

Narrative Agency in Palestinian Moving Image Practices

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Introduction

The history of a nation is defined by the stories of its creation, its culture, and its encounters with the outside world. Narratives shape the sources of identity that make up the collective voice of a people. They legitimize the belief systems of a community and unite a nation through a shared understanding of historical events, particularly in times of conflict. (Rotberg, 2006) Benedict Anderson (1983) argues in *Imagined Communities*, that ‘nation-ness’ is an imagined sense of identity distinguished by the ways in which nations are imagined. Identities exist within systems of representation that rely on depiction to produce meaning. (Hall, 2000) For this reason, self-representation plays a major role in shaping the political and social identity of a nation. (Shohat, 1989)

This paper will examine the contest for narrative agency and self-representation in Palestinian moving image practices. I will argue that during the British Mandate period, images of Palestinians as produced by colonial powers distorted the nation’s historical narrative and influenced stereotypical depictions of Palestinians in American media. My paper will examine the attempt of filmmakers Elia Suleiman and Jayce Salloum to reclaim elements of Palestinian history through subversive films that deploy Detournement as a strategy to deconstruct colonial narrative archetypes by creating a critical space from which to examine stereotypical representations of Palestinians in Western media.

Colonial Imagery and Narrative Archetypes

As noted by Edward Said (1994), the right to tell a story is what makes colonialism and imperialism possible. Those with the power to narrate impose their own agendas and manipulate narratives to suit their own interests. It is in this vein of thinking that history is written by the victors. Narrative agency symbolizes the voice of a people; to control the representation of ‘others’ is the same as speaking for ‘others’. To co-opt self-representation is to censor or eliminate entirely the voice of a nation. In addition to military and economic exploitation, the legacy of colonialism is one of narrative co-option. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said identifies the role narratives played in determining ownership of land.

By excluding certain accounts and privileging others, colonial powers justified their control over territories based on a false sense of entitlement that ignored the claims of indigenous populations. The histories of colonized peoples were told and retold from the perspective of foreign powers interested in legitimizing their empire by excluding dissenting accounts of life under occupation. With the collapse of colonialism in the post-war period, metropolitan cultures took on the role of empire. In particular, American film and media industries manipulated the representations of formally colonized peoples to fit allegorical stereotypes, influenced by European preconceived notions of the Middle East.

In the case of Palestine, a contest over narrative agency existed since the early nineteenth-century with the invention of the camera. During the British mandate period, colonialists propagated images of a land and a people that suited their own ideas and interpretations of what Palestine and Palestinians represented. Photographs and film reels provided a Western audience the opportunity to ‘see for oneself’ the exotic lands of the Middle East. Through the lens of the camera, European and American spectators imagined a culture and a people based on orientalist constructs of the Middle East. Interest in Palestine stemmed from a curiosity in religious studies as well as a desire to witness the fulfillment of Christian prophecies in the Holy Land. As a result, images of Jerusalem took on a biblical tone privileging landscapes, religious monuments, and sufficient negative space to ensure the erasure of a native population from its homeland. Photos which placed Palestine in the context of its biblical history helped portray the city as belonging to a collective religious community and not to the Palestinians. With its largest cities reduced to images of religious monuments and abandoned ruins, Jerusalem was depicted as an empty, uninhabited space. The notable absence of a local population from early colonial imagery gave rise to the popular impression of Palestine as a ‘land without a people, a people without a land.’ (Nasser, 2007)

On the rare occasion when Palestinians were featured in British photographs and film reels, the locals typically posed in traditional garb for Western tourists who considered the Middle East an exotic and exciting travelers’ destination. Another common function of the Palestinian in early colonial imagery

was the role of the backward Arab, desperately in need of civilization, progress, and modernization. American photographer Edward L. Wilson actually described the locals he encountered as “repulsive” and “entirely out of harmony with the character of the Land.” Perhaps for this reason Jewish immigration to Palestine was considered by many Europeans and Americans tolerable, if not advantageous for native inhabitants. (Nasser, 2007, p. 323)

By the 1930s, as European Jewish immigration to Palestine rose considerably, dominant themes of colonial imagery were already established in the minds of Western spectators. Palestine was seen as an uninhabited land, without an indigenous people. Palestinians were considered Arabs and thus took on the orientalist narrative archetypes assigned to the Middle East by European imperial powers. The Jewish settlers who immigrated to Palestine as a result of World Wars I and II reinforced these colonial pedagogies through propaganda films inspired by the Zionist movement – the goal of which was to eliminate the relationship between Palestinians and their homeland while promoting the Jewish pioneer as the rightful custodian of Jerusalem. One of the most influential Zionist propaganda films of the period is *The Land of Promise*, directed by Juda Leman and released to an American audience in 1935. The film was considered a documentary on the day-to-day life of Jewish settlers in their efforts to build a home in Palestine. It was such a successful component of the Zionist movement the film was even used in Nazi Germany to encourage Jewish immigration. (Downing, 1979) For filmmakers and historians alike, *The Land of Promise* is a prototype of Zionist propaganda in its co-option of the Palestinian narrative. Its significance lies in its ability to adhere the tenants of Zionism to a Westernized perception of Palestine. In this way, *The Land of Promise* contributed to the already existing stereotypes of Palestinians while addressing the inherent right of Jews to return to the Promised Land. (Hillel, 1995)

A major theme in *The Land of Promise* is the rebirth of Palestine following the return of the Jews to their rightful home. The film begins with a narration of the biblical story of Palestine – a land promised to Abraham by God. In the opening credits, the audience is called on to witness the “triumphs of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who are lifting Palestine back into the ranks of the great civilized

countries...” The narrator makes it clear that although Jews were exiled from the Holy Land long ago, these dispersed settlers carried with them a prized memory of Palestine as well as the hope for a future return. In this way, Jews made up for their physical absence from the land by passing down a sense of religious tradition and nostalgia to their future generations. The intended message of the film’s opening sequence is that even when the Jews were not living in Palestine, their religious spirit and determination made them part of the land and the history.

Throughout *The Land of Promise*, images of landscapes and vast swathes of agricultural space serve to reinforce the inherent connection between Jewish settlers and the land of Palestine. Not only do they have intimate knowledge of its topography, but the sweat and labor of the Jewish farmer is symbolically rewarded by agricultural prosperity. Jewish settlers are depicted as modern farmers with the superior technology, skill, and physical labor to make the desert bloom once again. Filmmakers contrast the primitive farming practices of the Arabs with the Westernized Jewish settler, who exists as part of a co-operative agricultural settlement. In this way, the Jewish pioneer comes to embody the Holy Land through sheer mental, emotional, and physical exertion. (Hillel, 1995)

The arrival of European Jews signals a rebirth of ancient Christian civilization, when Jerusalem was a flourishing city and an important center for progress and innovation. This is demonstrated by the economic prowess of Jewish settlers, responsible for the creation of sophisticated city centers such as Haifa and Tel Aviv. Self-sufficient women and men contribute equally to the industrial development of Palestine through commerce and factory production of olive oil, cotton, and silk. Jews are credited with helping Palestine rid itself of dependence on imports and instead “meet its own needs.” The self-determination and equal opportunity afforded by Jewish cities is a nod to the industrial self-image of Western nations who mirror the capitalist sentiments expressed in *The Land of Promise*. The message is clear: under the care of the Arabs, Palestine has suffered from a lack of progress and cultivation. It is almost as if Palestine required the return of the Jews to fertilize and develop once again. (Hillel, 1995)

In contrast to the hardworking Jew, scenes of the bazaar and city center evoke orientalist stereotypes of Palestinians as lazy, regressive, and industrially incompetent. This perception of Arabs belittles the cultural and historical narrative of Palestinians. It also creates a natural hierarchical structure meant to privilege the superior European refugee at the expense of the inferior and underdeveloped local population. (Shohat, 1989) As explained by Francis Gooding, the street scenes of Palestine which depict old Arab men juxtaposed with youthful, educated Jewish laborers rely on an already established concept of the ‘other’. The purpose of such a stereotype is to provide an amalgamated understanding of the imperial ‘self’ as it relates to its colonized subjects. In *The Land of Promise*, Jewish refugees are celebrated for their ability to overcome the inherent cultural differences between Europeans and Arabs in an attempt to improve a population of backward Palestinians. (Gooding, 2014)

In the aftermath of World War II, as more and more Palestinians protested against Jewish immigration, newsreels focused on a new archetype of the Palestinian – that of the terrorist. In an episode from the popular *March of Time* television program entitled ‘Palestine Problem’ (1945), government-imposed restrictions on Jewish immigration are lambasted as a form of appeasement without any consideration for the opinions of Palestinians and their political representatives. The program goes on to explain that despite having benefited from the presence of the Jews, defiant Palestinians insist that the land must remain Arab; they are even prepared to fight “a holy war which would set the entire near east to flame.” Images of disobedient Arabs are accompanied with theatrical and frightening music. They appear in the company of armed soldiers so as to further intimidate the audience. His opinion is not provided nor does it matter. The narrator is clear that the Jews who have already survived the horrors of the Holocaust have an “irresistible case” for a free Palestine that will prevail over the concerns of a few disgruntled inhabitants.

Stereotypes of Palestinians in Western Media

Narrative archetypes of the colonial period, such as those depicted in *The Land of Promise* and *March of Times*, played a major role in defining the Palestinian narrative in the minds of American spectators who both sympathized and identified with European Jewish refugees. Beginning in the 1920s, Hollywood adopted British and French cinematic depictions of primitive colonized people who benefited from the superior oversight of imperial powers. Americans held a similar understanding and support for colonial projects as espoused by their European counterparts. Part of this had to do with America's own imperial obsession with taming the Wild West and civilizing its indigenous populations. American cinema incorporated the 'myth of the frontier' into its Western adventure films. This ideology, made famous by the writings of historian Francis Jennings, romanticized the expansion of the United States from an east coast settlement to a bi-coastal nation. It provided the moral justification for American colonization of the western frontier, despite the presence of Native Americans.

Western films also took from the American belief in 'Manifest Destiny' – the popular Nineteenth-century thinking that America was unique in its spirit and institutions and therefore had a duty to expand and settle the land and peoples of the west. Colonial depictions of Palestinians as stateless terrorists who benefited from British oversight fit well within America's own opinion of itself as a nation made great by its conquest of the frontier and its purge of the uncivilized Native American. As such, colonial stereotypes were adopted and embellished upon by American media and film industries following the end of the British Mandate of Palestine and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. (Shohat & Stam, 2014)

The extent to which American cinema has replicated the colonial imagery of Arabs is problematic, to say the least. In *Reel Bad Arabs*, Jack Shaheen analyzes cinematic representations of Palestinians in American films released during the 1980s and 1990s. This particular period is significant given the political events which occurred at the time – the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation, also known as the First Intifada. In analyzing forty-five Hollywood fiction films claiming to portray Palestinians, Shaheen summarizes his findings by a lack of human drama from the perspective of

Palestinian families and individuals. Palestinians are represented as rebels, terrorists, and at best victims of circumstances which are never fully explained. In contrast, Israeli soldiers and settlers are ascribed heroic narratives and biblical storylines that justify their presence in an occupied space. Never are Israelis depicted from the perspective of imperial infiltrators responsible for usurping land and oppressing locals. Never are Palestinians depicted as humans with interests and emotions separate from their political circumstances. (Shaheen, 2003)

Popular films such as *Exodus* (1960), *Black Sunday* (1977), and *The Delta Force* (1986) illustrate the evolution of pre-1948 colonial imagery into what can be described as Hollywood's neo-orientalist stereotyping of Palestinians. In *Exodus* for example, director Otto Preminger depicts the right of the Jews to return to the Promised Land by borrowing loosely from the biblical history of Palestine. Such a storyline can be traced back to 1920s colonial photography and film reels. Preminger takes it a step further, however. His film, which played a major role in bringing Israel into American popular culture, was a testament to the colonial imagination of Palestine as belonging to religion, made even more compelling as a result of the emerging conservative Christian fundamentalist culture in the United States. (McAlister, 2001) Similar developments can be seen in *The Delta Force* and *Black Sunday*, in which film directors reinforced the association of Palestinians as terrorists by inexplicably and without much plot development partnering Palestinian villains with the likes of Iranians and Germans. By placing the Palestinian in the same league as controversial nations such as Iran and Germany, filmmakers played off preconceived opinions of evil Iranians and Nazi Germans, though neither nationality held much political relevance for the Palestinian plight. (Slade, 1981)

Even more troubling is how closely cinematic depictions of Palestinians during the 1980s and 1990s mirrored American public opinion following news reporting on the Intifada, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), and prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Opinion polls conducted in 1988 and 1989 showed that the majority of Americans blamed Palestinians and PLO leaders for the violence in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. In April of the following year, Israel registered the

highest approval rating in *Washington Post* and *ABC News* history. Despite dramatic changes in U.S.-PLO relations, throughout the Intifada Americans continued to distinguish between PLO representatives and the Palestinian cause, the majority associating the PLO with international terrorism and unreliable leadership. (Gilboa, 1993)

As explained by Said (1984), this type of negative publicity regarding the Palestinian cause is largely the product of a media system that omits negative facts concerning Israel, while punishing those who report the truth. American film and news industries reject information that doesn't fit into a pre-existing cultural narrative of the Palestinian people. In this way, Western media outlets employ a "non-narrative, indefinite formula" when reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that privileges the political and social discourse which exists outside the newsroom. Expressing sympathy for the Palestinian cause is equated to supporting the creation of a Palestinian homeland, the latter of which does not follow U.S. Middle East policy. American media is able to control representations of Arabs and Palestinians because of the scale in which it propagates reductive stereotypes. This constitutes a form of systematic violence that justifies unnecessary and inhumane force against those being represented.

Reclaiming Palestinian History through Subversive Film

However, history as written by colonial powers is not an uncontested truth. Attempts to rewrite the experiences of colonized peoples are equally as prevalent as the stereotypes used to oppress them. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, authors Ella Shohat and Robert Stam dissect the various methods by which filmmakers contest imposed historical narratives. The desire to reclaim elements of history lost during the colonial period stems from a revolutionary movement in the 1960s known as 'Third World Cinema'. It emerged against the backdrop of successful, though violent revolutions in Vietnam, China, Algeria, and Cuba. Third World filmmakers sought to unite colonized peoples from all over the world in militant action against imperial oppression. Filmmakers saw the camera as a tool to promote revolutionary thought and dialogue. It was also considered an instrument for cinematic counter-telling in the post- World War II

collapse of European empires. Third World filmists saw the rewriting of colonial history as way to change the present dialogue surrounding developing nations. By presenting an accurate depiction of life under occupation, the histories of colonized peoples would be understood as they were, and not in the context of a colonial Western narrative that distorted truths for political purposes. (Shohat & Stam, 2014)

The principles of Third World cinema appealed to Palestinian filmmakers who regarded the Israeli occupation as a product of imperial aggression and Western propaganda. Through subversive films, directors adopted central tenants of the Third cinema esthetic aimed at inciting audience participation through cinematic dialogue and sarcastic parody. Both tactics taught the spectator to never trust the images presented to them and instead, to engage in acts of “revolutionary decoding” when analyzing the implicit meanings behind the representations depicted in images. (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 263) In the case of filmmakers Elia Suleiman and Jayce Salloum, *Detournement* became a way to analyze the relationship between narrative archetypes from the pre-1948 colonial period and stereotypes from the late-1980s, early-1990s American news reporting on the Intifada. In their film, *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), the directors use *Detournement* to deconstruct colonial narrative archetypes by creating a critical space from which to examine stereotypical representations of Palestinians.

The French word *detournement* means to misappropriate, hijack, distort, or turn something on its side away from its normal function. *Detournement* films are characterized by the juxtaposition of familiar images and video clips, arranged in such a way as to create an unfamiliar response. Out of context from their traditional meaning, these images take on a new life – the purpose of which is to demonstrate clearly the systematic violence produced by reductive image making. Because stereotypes require no discursive explanation to be understood, *Detournement* films attempt to trigger a shift in consciousness of the spectator to question his or her understanding of what images mean and how they are used to justify preconceived notions of representations. (Debord & Wolman, 1956)

The concept of *Detournement* films was created by a group of revolutionary artists and political theorists known as the Situationist International. In 1956, group members Guy Debord and Gil Wolman

published *Methods of Detournement* outlining the various ways in which subversive strategy re-radicalized conventional truths as told by hegemonic institutions. Situationists operate under the belief that an understanding of history is constructed by “organizations of expression” that regurgitate lies through dominant political institutions. (Debord, 1959) The purpose of Detournement was to create distance from commonly held assumptions of history. For Situationists, the very act of exposing facts as fabrications constituted a form of historical correction by which alternative understandings of history could be expressed through an innovative aesthetic. (Debord, 1967)

The term ‘media jujitsu’ has been used to describe the re-appropriation of hegemonic discourse through Detournement films. As explain by Shohat and Stam (2014, p. 328), “By appropriating an existing discourse for its own ends, anthropophagy *assumes* the force of the dominant discourse only to deploy that force, through a kind of artistic jujitsu, *against* domination. Such an “excorporation” steals elements of the dominant culture and redeploys them in the interests of oppositional praxis.” By weaving together film clips and sound bites in an unconventional mix of mediums, filmmakers are able to break with the image’s linear narrative and reverse its dominant tone. The deconstruction of images happens when audience members mentally form new combinations from existing elements. It is up to the spectator to determine what the juxtaposed images have in common, or how they conflict. By inserting direct and repetitive quotations, the true intent and false ideas behind the dialogue of authority figures is exposed. For this reason, the ordering of images as they appear on the screen, combined with textual and sensory overlaps, is crucial in understanding the message of the film. Detournement creates a third text by playing off the thoughts and opinions expressed by those tasked with narrating history. (Debord & Wolman, 1956)

In *Introduction to the End of an Argument*, Detournement is used to convey the distorted narrative of Palestinian history and culture, as witnessed through a collage of colonial and imperial imagery. In the forty minute film, the directors assemble a collection of video clips from pre-1948 colonial films, Hollywood movies, American news broadcasts, and television documentaries to reveal dominant stereotypes of Arabs in Western visual culture. The video mimics media representations of Palestinians

during the Intifada by critiquing the ideology behind its imagery. This re-appropriation of film clips creates a creative space from which audience members can participate in the deconstruction of orientalist stereotypes.

In the opening sequence of *Introduction to the End of an Argument*, the directors overlap British newsreels from the colonial period with video clips taken from an American Nightline television documentary on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This juxtaposition is prefaced with titles to introduce the concept of “Speaking for Oneself” as similar to “Speaking for Others”. In the very next scene, a group of Israeli soldiers are filmed conducting a night patrol in the Kasbah. Images of the raid are overlapped with snippets of an interview discussing just how frightening it is to patrol Palestinian neighborhoods. Out of context from their original narrative functions, the irony of this particular juxtaposition of images is immense. The audience is left without a clear understanding of why Israeli soldiers are conducting night raids in Palestinian territory in the first place. The act of questioning the very presence of Israeli soldiers in Palestinian neighborhoods is contrary to the aforementioned Western understanding of the Jews’ inherent relationship to the Holy Land. Through the use of overlapping text, the filmmakers intentionally create parallels between an orientalist understanding of Palestine and Israeli militarization. The purpose of this particular sequence of images is to demonstrate the violent causal relationship that exists when foreign powers control the representations of ‘others’.

The influence of colonial imagery in shaping the Palestinian narrative is evident in a sequence of the film appropriately labeled “A Story”. Images of the backward Arab as depicted during the pre-1948 mandate period are emphasized by overlapping sound bites and text. In a video clip taken from the British film *Refugee Immigrants Reach Palestine*, the narrator describes the land as filled with “swamps, snakes, scorpions, and Arabs,” playing into the popular Western understanding of Palestine as a destitute and unfertile territory prior to the return of the Jews. By highlighting words such as *swamps*, *snakes*, *scorpions*, etc., the directors illustrate the mentality of colonialists who equated Arabs as infiltrators of their own territory, in the same category as the insects which plagued the land. In a dark yet humorous

twist, this particular sequence is juxtaposed with a sound bite of American journalists returning to their hotel to wash their hands after a long day of reporting on the field.

Introduction to the End of an Argument is primarily a critique of American news reporting on the Intifada and the subsequent debate concerning peace negotiations between Western diplomats and representatives of the PLO. The directors analyze stereotypical representations of Palestinians in Western news media, as they relate to perceptions of Palestinians stemming as far back as the British Mandate period. In what is arguably the most important sequence of the film, video clips of American diplomats speaking on the prospect of negotiations with the PLO emphasize that although major barriers have been broken in American-PLO relations, the U.S. is hesitant to conduct frank talks with leaders like Arafat who are generally perceived as untrustworthy by the American public. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger is shown rolling his eyes and grimacing during a live television interview while speaking on the subject of peace talks with the PLO. In another sound bite, an American news reporter mistakenly describes the murder of a Palestinian resistance fighter by Israeli soldiers as a suicide before correcting himself and then being taken off the broadcast. The very existence of Palestine as a nation with people and political institutions is questioned in the film. News broadcasts depicting the voting process for United Nations resolutions 242 and 338 are juxtaposed with images of ordinary Palestinians mingling at a street market. This sequence of clips begs the question, how is it that Palestinians do not exist when they are clearly shown on the screen, in front of our eyes?

What is significant about the film as a whole is the directors' understanding of the evolution of stereotypes through Western film and media. Representations of Arabs from as early as the 1920s have influenced a contemporary perception of Palestinians that is implicit in the American media's treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A lack of self-representation has prevented Palestinians from articulating a historical narrative sympathetic to their current situation. Time and again, Palestinians have been spoken for, instead of speaking for themselves. This is evident in the orientalist depictions of Palestinians that span over several decades. *Introduction to the End of an Argument* shows the systematic dehumanization

of a people as a result of the images imposed upon them. The irony being that this particular message is transmitted through the very medium used to oppress elements of Palestinian history. The denial of narrative agency, which began during the colonial period and has continued with the Israeli occupation, constitutes a co-option of Palestinian culture and identity. Through Detournement, the directors send a message that Western representations of Palestinians are the culprit behind the demise of a nation and a people.

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