldiers killed in the operation. This unusual act of political censorship was

Kong action-movie with a musical agit-prop. This film does not specifically deal with the Jenin incident but the second Intifada in general. It is set, like *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, in Suleiman's native Nazareth, as well as in the liminal spaces between the Israeli and Palestinian sectors.[16] This grey zone in which Palestinians now exist is his main interest. He sets the most remarkable parts of the film in the car park of the a-Ram checkpoint near Jerusalem.[17] The enigmatic Suleiman, silent throughout this film as in his last one, is seen with his girlfriend in an iconic Palestinian relationship – she comes from the Occupied Territories and he from the Israeli side of Palestine. So the only place they can meet with relative impunity is in the no-man's-land of the checkpoint car park.[18] The couple's dilemma reminds us that the Nakba has separated Palestinians since 1948 and continues to do so now. In a scene shot after Sharon's calamitous visit to the Harram Al Sharif (Dome of the Rock) in September 2000, which triggered the second Intifada, Suleiman inflates a red balloon with an image of Yasser Arafat on it and sends it flying across Jerusalem, past the checkpoints, until it reaches the Golden Dome and lands there. A pumped-up balloon – with obvious cinematic references – but also a pastiche of Arafat connects the hopes of Palestine to the symbol of its identity, the Al-Aqsa mosque, which gave its name to the second Intifada and commemorates that fateful visit by Sharon designed to infuriate Palestinian public opinion. This mélange – Arafat, Suleiman, his 'superwoman' girlfriend, musical and action extravaganza, Christ's crown of thorns, the Intifada – provides the elements in a narrative rich with cinematic references. It is almost a child's fable, with red balloons, an indestructible flying superwoman who defies her enemies with Kung Fu-style action and bullets stopped with her bare hands. The film starts with poor Santa Claus pursued up a steep hill by a gang of kids, losing all his colourful baggage on the way, and finally suffering a mortal wound just outside a hilltop church. It ends with a marvellous scene of the woman, a victorious Palestinian Christ, impervious to crucifixion by Israeli bullets.[19]

A return to Freud might prove useful to illuminate some of the devices employed in these films. In a recent piece Cathy Caruth discusses the famous *fort/da* episode in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.[20] She charts Freud's advances in his seminal piece from the initial description of First World War battle-shock traumas to the *fort/da* story of the little boy and the deep implication not just for trauma studies but for our culture as a whole. In this rereading of Freud's essay, the interplay (*Spiel*) between the death drive and the life energy at the heart of the little *fort/da* story gives the whole analysis its structure. Caruth transforms 'the original questions of trauma – *what does it mean for life to bear witness to death? And what is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?*' – into an ultimately more fundamental and elusive concern: '*what is the language of the life drive*?'.[21] In Bakri's film, *Jenin, Jenin*, a resilient young girl takes us through her traumatic experiences of the invasion. At one point she says to the filmmaker and, through him, to us: 'The Israelis can kill and maim, but they cannot win… all the mothers will have more children… and we will continue the struggle'. Her statement charts a passage from the trauma of death and destruction to the new life that will bloom and bring salvation. This is exactly what Caruth unearths in Freud

almost unthinkable until quite recently and bears witness to the moral decline in Israeli politics.

16 There are hundreds of checkpoints all over Palestine but the actual borders of Israel remain undefined – an unusual and disturbing phenomenon in international history. Israel's refusal to finalise its borders by agreement is related to its unadmitted nuclear capacity.

17 He was not allowed to film there but had to reconstruct it as a set.

18 Israeli soldiers no longer allow such meetings between checkpoints.

19 See also Haim Bresheeth's detailed treatment, 'A Symphony of Absence: Borders and Liminality in Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance*', *Framework*, 43:2, winter 2002, pp 71–84

20 Cathy Caruth, 'Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival', *Cultural Values*, 5:1, 2001, pp 7–19; see also Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1995, and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996.

21 Ibid, p 14

– the constant seesawing between the polarities of the death drive and the life drive, between utmost despair and new hope. Both are inseparable in the girl's story, as they are in Freud's *fort/da* story. The font of hope lies in the obsessive return to the 'scene of crime', to the locus of pain. This tactic of the *Spiel* (*game* but also *play* in German) is precisely the one chosen by the Palestinian filmmakers to deal with the traumas they face in stories of death, parting, loss and devastation.

This throws a new light on the stories of woe and on the whole practice of Nakba storytelling that structures these films. Like his earlier film, Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* is divided into chapter-like scenes; *Egteyah* by Nizar Hassan has chapter titles: *The Dream*, *The Passage*, *The Guest House* and so on. A wide variety of such storytelling tactics recur in these films. Hassan, the documentary filmmaker, is aware of this. When interviewed about the rationale for telling his political story as a myth, Hassan takes us back to his childhood, and more specifically to his mother. Mothers are the family storytellers in his and other Palestinian films.[22] They pass on the stories and memories from one generation to the next as the Nakba becomes an inseparable part of the cultural heritage.

> My clearest meeting with the Palestinian history as a story, a narrative, and not as a collage of isolated incidents, I owe to my mother… I was six or seven years old – and my mother took us to our bedroom… I only remember her telling the story without any tragic note, without victimhood, but with dramatic sense of survival. She was full of anger, a strong will and much hope…[23]

The story is the anchor for personal and national identity – the story of a family meets and overlaps the story of nation. The story includes secret coding. Hassan describes: 'a Palestinian discourse… I wished to discover its hidden codes' when speaking of one of his earlier films *Istiqlal* (Israel, 1994).[24] By discovering the codes, by interiorising them, he internalises the identity of Palestine and of the Palestinian. The story is the secret of making sense of oneself as a person and as part of a larger unit. Narrative and myth are the 'organisers of reality and of the past' or what Grierson terms 'the creative treatment of actuality'.[25] The stories of the Nigim clan and Hassan's own family history are closely intertwined. Hassan succeeds in relating this by thoroughly engaging the 'social actors': 'Without the participation of social actors, the documentary form known as direct or observational cinema could not exist. Without the informed consent of the subjects, the form lacks ethical integrity.'[26]

Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance* arrives at its high point with a story *about* storytelling told by the same writer we see talking about Saffouri in *1948*, Taha Mohammad Ali. These film stories remind us of Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History' who, looking backwards, can see only rubble and destruction in the wake of frightful massacres and privations.[27] But the angel is driven forward by the wind of history – just as these stories are. They signal that memory is the material of myth and myth is the foundation of the identity of nations. Benedict Anderson points to traumatic conditions for the growth of national narratives: 'All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.'[28] The amnesia in the case of Palestinians living in Israel after 1948 was a forced *public* one. The conditions for

22 Tal Ben Zvi, 'Aval Ani Verak Ani Asaper et HaSipur Sheli' ('But I and only I can tell my story'), *Plastika*, no 3, summer 1999, pp 75–81 (interview in Hebrew with Nizar Hassan)

23 A recognised national identity against all odds is presented as the main achievement of the Palestinian liberation movement by Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1997, pp 201–9.

24 See Ben Zvi, op cit, p 76

25 Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*, second edition, Faber & Faber, London, 1952, p 70

26 Caroline Anderson and Thomas Benson, *Documentary Dilemmas: Frederick Wiseman's 'Titicut Follies'*, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale–Edwardsville, 1991, p 151

27 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans Harry Zohn, ed Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, New York, 1969

28 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London, 1983, p 204

remembering and commemoration did not exist since Israeli rule prohibited any such exercise of memory. Only gradually, with the ending of military rule, the establishment of the PLO in 1964 and especially after the shock of the 1967 war, did a narrative begin to develop into the open manifestations of the last three decades.

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

> I'm encircled by giant buildings and Kibbutzes. As if that's not enough, my collar's choking me… Not long ago, those hills were deserted… 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.[29]

The two entwined worlds – that of the Priest representing the disappearing old pre-Nakba Palestine and the 'Kibbutzes' representing the growing sphere of Zionism – graphically represent the conflict. This is undoubtedly not a documentary but a staged scene. Yet it frames the documentary footage with which the film 'plays'.

Towards the middle of the film, the weight of the scenes – each autonomously shaped in a true Brechtian fashion – starts to reach a critical mass. We begin reading the absent *other* into the collapse of realities. The absent other is Elia Suleiman himself, back from exile in New York to another exile at home in Nazareth and ending up in a worse exile yet – that of life in Jerusalem under occupation. Instead of finding a former and cherished self, Suleiman is gradually and painfully disappearing in a simile of the disappearance of Palestine and the Palestinians. Suleiman's alter ego in the film, the young Adan, is a Palestinian woman who has chosen to fight the occupation. Like his parents, she represents the *Zumud* or resistance and survival.[30] If the struggle of the older generation took the form of powerful inertia, Adan takes the active road. To fight her enemy she must adopt some of its tactics, methods and machinery. She thus operates through the ether, broadcasting in Hebrew to the enemy, using a found army radio to send her messages, which are coded in the nonsensical fashion so beloved by the IDF. Her ultimate weapon is to use *Hatikvah* – the Israeli national anthem, which speaks of every Jew's hope to return to Jerusalem. It is then read in its original sense, as an anthem of the oppressed who have lost Jerusalem, who have lost the land, who have disappeared and hope to return. But this time it is the Palestinians who hope for return and liberation, not the Israeli Jews, turned oppressors themselves. Those without means must steal the thunder of their oppressors in order to survive.

29 Quoted from the English subtitles to the spoken Russian.

30 Its literal meaning in Arabic is 'adherence to the Land'.

THE AL-AQSA INTIFADA FILMS

The films that have appeared since the second Intifada began have built on the same principles, and used similar strategies, but with one crucial

difference. If the films before 2000 treat the 1948 Nakba as the ultimate catastrophe, recent films see the events unfolding before them as an even worse turn. In Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin* (2002) we hear the story of an old man who has followed the IDF orders to vacate the houses only to be shot in the hand and foot at close range in an apparent attempt to kill him. Speaking from his hospital bed, waving his bandaged arm, he cries and says:

> In '48 we tasted the same pain, but nothing like this! All that we have achieved – we built a house, had children – all gone in a single hour! So Bush can be really satisfied, him and his friend the murderer. Abu Sabra and Shatila![31]

In this new crisis the residents of Jenin who, like this old man, had experienced the Nakba realise that what they are now going through is indeed worse. Hassan's *Egteyah*[32] reminds us in the opening titles that the 14,000 residents of the Jenin camp are actually refugees from fifty-six different communities in 1948 Palestine. Some of them, like the old woman telling her story in the ruins of her home, were already second- or third-time refugees before settling in Jenin. Losing the Jenin camp becomes the epitome of despair – a lifetime Nakba getting continually worse. The woman, originally a resident of the Zer'een village erased by the IDF in the 1950s, has ended up in Jenin and thinks she may have some respite there. But of the intervening years she says:

> Since '48… I haven't had one good day, only fear and horror… our story with the Jews is a long one… since they arrived we have lived in suffering and bitterness.

Links to the now long disappeared villages are evident in most stories. A man tells Hassan:

> Since my childhood I had dreamt of building a big house in my original village, Al Ghazal near Haifa, a house with curtains, windows, chandeliers… when I had money, I was forced to build it here [Jenin refugee camp] on the camp's slope. It's the highest house…

Which is of course why the house is taken over by the IDF. Its inhabitants suffer terribly as a result.

If the old people had experienced some peace and quiet before the 1948 disaster, the young residents of the camp know only its dusty alleyways and rickety shacks, now destroyed by the mammoth US-made D9 bulldozers of the IDF. The young girl in Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin* amazes us with her concise logic and unfailing commitment to the struggle, the camp and its inhabitants. She vows that the camp will be rebuilt. She can never be at peace with those who have done this to her people. The Israelis may be able to kill and maim, destroy houses and whole neighbourhoods, but their deeds reek of fear rather than bravery, of weakness rather than strength. The moral fibre running through her story is the foundation of a redemptive narrative. Hassan has told us: being able to control your story is the font of strength of the dispossessed.

31 Abu Sabra and Shatila – a clear reference to Sharon, the one responsible for the Sabra and Shatila massacres, even according to the official commission of inquiry that forced his sacking as Defence Minister.

32 *Egteyah* means invasion in Arabic.

STORYTELLING AS DEFENSIVE PRACTICE: STORIES OF PALESTINE VS THE STORY OF ZIONISM

In the period following the Oslo Accord of 1993, the main struggle between Israeli Zionism and Palestine's emerging nationhood passed from the arena of armed struggle to that of culture and memory. Resistance to the one-sided Zionist story as a struggle of Jews 'to recover their own land' had to take place in the cultural arena by dealing with the story of Palestine as a strategic defensive move designed to recapture ground lost to Zionism and its dominant narrative.

Palestine's narrative as told by Zionism is first and foremost a story of denial endorsed by historians and intellectuals. The first casualty is the very word Palestine itself. After 1967, when the whole of Palestine was occupied by Israel, it became *de rigueur* to replace the historical term Palestine with the nationalist and expansionist Hebrew phrase *Eretz Israel*. The use of the Hebrew phrase acted as a hidden marker of ideology: it denoted the very absence of Palestine – the country, the people, the language and history.[33] 'Israel' provided a virtual and false connection to the Biblical existence of the land and its current occupation by the Israeli state.[34] Here we can see the historical 'amnesia' in action as noted by Anderson.[35] This erasure is applied not only in texts that deal with the area and its recent history but as a blanket term even when its use is patently nonsensical.[36] The use of the term *Eretz Israel* to replace and erase Palestine is not peculiar to Israeli right-wing politics, as it once was, but can also be found on the left of the political spectrum. It has become a peculiar test of Israeli conformity and political correctness, seemingly impossible to attack, question or analyse. Similar coded terms, embedded deep in Israeli public discourse, are used to describe the conflict in the Middle East. The 1948 war is only referred to as the *War of Independence*; the 1956 colonial war is only known as *The Sinai Offensive*. The 1967 war is termed the *Six Day War*. The 1973 war is called the *Yom Kippur War* and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 is quaintly called *Operation Peace in the Galilee*. Any departure from these terms is understood as a dangerous deviation, 'opening the door' to arguments about the dubious moral justification for any or all of those military campaigns and ultimately for Zionism itself.[37] The daily papers, whatever their political leanings, have accepted and adopted such terms, as have the various broadcasting institutions, thus normalising the use of Zionist Newspeak to obliterate the full story of the Arab Palestinian other. In the face of such thorough suppression, the Palestinian response must centre on unearthing the story and telling it first to the Palestinians themselves, always in danger of losing their story, but also to Israelis who may listen. This telling may eventually serve as a way of bridging the aspirations of both communities by trying to create understanding and compassion through recognising each other's pain. This need was first pointed out by Azmi Bishara, political scientist turned politician, in an article entitled 'The Arabs and the Holocaust'.[38] Understanding the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust and empathising with it should be a precondition to the demand for and expectation that the same consideration be offered by Israeli Jews to the Nakba. This was an important departure from the more usual Holocaust denial or indifference displayed by many Arab intellectuals. Bishara's argument for mutual empathy is presented here as

33 On this topic, see Ella Shohat, op cit.

34 See an illuminating example, 'Plans for Holy Land theme park on Galilee shore where Jesus fed the 5,000', *Guardian*, 4 January 2006. Conal Urquhart reports on a theme park to be built in this isolated and beautiful spot by a consortium of the American Christian right led by Pat Robertson. Many Israelis were offended by this proposal but the government is intent on realising its money-making bonanza. Even Biblical references of the Christian right are preferable to Palestinian ones.

35 Anderson, op cit

36 A recent case of replacing Palestine with the Hebrew *Eretz Israel* occurred in the translation of Eric Hobsbawm's *Century of Extremes* into Hebrew as pointed out by Yitzhak Laor in *Ha'aretz*, 12 May 2000.

37 See the discussion of *naming* in Rashid Khalidi, op cit, especially on the naming of Jeruslaem/Al Quds and *Haram Al Sharif* (the Temple Mount), p 16.

38 Azmi Bishara, 'HaAravim VeHaShoah: Nituah BeAyatiyuta Shel Ot Hibur' (The Arabs and the Holocaust: An Analysis of the Problematics of Conjunction), *Zemanim*, 53, Summer 1995, pp 54–71

a reversal of the historical and political amnesias on both sides of the divide as a precondition for a common future.

The eradication practised by Zionism on Palestine affects each Palestinian on at least four distinct levels. These are all referenced in the films under discussion. The first level is that of the nation/country – the level most responsible for the production of melancholia. The second level is less abstract and even more traumatic – that of the town or village occupied, destroyed and erased from memory as if the *self* itself had been erased. The third layer is that of the family. Each family in Palestine has suffered during and since the 1948 Nakba. The family has in many cases been dismantled as the basic unit of social organisation. It has been fragmented both mentally and geographically and has lost its cohesion and efficacy. This loss is conveyed by the central role attributed to the family and the mother in Hassan's work.[39] The last and most complex layer, affected by all other themes, is the individual Palestinian – Saleem or Mahmoud in *Ustura*, for example, or filmmaker Hassan himself – real people who have had to fight mental as well as military occupation.

The dispossession brought about by conquest is even deeper and more painful than losing home and country. The ultimate loss is that of losing one's story, losing the right to tell it, losing your own history. In *Ustura* this is precisely what happens to Saleem, the little Arab boy who became the hero of a Hebrew short story for children. The retelling of one's story, which brought tears to Odysseus's eyes in Homer's tale, is here barren and distant. In a scene with the Israeli author, Saleem is so disturbed by the written (Hebrew and Zionist) distorted version of his life-story that he departs, leaving filmmaker Hassan alone with the author reading aloud. His story has also been appropriated, as were his land and country before.

Conceptually and ideologically, Palestinians operate in the interstitial space between cultures: 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-versus-Oriental discourse. This interstitial mode is forced on them by the normative state of Palestinians – living in the seams of Israeli society; always situated between two points on the virtual map of Palestine.[40] The names of their villages or towns are not seen on road signs, just as their language, although it is an official language of Israel, is noticeable by its absence. Many are not found even midway between Israeli name places, because no road leads to them and they are not connected to the electricity grid. Those villages are termed 'unrecognised settlements' by the state 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, no matter how difficult to discern. When Hassan takes the Nigim family back to Saffouri in *Ustura* to locate their old house, all that remains is some foundation stones. Significantly, the map Hassan uses to draw the route of the refugees in 1948 shows only Arab names and disregards the Hebrew names for Jewish settlements.[41] So there are two virtual countries inhabiting the same space, disregarding each other, yet inextricably bound to each other.

39 Ben Zvi, op cit, p 80

40 See Haim Bresheeth, 'Self and Other in Zionism: Palestine and Israel in Recent Hebrew Literature,' in *Palestine: A Profile of an Occupation*, Zed Books, London, 1989, pp 120–52

41 The film builds what Naaman calls 'a metaphysical space… or a mythical space in which the narrative takes place', in Dorit Naaman, 'Reflections on the Liminality in Israeli and Palestinian Cinema', *Teoria VeBikoret*, vol 18, April 2001, Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem (Hebrew), p 216. In the same publication see Haim Bresheeth 'Borders and Liminality in Palestinian Cinema', p 99.

The irony is that the victorious newcomers are themselves refugees who claim this status as justification for that which cannot be justified.[42] In one scene, Hassan confronts Saleem's Jewish ex-headmaster with the fact that it is their homeland the Israelis occupy. The headmaster says he has a very short answer to this accusation: 'Auschwitz'. Here Hassan is heard saying 'cut', ending the scene abruptly. Not only are there two countries superimposed on this landscape but the powerful occupiers also project a third and different universe of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. The Palestinians' existence is now situated in the interstitial space between the universes of Judaism, rather than in their own country – they are also situated in the space between the distant Jewish past in Biblical Palestine and Israel's current control of it. This is referred to by Hassan in the interview quoted earlier.[43] The normal use of language and its dominant ideology in Israel connects both instances in a continuum despite the two thousand-year time span that gapes open between them. Non-existent people and their non-existent settlements have filled the non-existent gap.

TRAUMA, LOSS AND THE PAIN OF PALESTINIAN 'NORMALITY'

In thinking about these six films and their representation of trauma, we are again reminded of Freud's question summed up by Caruth: 'What does it mean for the reality of war to appear in the fiction of the dream? What does it mean for life to bear witness to death? And what is the surprise that is encountered in this witness?'[44] All films discussed here are marked by trauma and melancholia. In *Ustura*, in a deserted park in Germany, the director Nizar Hassan is offered 'the only fig tree in Germany' by Mahmoud – a token of the lost homeland and also a Biblical token – 'under your vine and fig tree'. Yet the only fig tree is a barren one – never to bear fruit, never to have continuity, like the exile Mahmoud who has no children. He talks of his existence in Germany as merely temporary but is destined to die in exile, under someone else's fig tree. In a scene towards the end of the film Saleem is discovered by Hassan sitting high in the branches of a carob tree, the tree of his lost convent childhood. Sitting in the tree, he talks of a childhood bereft of parents, siblings and his people, a childhood spent in exile within the Jewish Israeli community, away from Palestine while still in it. His is a deep state of melancholia.

In the terrifying end to Bakri's *Jenin, Jenin* the girl who serves as main commentator says this of her life whilst holding a large, twisted casing from an Israeli bomb which has destroyed her home and her community: 'I saw dead bodies, I saw houses destroyed, I saw sights which cannot be described… and now, after they ruined all my dreams and hopes – I have no life left!' The girl, who claims to have no fear of Sharon and his tanks, is frighteningly mature in her utterance of sentiments that damn the occupation and its inhuman brutality.[45] This girl, one must assume, is *also dreaming* of that of which she speaks, and through her the film presents a psycho-social equivalent of dreaming, a collective way of dealing with the trauma encountered. She returns to the trauma, like others in the film – the deaf-mute man, the children playing in the devastated landscape (in

42 On the same topic, see Haim Bresheeth, 'Givaat Aliyah as a Parable: Three Aspects' in *Space, Land, Home*, ed Yehouda Shenhav, Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, 2003, pp 251–6 [in Hebrew]

43 See Ben Zvi, op cit, pp 80–1

44 Caruth, 'Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival', op cit, p 8

45 Freud and Caruth illuminate this point: it is precisely the lack of fear and preparation (the impossibility of preparing for what they have experienced) that causes the trauma in the first place. Ibid, p 10

this film as well as in Hassan's *Egteyah*) – to relive moments of the trauma in a desperate search for relief, which is unavailable as the situation continues and intensifies. This is true of those telling their stories in the other films – *1948*, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Ustura*.

Another factor common to these six films is that all were made by Palestinians who are citizens of Israel. They enjoy a greater degree of freedom of movement and expression than that available to Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. The three directors are therefore sensitive to the fracture at the heart of Palestinian existence since the Nakba – the division of their people into three distinct groups, perhaps even four. Edward Said has enumerated the parts of the Palestinian nation divided by the Nakba.[46] The '1948' Palestinians who stayed put and ended up as Israeli subjects: those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip 'remains' of Palestine; many others dispersed as refugees in Arab countries, mostly Jordan and Lebanon. One should also add the Palestinians of the Diaspora that sprang out of the Nakba: the Gulf countries, Europe, North and South America and elsewhere. The events of 1948, which brought Jews from all over the world to live in Palestine/Israel, have created a Palestinian Diaspora similar to that once endured by the Jews. This situation is emphasised in Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* by the two protagonists, separated by Israeli checkpoints, who can only meet at the checkpoint car park; or in Hassan's *Ustura* which features a Diaspora meeting-point in a green and peaceful German park strewn with *Sans Souci* sculptures, where the 'only fig tree in Germany' is discovered by Mahmoud. All these films deal with the scattered limbs of Palestinian existence and are a powerful means of rewriting them into the collective memory of the Nakba. Such films actively reclaim Palestinian identity by bridging and combining memories in storytelling. Palestinian cinema exists in the exilic interstice [47] – between fact and fiction, between *documentary* and *fiction*, between the realities of Israel and Palestine, between life and death. Facts are not enough, these films tell us. It is only by *telling their* story that Palestinians may overcome a national political *melancholia* and come to terms with the Nakba. A future may be possible through a resolution of the traumatic past.

46 Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, pp 116–18

47 On exilic cinema and its devices, see Hamid Naficy, ed, *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, Routledge, London, 1999; and Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1991.