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RADICAL RATIONALISM AS CINEMA AESTHETICS: THE PALESTINIAN–ISRAELI CONFLICT IN NORTH AMERICAN DOCUMENTARY AND EXPERIMENTAL FILM

In the current age of digitalized media, a new wave of political activist filmmaking has emerged that takes as its primary focus the conflict in Palestine/Israel. Issuing from the West, including Israel, and often produced collectively by anti-occupation movement workers to motivate activism and resistance (*Standing With Palestine* [Paper Tiger TV, U.S., 2003]), build legal cases (*In the Name of Security* [Emily and Sara Kunstler (National Lawyers Guild), U.S., 2002]), and raise consciousness amongst the general public (*Breaking the Silence: Israeli Soldiers Talk about Hebron* [Shovrim Shtika, Israel, 2005]), this wave of Palestinian–Israeli conflict films has over the past decade courageously offered heretofore suppressed, socially marginalized perspectives on a situation considered one of the world’s most contentious and emotional. By their very content, as it exposes the devastation of Israeli occupation and the contradictions of Zionism, these Palestine solidarity films intervene into both U.S. corporate news coverage and Hollywood representation of the Levant. Indeed many of the films overlap another, similar cinematic movement regarding television and print media coverage of 9/11 and the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions, to which Jonathan Curiel of the *San Francisco Chronicle* has referred as the “War and Media Studies” genre (see Ginsberg and Lippard 202-203).

Unfortunate for the purposes of many of these films, especially those aiming to raise public consciousness, is their limited distribution, and sometimes more limited reception, within the art cinema circuit, elite-popular film festivals (Sundance; Human Rights Watch), film/cultural studies conferences, and alternative Internet streams (<http://www.bullfrog.com>, <http://www.youtube.com>, <http://www.ochaopt.org>). Almost none of them have been the subject of scholarly analysis. Notwithstanding recent Israeli attempts to infiltrate and co-opt digital media networks in an effort to preempt their effectiveness (Kuntsman and Stein), however, these films have become useful resources for movement activists and others seeking visual evidence of—in an effort to organize against—an exacerbating situation still widely obscured and skewed by the U.S. corporate film and media industries

and the U.S. Jewish and Christian Zionist communities as they continue to deem the conflict “controversial” despite the arguable claim that, among the international community of scholars, Israelis among them, “the range of political disagreement [on the facts of Zionism and Israeli occupation] is quite narrow, while the range of agreement is quite broad” (Finkelstein 6).

The cinematic techniques preponderant within this developing cinematic wave draw largely from political documentary movements such as cinema vérité and direct cinema as well as from traditional explicative and expository modes (compilation, talking heads; see Nichols). In contrast to much documentary filmmaking of the 1930s and 1940s, however, and to the experimental, often activist films and videos which emerged in their wake, all of which were decidedly politically motivated and frequently explicitly informed by the theatrical, painterly, and photographic intertexts of the cinematic avant-gardes, a majority of the activist films now being made about the conflict in Palestine/Israel employ so-called “reality-TV” aesthetics that are generally unconcerned with the signifiatory properties of the cinematic medium *per se* (form), much less the related institutional structuring of spectatorship (the apparatus)—that is, the matter of political aesthetics—for they instead tend to utilize the camera as a relatively transparent index of external reality: an empirical device of raw “witnessing,” a progressive-populist instrument of social intervention and mobilization.

This phenomenon may be attributed to a longstanding sense, still common within many contemporary activist circles, for which attention to aesthetic form and institutional structuring is elitist and exploitative, because it is perceived either to symptomatize collaboration with the Hollywood industrial hegemon (see Horak) or to unnecessarily manipulate and complexify a presumed self-evident pro-filmic. While attempting to advance, through the mass medium of cinema, political agendas that are certainly welcome and commendable from Palestinian liberationist perspectives, contemporary North American Palestine solidarity films made in the documentary tradition echo preponderantly what Palestinian filmmaker Omar al-Qattan refers to as the “commando” reportage of international corporate news agencies, with its conventional and banal aesthetic that “smack[s] of political tourism” in its subordination of oppressed voices and perspectives to Western political priorities (al-Qattan¹²¹, 126-27). Due in part to limited resources and amateur production conditions, these well-intentioned and committed cinematic responses to reactionary policies and practices offer little more than generic compilations of albeit damning footage juxtaposed with albeit revelatory interview testimonials, which, for reasons no longer

subject to serious debate in film circles, supply, in their relative aesthetic alienation from larger explanatory contexts, limited and sometimes ironically self-contradictory counterproof. The problem rapproches with concurrent Palestinian activist filmmaking, in which a similar simplification of aesthetic form has occurred under the contradictory rubric of Western state, corporate, and NGO patronage, resulting in works that often starkly contrast the aesthetically rich, frequently poetical, self-consciously revolutionary films of the exiled Palestinian liberation movement of the 1970s and early 1980s (see Ginsberg and Lippard 320-322).

This essay takes as counter-examples of these laudable efforts to *prove* the horrors of occupation three recent works of Palestine solidarity filmmaking: *Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land: U.S. Media and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict* (Sut Jhally/Bathsheba Ratzkoff, U.S., 2003); *Zero Degrees of Separation* (Elle Flanders, Canada, 2005); and *Still Life* (Cynthia Madansky, U.S., 2004). Taken together, these films represent a markedly different approach to the conflict in Palestine/Israel. Each stands to intervene into prevailing moving-image projections of the conflict by supplying an aesthetically engaged analysis without jeopardizing—indeed the films promote—answerability to and solidarity with the aspirations of Palestinian liberation. Rather than merely exploiting the cinematic apparatus for the sake of political messaging, these works exemplify a crucial direction for Palestine solidarity filmmaking, according to which the association and proximity of moving-image technology with the ethnic cleansing of Palestine is as important a site of textual critique as are Zionism and the Israeli Occupation themselves.

PEACE, PROPAGANDA AND THE PROMISED LAND

Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land: U.S. Media and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict is an exceptional documentary. One of the few that breaks the general trend, it offers an atypically *analytical* critique of U.S. corporate media misrepresentation of the conflict, while also having been produced and directed by media scholars and educators who are non-professional filmmakers. *Peace* is a self-conscious and cinematically reflexive work, noteworthy for its compelling implementation of montage and computer graphics to form a layered horizon of critical intelligibility that serves to reposition predominant formulations of cinematic “witnessing” into contexts increasingly conducive not only to the possibility and necessity but also the *feasibility* (Bronner, *Blood*) of a just and lasting Middle East peace.

Peace's critical acumen is ironically refracted through its U.S. corporate media reception. Mainstream reviews of the film at once applauded its exposure and criticism of what Jack Mathews of the *New York Daily News* called “the partisan American view of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict” (“Showing the movie would be a great way to open a debate”), but questioned the effectiveness of what he also saw is the film’s resistance to partisanship in general (“I would love to hear its charges answered as clearly as they’re stated”). Joshua Land of the purportedly more liberal *Village Voice* argued, by extension, “Ultimately *Peace* is limited by the very success of its critique; by the end it’s difficult to conceive of large-scale change as even possible.” Although Land surpassed Mathews when he concluded, “But both the movie and the propaganda assault it describes teach one important lesson: Get organized,” both critics clearly expected the film to furnish ideal solutions to the conflict—and the only way to have done that, in their implied estimation, would have been to marshal some vaguely defined notion of partisanship, as though the only or preferable way to intervene cinematically into the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is to propagate a political platform that predetermines answers to most if not all of the problems and questions the issue raises—a rare practice even for Palestinian revolutionary cinema.

In fact, *Peace* is not a partisan political film, but this by no means prevents it from taking a position that challenges what one of its interview subjects calls Israel’s “ideological occupation of the U.S. media,” or from in turn proposing a partial and adaptive solution to the conflict. While its content is comparatively mild by contemporary movement standards, that proposal is simply not acceptable to the mainstream corporate media, which also purports to offer serious analysis of the conflict.¹ In today’s chilling atmosphere of neo-McCarthyist intimidation, fear-mongering, and squelching of dissent,² many more moderate, bipartisan, liberal-ecumenical perspectives have been denied legitimacy and credibility by their *de facto* association with “radicalism”—notwithstanding the fact that partisanship and radicalism entail neither the same concept nor political strategy, and despite Norman Finkelstein’s sardonic remark that the “[Radical Left’s] combined constituency could...comfortably fit into a telephone booth” (Finkelstein 25). At best, *Peace* is a fitting example of progressive filmmaking on the issue

¹ Not coincidentally in this regard, *Peace's* production company, Media Education Foundation, also produced *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear and the Selling of American Empire* (Jeremy Earp/Sut Jhally, U.S., 2004).

² See Beinín; Fontan; Ginsberg, “Academic”; Abdelkader and Ginsberg; and Ginsberg, “Protesting.”

of Palestine/Israel. While affirming *New York Times* critic Ned Martel's accusation of "one-sidedness," it should in no way be positioned as either partisan or revolutionary. In fact, its proposed political solution is not the one secular-democratic state hailed by radicals and many progressives in opposition to prevailing opinion [I count myself among this grouping],³ but the two-state solution condoned by most liberals, many conservatives (at least superficially), and also many progressives.⁴ Whether *Peace* supplies a convincing or seamless argument in favor of that solution is a question to which I shall return, but again, that question should not be misconstrued as sectarian, factional, or parochial, but instead as part of a necessarily analytical process that one might describe, after Stephen Bronner in another context, as *radical rationalism* (Bronner, *Reclaiming*).

Peace is divided into eight designated parts, an unmarked introductory sequence, and a conclusion, each of which focuses on a particular strategy deployed by the U.S. corporate media to misrepresent the conflict in Palestine/Israel: PR Strategy 01: American Media: Occupied Territory; PR Strategy 02: Hidden Occupation; PR Strategy 03: Invisible Colonization; PR Strategy 04: Violence in a Vacuum; PR Strategy 05: Defining Who Is Newsworthy; PR Strategy 06: Myth of U.S. Neutrality; PR Strategy 07: Myth of the Generous Offer; PR Strategy 08: Marginalized Voices; and Is Peace Possible? This ordering of parts comprises an image-word trajectory that proceeds *dialectically*. The film elucidates explanatory contexts for the conflict that have regularly been ignored or evaded by the corporate media, and these revealed elisions become the basis for generalizing the phenomenon of misrepresentation to a systematic practice of dissimulation that involves rhetorical and linguistic manipulation of the facts of occupation and its perpetuation by military incursions and illegal settlement-building. *Peace* argues that these are all tactics meant to garner U.S. popular support for Israeli policy and disregard for Palestinian claims.

³ Examples of one-state arguments include Tilley; Abunimah; Qumsiyeh; Kovel; and Karmi.

⁴ Among two-state supporters are 45% of Palestinians and 32% of Israelis, the large majority of which latter nonetheless supports egregious military and political violence, including mass expulsions, against Palestinians as a means to arrive at the desired end (Finkelstein 298-300, citing a Jerusalem Media Communication Center study from Dec. 2001–June 2004). Since the Gaza disengagement of 2006 and ensuing events, the number of Palestinian two-state supporters has decreased slightly, while their number among Israelis and Zionists (as well as many Palestinian Authority politicians) has increased slightly, as evidenced by the formation of J Street, a non-profit, Washington-based advocacy group self-described as the "Political Home for Pro-Israel, Pro-Peace Americans" (<http://jstreet.org>).

Peace's dialectical trajectory is supplemented by a montage structure that rehearses and performs *cinematically* this proposed critical analysis. This aesthetic structure is itself cleverly performed by occasional insertions of computer-graphic diagrams, which one reviewer likened to PowerPoint demonstrations useful for classroom instruction (Land) and another criticized as boring and humorless for the same reason (Smith). These underscore the film's critique by, on one hand, subjecting mainstream commonsense about the conflict to dispassionate exposure and, in the same gesture, abstracting its central constituent questions from the preponderant morass of confusion, the "quagmire" perpetuated through misrepresentation, into poignant visual and discursive explanations serving to demarcate and clarify the corporate media's pro-Israel bias.

Part and parcel of this critical structuring is the film's interweaving of observational and formalist techniques. On one hand, *Peace* juxtaposes excerpts from U.S. news reports which refer to illegal Jewish-only settlements as "quiet neighborhoods" and to Israel Defense Forces (IDF) military offensives against lawful Palestinian resistance as "defensive retaliations" with candid shots of demolished Palestinian homes, IDF soldiers torturing Palestinian civilians, and congested military checkpoints throughout the West Bank. The critical contradictions effectuated by these juxtapositions are in turn conjoined with BBC news reports that starkly contrast the U.S. reports, and with maps and reports from international and Israeli human rights organizations and research institutes that present statistics about the Occupation and points of international law rarely accessed or discussed within the U.S. media. Apropos of the film's dialectical trajectory, this series of juxtapositions and conjunctions serves to stretch the various highlighted contradictions progressively across the film, enabling it to gauge the extent of U.S. media dissimulation in terms of both international geopolitics and the tenets of an ideological rationalism that reduces comparative differences to the highest bidder in an unevenly stacked power game.

Echoing this montage-effect is *Peace's* use of disjunctive and contrapuntal voice-overs to foreground the critical issues raised within each of the image-sequences. Instead of simply explicating the images they ostensibly narrate or describe, interviews with radical scholars, independent journalists, human rights activists, and Palestinian and Israeli officials contradict them or their mainstream explications. In that context of critical disjunction, these largely marginalized voices become conceivable as an interpretive bloc that articulates a conceptual—thematic—consensus critical of Israel. Hence commentaries by Noam Chomsky (Massachusetts Institute of

Technology), Gila Svirsky (Women in Black; Coalition of Women for Peace), Alisa Solomon (*Village Voice*), Seth Ackerman (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), Karen Pfeifer (Middle East Research and Information Project), Major Stav Adivi (IDF; Israeli Committee against House Demolitions), Hanan Ashrawi (MIFTAH [Palestinian Initiative for Global Democracy and Dialogue]/Palestine Legislative Council), Hussein Ibish (American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee), Robert Jensen (University of Texas, Austin; Third Coast Activist), Sam Hussein (Institute for Public Accuracy), Neve Gordon (Ben Gurion University; Ta'ayush: Jewish-Arab Partnership), Toufic Haddad (*Between the Lines*), and Robert Fisk (*London Independent*), together, clarify as ideologically motivated and politically based what might otherwise appear self-evident over the image-track. Whether in conjunction with a shot of a Palestinian child crushed to death under the rubble of a demolished West Bank home, or a much less explicit excerpt from CNN, CBS, NBC, ABC, or Fox, these dissonant voice-overs help disclose as systematically reinforced the horizons and interstices—the taboos—of U.S. corporate media reportage. Atrocity images and insert-shots of statistics and maps furthermore corroborate and qualify rather than merely obviate the insidious, nearly conspiratorial intentionality of the distortions and blind-spots foregrounded in and through the interviews.

Crucially, by this dialectical structuring, *Peace* avoids the twin pitfalls of abstract moralizing about the conflict (the tendency of committed Zionists) and presumed neutrality regarding it (the *sin qua non* of corporate “communication”). Notwithstanding the condemnatory nature of its evidence and, in turn, the egregiousness of its mainstream reception (“[T]oo often the movie ‘proves’ American news bias by quoting experts who say it exists” [Smith]), that is, *Peace* resists being a mere salutary corrective, even as it makes the incontrovertible point that the Occupation must end and Israel is at brutal fault. In fact, the film’s refusal to pontificate parallels another of its contentions—that Zionism and Judaism are distinct (see Aruri, “Anti-Zionism”), exemplified by interviews with Rabbi Arik Ascherman of Rabbis for Human Rights, and Rabbi Michael Lerner, publisher of *Tikkun* Magazine. *Peace* in effect supplies a multifaceted deconstruction of prevailing myths about the conflict’s root causes and conditions, whether those which attribute it to the existence of so-called eternal “anti-Semitism” (Chesler; Foxman; cf. Klug) or blame it upon contemporary so-called Arab intransigence (cf. Aruri, *Obstruction*; Shlaim)—neither of which are necessarily characteristic of Judaism, but both of which are positively integral to Zionism. This veritable cinematic theorization, that is, presents a reasoned counter-logic to U.S. corporate media arguments that exploit real social

exasperation over the conflict's apparent complexity and irresolvability and that perpetuate public ignorance of its actual causes and effects. To borrow from British writer Christopher Sykes, *Peace* puts the lie to the dominant narrative by intellectually reengaging the "[Zionist] habit to speak not only in two but several voices, to run several lines of persuasion at the same time, [producing] a not-undeserved reputation in the world for chronic mendacity" (qtd. Childers 166).

By the same token, *Peace* betrays the ideological limits of its own critique, vividly symptomized by the film's epilogue, "Is Peace Possible?", in which the two-state solution is peremptorily adduced as consensual. Although contrived, this arbitrary inference finds its precedent in the film's prologue, which traces the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights and subsequently refused to comply with international law demanding its withdrawal. The *Nakba* of 1948, however, during which thousands of Palestinians were killed and more than 750,000 were expelled from their homes and lands and lost their livelihoods while Israel declared its "independence" (Reinhart; see also Pappé; Masalha), remains unacknowledged, as does the 1947 U.N. partition plan, which, although subverted by Zionists and rejected by Palestinians, was devised to realize the 1917 Balfour Declaration that legitimized Jewish claims to European colonial territory in the Middle East (Mallison). By building its entire argument upon this structured elision, *Peace* partakes of the very casuistry it would seem to oppose, displaying a subtly implicit affinity with Zionism. The film's concluding dedication to Edward Said, whose seminal *The Question of Palestine* extensively documents the *Nakba*, barely papers over—in fact exposes—this blind-spot. To its credit, the film's nonetheless challenging analysis tends generally to overpower this elision, offering *structural* proof of Zionism's failed disingenuousness vis-à-vis persistent Palestinian patience and sincerity. Despite itself, then, the progressive *Peace* at least renders doubtful the feasibility of two states, thus opening for consideration the one-state solution even while prevaricating on the plausibility of the Zionist project itself.

ZERO DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Zero Degrees of Separation, by contrast, pushes the Zionist envelope to a near breaking point. This experimental documentary was conceived and directed by Elle Flanders, a Jewish-Canadian artist who is also a lesbian and an anti-occupation activist who lived for a time in Israel. Unlike *Peace*, *Zero*

Degrees utilizes techniques of avant-garde cinema and cinema verité to supplement analysis of the conflict both historiographically and socio-culturally. *Zero Degrees* deliberately subverts the founding myths of Israeli history through a studied integration of archival and home movie footage, with scenes from the daily lives of two intercultural Palestinian/Israeli couples: one lesbian, one gay; one part Ashkenazi (Jewish European)–part Palestinian-Israeli, one part Mizrahi (Jewish Arab)–part West Banker; one middle-class, one working-class. In so doing, the film cinematically critiques what it also exposes and documents are the racist and militarist characteristics of patriarchal neocolonialism in Palestine/Israel. Not unlike *Peace*, then, *Zero Degrees* at once resists the facile conception of cinema as a mere recording device and helps resituate Zionist history as an ongoing political struggle rather than a projected romantic ideal. Integrally queering entrenched knowledge and sensibilities about the conflict, furthermore, *Zero Degrees* serves to foster more inclusive and far-reaching visions of Middle East peace.

Zero Degrees has enjoyed widespread distribution in comparison with many other Palestine solidarity films. It has screened regularly at numerous independent film festivals internationally; it aired on MTV and the Sundance Channel; and it continues to screen on college and university campuses worldwide, usually in Flanders' presence. The film has also won several awards, including prizes from the Torino Women's Film Festival, the Barcelona International Women's Film Exhibition, the Creteil International Women's Film Festival, the Mumbai International Film Festival, the Columbus (Ohio) International Film and Video Festival, and two queer festivals, Frameline's International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in San Francisco and the Inside-Out Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Toronto. According to Flanders, *Zero Degrees* is generally well-received, occasionally even by Jewish audiences. Following a March 2007 screening at Ithaca College, for example, a former fundraising agent for the unapologetically Zionist Jewish Federation, was so moved by the film that she expressed publicly a positive change of heart toward critics of U.S. and Israeli policy.⁵

By the same token, *Zero Degrees* has not always received a warm welcome. One of its worst receptions occurred at New York City's 2005 lesbian and gay New Festival, where it was roundly booed. Notwithstanding the unofficial fact that a disproportionately large percentage of Jewish anti-occupation

⁵ Full disclosure: The screening was organized at my suggestion by the campus gay-straight student alliance while I was working as an adjunct professor at Ithaca College.

activists in North America identify as both feminist and queer, several of this screening's audience members, who self-identified as both lesbian and Jewish, accused the Festival of false advertising, asserting that *Zero Degrees* had nothing to do with "queer" and that it showed little respect, moreover, for the "Holocaust-like" suffering of gays and lesbians, especially those residing in Arab and Muslim countries.

My own counter-response as an audience member at that screening was that *Zero Degrees* is a profoundly queer film: its critical deconstruction of the Zionist/Israeli narrative offers a cinematic historiography of the conflict in Palestine/Israel, the denial of which symptomatizes not queer irrelevance but the ideological parameters of "queer" as they are assimilated and popularized within contemporary Western cultural and academic discourse (see Habib; Massad). Rather than blurring in typical—by now conservative—postmodern fashion the ontological foundations of gender and sexual "difference," *Zero Degrees* 1) politicizes those foundations and that "difference," revealing their ironical function for Western patriarchal neocolonialism; and 2) analyzes that Eurocentric, orientalist politicization historiographically—in this instance a) generationally, between and across Flanders' grandparents' experience of Palestine/Israel and her own—and b) sociologically, between the ethno-nationalist and class divisions riving Palestinian/Israeli culture and society. In effect, and to the dismay of the New Festival audience's queer identity police, *Zero Degrees* does not simply depict queer life under Israeli occupation—as Israeli cinema itself has attempted with controlled hesitancy⁶—but instead refracts the Palestinian–Israeli conflict through a cinematic lens that may be designated "queer" in a larger, political-aesthetic sense. Thus like *Peace*, *Zero Degrees* offers a veritable discourse analysis of Zionism that demystifies ideological notions widely accepted in North America, including those which rationalize Israeli injustices as necessary for procuring a safe haven for Jews in the wake of the Holocaust while falsely proclaiming Israel's founding as a welcome end to the Jewish exceptionalism selectively attributed to post-Babylonian proscriptions against heroic (willed) sacrifice and idolatry (the visual imaging of holiness characteristic of Christianity and other, pre-Judaic Levantine creeds).

To help explain this contention, I shall first discuss a scene that occurs ten minutes into the 90-minute work and concludes an initial establishment of

⁶ Popular examples include *Yossi and Jagger* (2002), *Walk on Water* (2004), and *The Bubble* (2006), all three directed by Eytan Fox. See Ginsberg and Lippard 157.

context for the introduction of the gay and lesbian couples. This context supplies a personal-political history of Israel arranged architectonically into three periods: 1) post-1948, when Flanders' grandparents, their spouses and siblings visited the newly established Jewish state on a philanthropic tour; 2) 1967-73, when, during Flanders' childhood, Israeli forces occupied the West Bank, Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights; and 3) the present, neoliberal period, during which the violence of occupation has reached unprecedented heights, having produced an elaborate prison system, a monstrous Apartheid Wall, dozens of illegal checkpoints and bypass roads, and hundreds Jewish-only settlements often inhabited by trigger-happy Orthodox Jewish vigilantes. This periodization is mediated aesthetically, by barely marked ellipses facilitated by graphic matches and non-diegetic sound bridges between and across the varied sets of archival, home movie, and contemporary footage included in the scene, and by utilization of overexposure, grayscaling, and slow-motion techniques, especially but not exclusively on contemporary footage—all of which serve variously to compare current with historical periods while indicating performatively an ongoing irruption of the past into the present in terms of the absences that have always structured "Israel": Palestinians (who Golda Meir proclaimed are non-existent [Taylor 143]), Jewish Arabs (to whom Meir referred as children needing European uplift [Shohat]), and feminists and queers (who have remained unmentioned and visually misrecognized until more recently [Yosef]).

To its credit, the scene subverts figuratively the Jewish nationalist "establishment" represented by Flanders' grandparents, as it resists providing a "silent backdrop or incidental stage setting" (Oren Yiftachel qtd. Abunimah 138) that would merely reaffirm both the Zionist myth of Israel as a sacred landscape for Jewish developmental telos (i.e., Israel Zangwill's "A land without a people for a people without a land") and classical landscape painting's nostalgia for the European Renaissance (the Christian conquest of the Muslim world). *Zero Degrees* in fact resituates Eurocentric mystification by constructing a "cultural landscape" (Khatib 18, my emphasis): the scene's dialectically imaged context renders *Zero Degrees*' personal-political architectonic a disestablishmentarian counter-memory. Concretized by explanatory intertitles which themselves also perform a certain history—that of *cinema's* silent, or unspoken period as it intersects with and segues into the historical avant-gardes—the scene repositions epistemologically the entrepreneurial ethic of Flanders' Zionist lineage and the particular home move practice it inspired into a critical heterotopia from which the failures of Zionism, including its ethno-racialist imperatives to

heterosexism (see Boyarin) and modern-day anti-miscegenation policies (see “Arab”) might be heralded, prophetically, as a travesty of the very safety it would purport for post-Holocaust Jews.

Indeed ensuing from the scene are introductions to the film’s gay and lesbian couples. *Zero Degrees*’s solidarity with the Palestinian struggle is increasingly evident during scenes in which Samira (Palestinian Israeli), Edit (Ashkenazi Israeli), Selim (West Banker), and Ezra (Mizrahi Israeli) are portrayed, together and apart, analyzing, responding to, and acting in relation to ongoing dire events, in scenes which continue to be intercalated with temporal shifts to prior periods. The effect recalls the literary technique of renowned Palestinian writer and political activist, Ghassan Kanafani, whose novels and short stories inscribe the interpenetration of past and present across the consciousness of their characters (Kilpatrick 1-7)—although in *Zero Degrees*, trans-temporal shifting is “queered,” the film’s subjects portrayed variously gender-bending as well as performing gayness and lesbianism in the midst of circumstances so disruptive that they eventually lead to the dissolution of both relationships (again like Kanafani as well as much Palestinian film and literature, there are no happy endings in *Zero Degrees*⁷). Importantly, this “queerness” does not itself simply subvert but also helps explain the film’s historiographic context not as scenic backdrop or “virgin” territory but as a productive site of colonial-settler incursion (see Rodinson) that *requires* postmodern, interpenetrating forms of racism and heterosexism to further the expansionist aims of its colonizers. Much like an Edward Burtynsky photograph, context here is an engaged location inscribed and modified by conditions brought about by ruinous acts which the spectator is encouraged to recognize have been implemented to liberate her largely at the expense of others now less fortunate.

So, for example, scenes involving the lesbian couple do not serve by their alternation of intimacy and banality to undermine *Zero Degrees*’ political positionality, its critical perspective on Zionism and Israeli occupation. The performativity of these scenes, in editorial context as well as via character speech, gesture, mien, and action, is grounded in an asymmetrically understood pro-filmic, a social reality in which Ashkenazi culture and the Western political and economic hegemony—contemporary neoliberalism—it variously bears and facilitates are often violently enforced. Rather than disallowing what postmodern theory has derogated as “totalizing,” here

⁷ A classic cinematic instance of this phenomenon is *The Dupes* (Tawfiq Saleh, Syria, 1973), adapted from Kanafani’s novella (trans. Kilpatrick), *Men in the Sun*. See Ginsberg and Lippard 118-119.

queerness serves a structural means for both attracting and repelling the New Festival-type spectator's narcissistic expectations, to resituate them as alienated needs from the possibility of which fulfillment she is socially exiled by Zionism, a condition that characterizes the existential "im/possibility" attributed by Hamid Dabashi, after Edward Said, to Palestinian life under occupation (Dabashi 8-11)—and that, moreover, epitomizes life for much of the world's population under patriarchal capitalism.

These sequences mark and display, in tandem, two interrelated Zionist taboos, social realities at once desired and proscribed within official Israeli culture: 1) a non-socialist, neoliberal economy exemplified by the Starbucks-like cafe in which Samira is portrayed, high-fashion Dizengoff Street in the background, analyzing the irremediably political parameters of her relationship with Edit; and 2) a non-patriarchal lesbian sexuality exemplified by the physicality and intimacy depicted between the women through uncharacteristically flat, Bergmanesque close-ups. The contradictions sustaining these taboos are foregrounded by the insertion of additional post-1948 footage that draws historical connections between Western philanthropic patronage and Israeli militarism. Indeed, whereas queer liberation has recently been co-opted by the right-wing, Orthodox Jewish militants intent on decrying Palestinian society as "backward" and "oppressive" in order to justify Israeli hegemony and U.S. political and economic support for the Occupation, Palestinian/Israeli queer liberation was originally initiated by left-wing direct action groups such as Black Laundry [Kvisah Shchorah] (Israeli queers) and Aswat (Palestinian lesbians) articulating sex- and gender-based critiques of the Occupation and Western policy in the Middle East (see Steve Quester qtd. Farber 47). Perhaps echoing such groups' ongoing boycott of the Jerusalem Pride march for its profound hypocrisy in this respect,⁸ *Zero Degrees'* representation of an historical, politically, and economically overdetermined lesbianism not only evidences a modernist refusal to portray traditionally satisfying lesbian sexuality onscreen but, more complexly, illuminates Israeli "satisfaction" itself as an allegory for the profound *unsafety* which Zionism has wrought for gays and lesbians in Palestine/Israel since the Jewish state's still-controversial, unsettled founding.

⁸ In June 2010, Flanders would herself participate in the (successful) protest against Pride Toronto for its initial exclusion of the group, Queers United against Israeli Apartheid, from marching in that annual glbtq parade. See "Pinkwashing: Listen to Elle Flanders, Cecillie Surasky on WBAI, Healing the Gay-Jewish Divide," <http://www.muzzlewatch.com/2010/06/28/pinkwashing-listen-to-elle-flanders-cecillie-surasky-on-wbai-healing-the-gay-jewish-divide/>; and "Power and Politics: Elle Flanders vs. Martin Gladstone," <http://vimeo.com/11097116>.

The material and ideological unevenness and insecurity of the film's lesbian relationship is rehearsed with alteration vis-à-vis Ezra and Selim. Little if any psycho-social conflict is evident between the men, only structural-institutional limitations that will eventually make it impossible for them to remain domestic partners, much less lovers. Moreover, this gay male couple is working-class and entirely Arab; unlike the lesbian couple, it embodies ostensibly Zionist ideals that combine socialism with Middle Eastern rootedness, while at the same time standing to confound, by very virtue of the relationship, one of Zionism's enabling prohibitions: the disassociation of Jew and Arab—literally, insofar as Selim, a West Bank resident, lives with Ezra illegally in the latter's Israeli home, and figuratively, insofar as Ezra, a Jew of Iraqi parentage, is ethnically Arab and therefore on one level *not* involved in an intercultural but, rather, a "*homocultural*" relationship with the Palestinian Selim. In *Zero Degrees*, the Jewish/Arab confutation of Zionism's ethno-chauvinist distinction between Jew and Arab is positioned by the narrative logic as an allegorical congealment of social axes (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class), which in turn serves to belie the racialism of Zionist ideology by presenting a fulcrum for one of the film's more remarkable depictions of Zionism's asymmetrical allocation of "security," a scene in which Ezra, dressed in flamboyant purple and debonair straw hat, cleverly distracts IDF attention from Flanders filming a flagrant Israeli violation of international human rights law.

In this penultimate scene, Ezra—at once Jewish, Arab, working-class, and involved sexually with a Palestinian man—"questions and listens" to some Israeli soldiers seated uncomfortably in the front of a military vehicle making surveillance rounds through a rural, Bedouin village. His relentless jibing facilitates an important cinematic intervention for Flanders, who surreptitiously locates a Palestinian prisoner bound, gagged, and blindfolded in the back of the vehicle, baking in the desert heat. The moment epitomizes the film's layered deconstruction of Zionism, here especially its reflexive aspect. It is, after all, an anonymous Palestinian, not Flanders or Ezra, who has been discovered in military captivity, undergoing torture; *Zero Degrees* reminds us that it is Palestinians, not Jews, who are overwhelmingly victimized within the parameters of the conflict. This epitomical function is underscored by a prior scene in which Ezra is portrayed meeting amicably with some Bedouins (commonly self-positioned as the "original" Palestinians) who confide in him that their agricultural livelihoods are being jeopardized by Israeli expansionism throughout the Negev, and they welcome his solidarity.

Both examples literalize the film's particular queer, counter-mnemonic architectonic, as it is the Mizrahi subject, Ezra, whose campy performances enable him—and with him, the film—stridently to cross socio-historical and geographical borders as well as to allegorize those very crossings politically. He is the film's uncanny node of *identitarian reorientation*, a *redemptive* figure whose Jewish-Arab/gay-male/working-class positionality, rather than some personal idiosyncrasy or perceived ethno-racial proclivity, is what enables the Ashkenazi Flanders to document Israeli human rights violations during the IDF torture scene (and elsewhere) while also avoiding a cinematic framing of such evidence-gathering that would rehearse Eurocentric tendencies, whether acts of salvific regeneration typical of colonial filmmaking or orientalist reinscriptions of Arab (homo)sexuality in which Ezra's love for Selim (or Edit's for Samira) would be conceivable only as an anachronism. It is in fact on this radically redemptive basis that Flanders, for whose wealthy grandparents Ezra had once worked as a gardener, decided to entitle her film "Zero Degrees of Separation."

By these tacks, *Zero Degrees* both recognizes and subverts Zionism's implicit return to idolatry and its promotion of heroic sacrificialism. The film's reflexivity blocks transparency through both structural and cultural differentiation in an effort to encourage socially critical recognitions, while, apropos of Kanafani reading Marx, proposing that, whereas its Palestinian/Israeli subjects are ineluctably social "causes,"⁹ they are not necessarily so, and do not necessarily act, under circumstances of their own making [Siddiq]). In effect, the film conceives and projects its vision epistemologically rather than either dramatically or abstractly, through a culturally interventionist, historiographical approach to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict that in due course avers that the greater taboo still hampering a just solution is not sexual/identity difference *per se* but, recalling *Peace*, the material distinction its uncanny redemption enables between the Zionist exceptionalism represented by the unpunished IDF torture of Palestinians, and the Jewish difference(s) encapsulated by the indomitable Ezra.

STILL LIFE

An avant-garde work conceived and directed by artist Cynthia Madansky, *Still Life* confronts this persisting taboo head-on. Unabashedly anti-Zionist,

⁹ Ironically, in May 2009, Ezra was imprisoned by Israeli police for his anti-occupation activism. See Gordon.

the film's striking and disconcerting formal structure at once documents and cinematically critiques the violent effects of occupation on everyday Palestinian life in a way that evokes the foregone Palestinian revolutionary aesthetic. Like *Peace* and *Zero Degrees*, *Still Life* is a cinematically reflexive work, in this instance one which orients a self-consciously asymmetrical spectatorial horizon that forcefully and unequivocally repositions perspective on the conflict not merely beyond the complacency and ahistoricity of news information-gathering, but against the everyday replication of industrial (and) surveillance techniques in which it often unwittingly participates. As I shall illustrate, key to such repositioning is *Still Life's* peculiar voice-image structure, which radically subverts the oriental travelogue aspect of typical Middle East peace coverage and representation.

Set in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs), *Still Life* is divided loosely into five parts, each distinguished by its respective depiction of the Israeli Occupation through a non-linear series of equally paced, tightly framed shots of the devastating, claustrophobic, immobilizing effects of occupation on Palestinian life, community, and property. The film's first part depicts the ruins of Palestinian homes, schools, businesses, and municipal buildings in areas of the Gaza Strip that have been demolished by the IDF as part of collective punishment maneuvers declared illegal under international law (e.g., in May 2004, 227 houses were destroyed in the Rafah Refugee Camp in the Gaza Strip, rendering 3,451 Palestinians homeless). The second part depicts various segments of the Israeli Apartheid Wall under construction across the West Bank and East Jerusalem also in contravention of international law. The third part depicts conditions at IDF checkpoints across the West Bank which restrict movement within Palestinian domains of work, residence, commerce, and governance—also in contravention of international law. The fourth part depicts Palestinian public representations (posters, wall art, and graffiti) of various forms of resistance—much of which is legal under international law—to the oppressive conditions of occupation revealed in the first three parts, including especially the armed struggle and its “martyrs.” The fifth part is an intricate reprise of the prior four parts.

Still Life's steady pace and non-linear progression are supplemented by a highly mannered shot composition that carefully frames and reorients its objective field, performing a peculiar cinematic subjection of filmmaker and spectator to the Palestinian cultural landscape. Each shot in the series contains a modicum of movement either in the pro-filmic or through a deliberately unstable camera. For example the first two parts of the film are comprised of shots containing minimal pro-filmic movement. In the first

two parts, the shots are mostly flat and devoid of human figures. Madansky's camera is often so unsteady as to render palpable her fearful reaction to the massive destruction she is filming and the studied tableau of oblivion into which she will later arrange the shots. The film's third part is more frequently peopled and includes numerous shots of demonstrable movement. Many of these shots are stable and more deeply focused, as though affirming the steadfastness, or *sumud*, characteristic of the Palestinian struggle. At the same time, a close framing of shots of Israeli bulldozers demolishing buildings and shoveling dirt and of Palestinians scaling the Apartheid Wall abstracts those movements, rendering them static or stalemated—just as erratic framing around flatter, stiller shots suggests a contrasting disorientation within Palestinian reality.

Finally, while *Still Life's* fifth part will return to and conclude the film with shots recalling—but never repeating—shots from earlier sections, especially those which are peopled, its fourth part marks a critical hiatus in the apparent serial depiction of Palestinian reality's uneasy progression from relative stagnation to limited movement, from sheer disaster to fitful rebirth: its shot content is almost entirely representational, still, flat, and unpeopled, and its running time is decidedly shorter than that of the other parts. Indeed the film's key, hiatal section performs unsentimentally through its succinct tableau of stark simulacral imagery the oft-ignored Palestinian demand, recognized by anti-occupation activists as fundamental to solidarity, that the Palestinian past and Palestinian dead—however innocent or defenseless—be acknowledged and remembered, and that by extension, Palestinians be allowed to return to their historic lands (al-Qattan 124). In this respect the fourth section resituates an orientalist gaze on Palestinian violence with an act of cinematic violence; it is an immanent narrative interruption signaling the Palestinian demand that their right to resist oppression and lament their dead be accepted as a prerequisite for the progress demanded within the peace movement, in turn thwarting on principle the typical spectatorial desire for ideal closure or solution.

Clearly *Still Life's* structure recalls *Peace* and *Zero Degrees* in this respect. Its subversion and derailment of linear progression and the nostalgia for discovery often accompanying it, moreover, are also well-familiar to feminists and postmodernists: repetition of images, circularity, narrative irruption, and figuration of resistance through simulated recollections of social loss. The film likewise records no dramatic action, only the remnants of life constantly shattered by the violence of occupation: rubble, blocked passage, and monuments to the dead. These techniques of controlled recognition

undercut the sense of spectatorial entitlement associated typically with patriarchy and exploitation, redirecting attention toward the act of framing and, by analogy, the social geography of occupation. Thus *Still Life* evokes the work of Maya Deren, for whom narrative movement is effectuated by contextual reorientation of nodal figures across a series of reframed shots rather than by match continuity across distinct places, by shifts in existential coordinates rather than by teleological projection. In *Still Life*, that is, cinematic space is “ampliated” (Carroll), becoming a formal signifier of the historical causality and social struggle at the objective core of the conflict (cf. Khatib 15-16). The film’s images refuse to serve as the silent backdrop or incidental stage setting deployed commonly to rationalize Zionist eminent domain, and in this way they underscore the fact that historic Palestine was in reality inhabited prior to its colonization and expropriation by European Jews.

Unlike Deren’s silent oeuvre, in which cinematography marks the socially transformative praxis of a counter-intuitive “eye,” however, *Still Life* includes an ironical, interrogative voice-over spoken by Madansky to an audience comprised of hypothetical participants in a guided tour of the OPTs. This voice-over drives an aesthetic wedge between the image-track and soundtrack, effectively designating their disjunction, rather than shifting backgrounds, as the film’s “context” and fulcrum of forward movement. The ensuing interrogation refuses to mimic or copy, while nonetheless relentlessly identifying, the shattered world before the camera as a site of broken and erased life repeatedly destroyed by techniques which bear and ramify, like dominant cinema, the exploitation, the theft, the literal absencing of their reproductive means: the collective labor of the Palestinian people.

Hence Madansky’s references to disorientation and desire, which in this context are highly politicized: “Do you know where you are?” “Do you know what you are looking at?” “Do you know who lives here?” “Do you recognize the kitchen?” “Do you like the view?” The voice-over serves not to convey facts directly or to answer questions (unless to pose additional ones), but instead to perform sardonically, mordantly, but never moralistically, Palestinian alienation—from the film’s objective content (“Would you live here?”), from its spectator-tourist (“Would you like to visit?”), from its Jewish-American director (“Who is responsible for this?”). Indeed in the musings of Palestinian filmmaker and critic Sobhi al-Zobaidi, “As a Palestinian writing these words, do I allow myself to think of or to imagine a meta-text for the film because Cynthia is Jewish? Yes I do....”

More specifically, as the film advances, prescriptive and evaluative concepts are introduced which help describe the images—house, building, neighborhood, room, office, roads, trees, garden, water, earth, remnant, wall, checkpoint, hero, martyr—and which draw attention to their socio-historical and transformative character—cause, crime, destruction, punishment, pain, fear, safety, health, rightness, security, responsibility, happening, getting to work, creating safety, protesting, stopping, speaking, thinking, and feeling. These concepts are always contextualized with further questions and qualified by dissonant sound-effects drawn from Zeena Parkins' anti-realist musical composition, *Dollar Shot*, thus emphasizing that the concepts are mediated economically in relation to the images of Palestinian destruction. Hence the questions: "Who is paying for this?" "How much does this cost?" "Who is funding this?" "Who paid for this?" "Who pays for this?" "Is this okay?" "Is this right?" "Are you afraid of this?" "Are you silent because you are afraid?"

In this way, Madansky's interrogation addresses and holds answerable a spectator whose alienation from Palestine the film re-envisages anti-Zionistically, articulating a profoundly prophetic perspective: that of the dialectical seer. Without a doubt, spectators for whom the Occupation is uncharted territory will learn something about it through the film's visual and verbal suggestions with a modicum of ideological resistance. But spectators for whom the Occupation has been the subject of denial will be significantly challenged by the same techniques. Again to quote al-Zobaidi,

Maybe it is the tone in her voice and the simplicity with which she throws her questions that makes me think that Cynthia means a certain kind of audience. An audience who has forgotten these simple facts like reminding a rich man of the times when he was poor...There is a certain sarcasm in her tone that develops into sorrow as these questions are repeated over and over again...She tells no stories but invokes many a story we have stored in our memories. As much as she speaks to our consciousness, the repetition of the images and words delve into our unconscious words, linking thus the un-linkable (*like Jewish and Palestinian victimhood, for example*). [my emphasis]

In effect, *Still Life's* Zionist spectator is at once marked out and integrated, induced into an uncanny shock that may awaken an obscured, fragmented memory of contemporary Palestine cruelly robbed and ransacked in the name of Jewish safety. This spectator is brought closer to the conflict, closer to her alienated relationship to the state of internal exile and existential im/possibility that is Palestinian life under occupation. In effect, rather than re-enact the salutary Western consumption of Palestine through techniques

of empathy and identification common not only to documentary cinema of the conflict but to progressive guided tours of the region (Faculty for Israeli–Palestinian Peace; Global Exchange), *Still Life* refuses to reify the conflict or its own representation thereof through the putatively sublime allure of pathetic images and gruesome thoughts. Its interrogation articulates a self-critical mantra that invokes and deconstructs the racist history of the film’s unvoiced Ur-concept, Zionism: European Jewish suffering as purportedly unchallengeable rationale for the colonial-settler formation of a Jewish state on expropriated Palestinian land. Again al-Zobaidi:

...I can’t stop myself from seeing Jews there in the rubble...I can see Jews underneath the rubble and above it at the same time. I wonder how conscious of her “Jewishness” Cynthia was when she was filming and editing or when she was recording her voice...but it is there in her unconscious, I am sure about this. [my emphasis]

In effect, the *Still Life* holds up a cracked mirror that disallows the fetishistic consumption—racialist incorporation—of human suffering propagated, ironically, by too many Palestinian–Israeli conflict films apropos of their ideological predecessor, the Holocaust film. In this way *Still Life* radically reclaims the collective impulse at the core of any such representation, a principle of struggle shared by Palestinians, in the words of al-Qattan, with “all oppressed peoples of the world” (al-Qattan 121). This post-Holocaust film illuminates the contemporary decimation of Palestine by compelling uncanny, but never mystical, recognition of Zionism’s own history of rape, plunder, and murder, of alienation from home, work, mobility, and the right to mourn one’s dead. The film’s layered and confrontational conveyance of information about the Occupation accommodates degrees and kinds of spectatorial knowledge, not for the sake of consumerist inclusiveness, but in order to position a radically alterior interlocutor, an epistolary *Thou* who, in consenting to “ride” with Madansky’s calmly abrasive questions, must face the possibility that the real, human price of occupation is more and other than the cost of a DVD or a guided tour of Israel and the OPTs; it is the abstraction, internalization, and displacement itself of suffering and sacrifice, which facilitates ideologically the continuation of deadly violence.

Still Life’s Thou is asked to recant the territorial demarcation of transcendental “framing,” of life stilled unilaterally by illegal walls, checkpoints, bulldozers, and bullets paid for by covert arms and munitions sales and the insidious expansion of Third World debt, all in the travestied name of a universal deity. Placed instead on an uncertain but politically determinate path (“Did you know this was happening?” “Do you think this is okay?”

“Do you think this is a crime?” “Who benefits from this?” “What would it take to stop this?” “Do you want to?” “What can you do?” “Do you want to do something but don’t know how?” “Would you say something?” “Have you said anything?” “Do you speak of this?” “Do you protest this?”), *Still Life’s Thou* bespeaks a contested commitment to authentically de-realize the dead and supra-alienated labor of destruction and self-destruction that has come to substitute for Palestinian self-determination and -expression, and that has justified the self-designation of Palestinian film as a “cinema of the poor” (al-Qattan 121). Perhaps the effect is best expressed, in closing, with a quote from late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whose own office at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah was ransacked by the IDF in 2002, and whose famous words are scrawled in English on a wall in *Still Life’s* final shot: “If you destroy our lives, you will not destroy our souls.” Still, there is life.

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