

Divine Intervention: **A Decolonial Psychoanalytic Reading**

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This paper offers a decolonial psychoanalytic reading of Elia Suleiman's 2002 film, *Divine Intervention*. It begins by critiquing the Eurocentric gatekeeping within film studies that often marginalizes Palestinian cinema, arguing that publishing on *Divine Intervention* is a political act against the "prohibition of Palestine" in the *Global North*. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is extended to propose that the decolonial subject is "doubly divided due to colonial difference," leading to a "double-unconsciousness." The analysis delves into the film's portrayal of jouissance (enjoyment), distinguishing between "mythic jouissance" (colonial oppression) and "divine jouissance" (decolonial liberation). The paper interprets the film's "absurdist" style and the main character's (E.S.) silence as an active, agentic force. Further, the film's political commentary is examined, particularly through the symbolism of a red balloon representing Yasser Arafat's "ego-politics" and vacuous authority. The study also explores the film's unconventional theological undertones, portraying colonialism as the Antichrist and interpreting the Woman character as a fida'iya (one who sacrifices for a cause), embodying a "feminine aesthetic violence" that challenges colonial structures. Ultimately, the paper argues that Suleiman's cinema presents a theory of decolonial power through its representation of decolonial subjectivity.

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INTRODUCTION: GATEKEEPING PALESTINIAN CINEMA

In 2020, I approached a film theorist and the editor of a scholarly book series on cinema with an idea for a book on Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002). I wanted to write about how decolonial subjectivity figures in this Palestinian film. However, the theorist/editor was not keen on my idea, reasoning that the film was not "widely known". I argued that the film is not obscure, given that it won significant film awards (e.g., the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival), has been positively reviewed by prominent film critics (e.g., J. Hoberman and Roger Ebert), and was even streaming on Netflix for a while. Of course, it is also worth mentioning that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences excluded *Divine Intervention* from the Best Foreign Language Film category on the pretext that Palestine is not a formally recognized nation-state according to the United Nations. Nevertheless, Hamid Dabashi argues, "The world of cinema will soon claim Elia Suleiman in the way the republic of letters has claimed Edward Said"



(2006, 156). The parallel between Suleiman and Said is interesting in light of the latter's recognition of the former's cinematic articulation of a national Palestinian narrative "in very subtle and eloquent ways" (as cited in Dabashi 2006, 11).

The theorist/editor then argued that a book on an "obscure" Palestinian film would not sell and would not be taught in film courses. I counter-argued that the film had actually been assigned in film courses at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Dartmouth College. The theorist/editor was unconvinced by my examples since, for them, these courses are not considered "general film surveys." I wrote back, "This is unfortunately why film studies as a discipline is Eurocentric and excludes many great films from North Africa and West Asia. This is, of course, exemplified in the sub-discipline of 'world cinema' (i.e., the rest of the world)." The theorist/editor encouraged me to choose another 'world' film from Africa or Iran.

I begin with this story of an email exchange about an unrealized book project to showcase the gatekeeping of publishing about Palestinian cinema in North America—a form of censorship in the Eurocentric academic field of 'film studies,' which excludes non-European cinema and places it under the generic heading of 'world cinema.' As such, publishing a peer-reviewed article on *Divine Intervention* for a film and media studies journal is a political act that signifies true freedom of expression since Palestine is a taboo topic in the *Global North*. More than a dozen scholars in the US, for example, have lost their jobs because they are openly pro-Palestine (Lennard 2024).

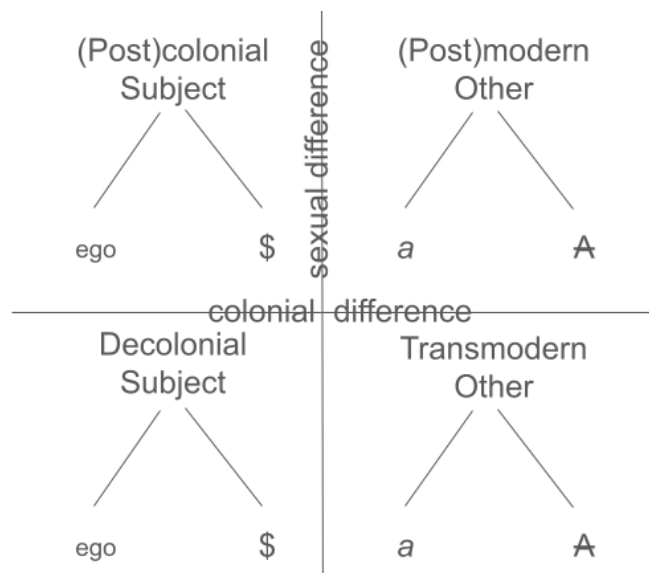
The prohibition of Palestine—and any signifier of 'Palestinianness'—is a function of a collective symptom vis-à-vis Palestine-as-taboo. Palestine must be negated because acknowledging the historical and ongoing displacement of Palestinians would manifest as collective guilt and anxiety (Freud, 2004). Therefore, the negation of Palestine is a structural component of the Euro-American political unconscious, alongside other structural negations: colonialism, imperialism, genocide, slavery, racism, etc. These structural negations result from a collective emotional ambivalence, which then manifests consciously in a variety of ways, particularly as indifference or hostility; hence, the ungrievability of Palestinian lives in the Euro-American imagination, for instance (Butler 2004).

THE QUESTION OF DECOLONIAL SUBJECTIVITY

Divine Intervention is the second part of a film trilogy of self-portraits that begins with *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) and ends with *The Time That Remains* (2009). The trilogy is a cinematic meditation on the decolonial subjectivity of Palestinians, a resilient subjectivity doubly divided by Israeli settler colonialism (Rodinson 1973). According to psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Lacan 2006), the subject is divided between ego and unconscious. However, this 'subject' is not any generic subject; rather, the psychoanalytic subject is the

Euromodern “subject of science” (Lacan 2006, 727). As such, the psychoanalytic subject is *ipso facto* the (post)colonial subject because (post)coloniality is the underside of (post)modernity. Consequently, I stretch psychoanalytic theory from an exterior perspective and argue that *the decolonial subject is doubly divided due to colonial difference*, a dimension undergirding sexual difference. This double division implies a double-unconsciousness [Fig. 1].

Fig. 1
A theory of double-unconsciousness.



By “(post)colonial subject,” I am combining both colonial and postcolonial subjects because I situate postcoloniality as a critique of modernity/coloniality *within* the logic of Totality. As such, I regard the (post)colonial subject as the normative subject of the signifier. Decoloniality, on the other hand, is a critique of Totality from Exteriority. Sexual difference refers to the universal alienation experienced by human subjects during the Oedipal stage of psychosexual development between the ages of three and five, wherein the heterosexual child is sexed through identification with the same-sex parent. So what of colonial difference?

For Lacan (1998), masculinity and femininity are neither biological (male-female) nor cultural (man-woman); sexual difference is a difference in *jouissance* (enjoyment)—the two modes of enjoyment are also framed as *phallic jouissance* and *Other jouissance*. Enjoyment is beyond the pleasure principle, so also includes pain. Whereas phallic jouissance is masturbatory (the enjoyment of the idiot), Other jouissance seems to be more sophisticated since it can entail non-phallic forms of enjoyment like sonic jouissance (the enjoyment of music and sound), optical jouissance (the enjoyment of visual arts), and ecological jouissance (the enjoyment of the environment). In some of my previous work (Beshara, 2019; Beshara, 2021), I also write about the colonial difference between *mythic jouissance* and *divine jouissance*.

While the former is the (post)colonial enjoyment of oppression and violence, which is the modus operandi of Totality (modernity/coloniality), the latter is the decolonial enjoyment of liberation and (non)violence in Exteriority. By “(non) violence,” I am indexing the revolutionary traditions of violence and nonviolence,

which always require justification as a means to a liberatory end: historical reason → legitimate power. The reactionary violence of Totality (modernity/ coloniality) is an end in itself: instrumental reason → illegitimate power.

Divine Intervention is a film about *jouissance*, and the hint is in the subtitle: *A Chronicle of Love and Pain*. It is a chronicle of love, as opposed to pleasure, because where sex is nowhere to be seen, unspeakable pain is the substance of the film. The silence of pain points to the traumatic Real, hence the necessity for ideological healing through the passion, or discursive-fantasy, of love. A line used several times across different contexts in the film is "I am crazy because I love you." This sentence is never spoken; rather, we see the words a number of times: first as graffiti written on a wall then as a title card—a nod to silent cinema—and finally as a hand-written note. The words arise from Suleiman's need for mobility, renewal, and dislocation as a way to delay death: "Desire and love are decentered in the sense that you never know when and where they will strike, yet you always welcome them" (Suleiman 2000, 101). The silent pain underneath the signifier 'love' epitomizes E.S.'s mute existence, which led Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi to compare him with Naji al-Ali's cartoon character, Handala—another silent, expressionless observer (Gertz and Khleifi 2008, 41). As such, this painful silence is neither passive nor powerless, but active and agentic as I will show later.

AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE FILM

Before I critique the film, I wish to contextualize my first encounter with *Divine Intervention*, an experience that profoundly politicized my psyche. The film was released in 2002 in the context of the Second Intifada and the aftermath of 9/11. I was 18 years old when I saw *Divine Intervention* for the first time with a friend. The screening took place in downtown Cairo inside a makeshift art space owned by the Townhouse Gallery, which used to be an auto repair shop. The film left everyone speechless and gave us something to think about as the war on terror unfolded before our eyes.

Egyptian viewers, who have a deep sense of solidarity with the Palestinian people, were not turned off by the hallucinatory style of the film, which can be described as a cinema of the absurd given its "hybrid aesthetic" that blends "fictionalized memoir, burlesque, formal experimentation, and pungent reflection on Mideast politics" (White and Suleiman 2010, 38). Dabashi characterizes Suleiman's cinema as a willful and violent form of resistance to colonial power by enacting a frivolous aesthetic of emancipation (2006, 174). Dabashi hones in particularly on the decolonial concept of 'frivolity,' which he argues "is the noble version of [colonial] obscenity" (2006, 149). Dabashi writes:

What we witness in Elia Suleiman's cinema is the precise critical moment when the depth of tragedy mutates into the height of

comedy, comedy meets absurdity, and then absurdity remembers the dark dread at the heart of its own memory of the terror it must, and cannot but, remember... Elia Suleiman's cinema is the revenge of joyous laughter on obscene mendacity (Dabashi 2006, 148).

Similarly, Stanley Kaufman characterized Suleiman's cinema as absurdist and compared the filmmaker to Eugène Ionesco (as quoted in Suleiman 2003). However, Suleiman describes his style as "minimalist" and "pure" while "pushing the extremes in two genres—hyperrealism and the absurd" (Suleiman 2000, 101). A scene toward the film's end, wherein three guys are shaking a white car, is a good illustration of this.

The spectator is left wondering why they are shaking the car. They did it to activate the alarm. Is it a meaningless act? It appears so, but on second thought, they sound the alarm to draw attention to their situation under occupation, for it is the occupation itself, which is absurd or obscene to use Dabashi's term. Another absurd scene is of a man waiting at a bus stop. A different man emerges from a building and tells him: "There is no bus". The first man responds, "I know." He then wears his sunglasses—a motif in the film—and feels cool even though he knows he is defeated. The characters seem to be casting shade at the reality of occupation. We conclude that the man is not waiting for a bus, but like Vladimir or Estragon, he is waiting for Godot, that is, for a miracle: the end of the occupation. At some point, we see the following words written on the wall ("I am crazy because I love you") near the bus stop. These words are repeated by E.S. later in the film in a note to Woman near al-Ram checkpoint.

That year, I recorded a song called "Palestine" because I had been thinking about the tragic killing of Muhammad al-Durrah, who was 12 years old, in 2000. Muhammad's father, Jamal al-Durrah, lost his two brothers, sister-in-law, and niece in 2023 during Israel's war on Gaza. I re-recorded my song in 2024 since my words in 2002 continued to apply as if nothing had changed: "Palestine is losing people. Palestine is losing blood. Palestine is strong though powerless. Palestine is the cause for everybody."

THE POLITICAL ARC: FROM INTIFADA TO FRAGMENTED LEADERSHIP

The context of the Second Intifada (2000-2005) is essential for understanding *Divine Intervention* since this uprising signified the failure of the Oslo Accords (1993) that created the Palestinian Authority, which Yasser Arafat then headed. The Oslo Accords were in response to the First Intifada (1987-1993). As such, the Second Intifada, which was in response to Ariel Sharon's visit to al-Aqsa Mosque, indexed the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the end of Arafat's legitimacy as a political leader, particularly after the failure of Camp David (2000). Out of this failure, Likud rose to prominence, and so did Hamas, which took power in Gaza from Fatah in 2007—two years after Israel withdrew its

military. Arafat's political arc is a microcosm of the political failures that have been plaguing the Arab world since 1948, or al-Nakba (the catastrophe), and 1967, or al-Naksa (the setback): first as a tragedy, then as a farce.

Arafat was a revolutionary symbol of Arab socialism; he was one of Fatah's founders who served as Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from 1969 until he died in 2004. The PLO slogan in the 1970s was "Unitary Democratic Non-Sectarian Palestine". What happened to this dream of a secular and democratic binational state? Here is the rub, "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton in 1887).

When Arafat became President of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, his power was legitimized by the Oslo Peace Accord but not by the Palestinian people. This led Said (2001a), who used to be Arafat's comrade for many years before the Oslo peace process, to write that the mandate of "the corrupt Vichy-like Authority of Arafat... has essentially been to police and tax his people on Israel's behalf." To quote Walter Mignolo, Arafat's arc regressed from revolutionary "body-politics" to reactionary "ego-politics" or from an identity based on politics to a politics based on identity (2007, 492). This is the trap of any Imaginary politics, which is always premised on the over-identification with a charismatic leader, who is often reduced to the status of a symbol or an image. The ego-politics of Fatah ended up displacing the cause of Palestinian liberation, which was driving the body-politics of the PLO.

Suleiman represents Arafat's ego-politics in the film through the image of a red balloon with a caricature of Arafat's grinning face, which Gertz and Khleifi read as an ambivalent symbol—or a floating signifier—that "is ridiculed and rejuvenated simultaneously" (2008, 181). I was reminded of the ghost of Hamlet's father. E.S. inflates the balloon at al-Ram checkpoint and releases it through the sunroof. The guards at the checkpoint are alarmed when they see the Arafat balloon flying, but they are unsure what to do, so they contact their superior.

At this point, the balloon is floating gracefully over different parts of Jerusalem, finally making its way to the Dome of the Rock and circling the crescent on top of the Dome. This fantasy sequence is undoubtedly an allusion to the French short film *Le ballon rouge* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956), which has influenced Suleiman's style since it has no dialogue, relying instead on visual storytelling and symbolism. Suleiman has described his cinematic practice as an effort to create "the 'total' image, the image that has no substitution," which, for him, "is the poetic vision" (2000, 98). Stathis Gourgouris qualifies Suleiman's cinema as specifically exemplifying "a poetics of dispossession" (2015, 32).

Poetically, the balloon signifies the vacuousness of Arafat's political authority, an inflated ego: an Imaginary representation without any Real or Symbolic substance—i.e., a perverse subject whose unconscious is disavowed. The Dome of the Rock is one of the holiest sites in Islam, and it marks the site from which Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. In contrast, Arafat's balloon is stuck spiraling around the crescent atop the Dome, which suggests that Arafat is a

false prophet. He is in neither Heaven nor Hell but is stuck in the intermediate state of Barzakh. The balloon, however, distracts the Israeli guards, which allows Woman to successfully pass through the checkpoint.

THEOLOGICAL UNDERTONES: A COLONIAL CHRISTMAS

In my reading, *Divine Intervention* is a Christmas movie but a very unconventional one. What does a colonial Christmas look like in the Holy Land? The film begins with a scene of Santa Claus running for his life in Nazareth while being chased by a band of brothers. Santa throws his gifts at the group in self-defense. As such, the gift economy that anthropologists write about is not operative in this precarious situation. Santa reaches the top of a hill, but in a medium close-up, it is revealed to us that he has been stabbed in the chest. This ominous tragi-comic scene is followed by the title "Nazareth." For Robin Truth Goodman (2024), the dark comedic undertone of Suleiman's cinema is a form of border methodology: "comedy is here a genre of the border in that it connects and overlaps categories of difference while maintaining their differences in dissensus" (2024, 83). In my theorization, the border is the line of colonial difference, which produces double-unconsciousness.

Santa Claus is also known as Father Christmas, so we witness not only the killing of the primal father by a band of brothers—like in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 2004)—but also the death of Christmas in Nazareth, the city where Jesus lived and preached. This opening scene sets a bleak tone for the theological undertones throughout the rest of the film. The opening scene implies that colonialism is the Antichrist. Suleiman is, of course, a Christian of Rūm Greek Orthodox origin.

Other theological references include a random person telling a story to the welder involving the number 6, and he mentions explicitly "666 shekels." This alludes to "the number of the beast," particularly as mentioned in the *Textus Receptus*. The beast is another reference to the Antichrist by way of Nero Caesar, associated with 666. There is a scene involving three men standing in a yard while hitting a mysterious object using wood logs. A group is watching them. Someone says, "Hit the motherfucker." A fourth man shows up with a gun and shoots at the mysterious object, which we then discover is a snake. The serpent, of course, is a Christian symbol for the Devil or Satan. They then burn it.

THE FIDA'IYA AS CHRIST-REDEEMER AND THE DECOLONIAL GAZE

Another key theological motif appears during the film's climactic fantasy sequence, wherein Woman plays a *fidai'ya* (someone willing to sacrifice their life for a cause, such as Palestinian liberation). Suleiman implies that Jesus was a

fiḍa'i since he sacrificed his life to save humanity from sin. In a sense, we can also read *Antigone* as a *fiḍa'iya*, which implies that Palestinian ethics align with the ethics of psychoanalysis since it entails acting on one's unconscious desire. Free Palestine is the *objet a* causing the desire of the *fiḍa'i subject*. As such, Suleiman frames the *fiḍa'iya* as a Christ-redeemer figure hovering above the ground with her body positioned in the shape of a cross and with bullets frozen in mid-air around her head, forming a halo (saintly aura) or a crown of thorns.

E.S. never speaks; he listens like an analyst. His cinema is his voice. He does not even have expressions on his face, which is reminiscent of the Kuleshov effect, a film editing technique developed in Russia in the early 20th century that allows spectators to derive subjective meanings from their interpretation of juxtaposed shots, wherein the subsequent shot informs how we read the previous shot. The Kuleshov effect resonates with Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or *après-coup*, wherein we interpret S1 (master-signifier) based on S2 (knowledge). The Kuleshov effect opens the space of interpretation for us to reflect on our desire as spectators.

The minimal dialogue and the series of vignettes that repeat and vary using meditative and choreographed wide shots led film critics (e.g., Drake Stutesman) to compare Suleiman with Jacques Tati. Also, E.S.'s expressionless face reminded other critics of Buster Keaton's deadpan style. However, Suleiman denies any influence from these two filmmakers while acknowledging his debt to Ozu, Hsiao-hsien Hou, and Tsai Ming-liang (Porton 2003; Suleiman and Stutesman 2004). Why must non-Europeans always be compared to Europeans for us to be legible?

The only scene wherein we see E.S. barely crying or expressing some sort of emotion is when he is in the kitchen cutting an onion, so we are unsure if he is melancholic about the occupation or if it is the onion that causes his tears. Perhaps occupation is an onion: a complex tear-jerker. Extending food metaphors further, Suleiman ends the film after his father's death, wherein we see E.S. sitting on a couch next to his mother; she says, "That's enough. Stop it now." She is referring to the pressure cooker in front of them, which symbolizes the defeated Palestinian or Arab psyche suffering from repetitive colonial pressures; however, Suleiman uses her statement as a cue for him to also end the film.

PALESTINIAN SUBJECTIVITIES UNDER COLONIALISM

Colonized Palestinian subjectivity is alienated in three ways that mark different degrees of oppression and violence within settler colonialism: (1) Palestinian citizens of Israel, (2) Palestinians in the West Bank, and (3) Gazans—not mentioning Palestinians in the diaspora, whom I will bracket for my analysis even though Suleiman is technically a diasporic Palestinian filmmaker. Palestinian citizens of Israel are a minority in Israel, constituting about 20% of the population; as such,

they are persecuted, but they have been protected to some extent by their legal status as Israeli citizens.

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza do not have the legal protections of citizenship since the United Nations does not officially recognize Palestine as a sovereign nation-state but merely as an "observer state." Therefore, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are colonized subjects of Israel (i.e., non-citizens) who are theoretically protected under international law. Still, in practice, the Geneva Conventions are seldom enforced. Whereas Fatah has the semblance of symbolic authority in the West Bank (or the occupied Palestinian territories) in coordination with the Israeli military; Gaza, which has been described as an open-air prison or concentration camp, was governed by Hamas.

I say "was" because governance is impossible in the context of asymmetrical warfare, given Israel's ongoing assault against the civilian population in Gaza. The current death toll in Gaza, as of June 16, 2025, is more than 55,000 reported fatalities, the majority of which are women and children. These distinctions in colonized Palestinian subjectivity are crucial to emphasize since they reflect different politico-economic realities that Palestinians may experience or various degrees of colonial cruelty that range from anti-Arab racism to sadistic extermination.

As such, Gaza is absent in Suleiman's cinema because he writes from his privileged position as a Palestinian citizen of Israel with a social link to the West Bank. Suleiman states, "I am from Nazareth, not the West Bank. Also, I have not lived in just one place. I have traveled and lived in different countries, and *this nomadic experience is a privilege*. My tie to the land is not exclusive" (2000, 96) [emphasis added]. What is important is that Suleiman uses his subjective privilege to produce radical aesthetic objects (films) about Palestine, and that is an ethico-political act in service of historical reason. Liberation praxis entails double critique: (1) critiquing Totality and (2) Exterior self-criticism. This double critique then becomes the foundation for enacting dual power: colonial resistance v. decolonial power. In other words, we must have a theory of decolonial power before we can practice it, and I argue that Suleiman's cinema presents us with a theory of decolonial power through its representation of decolonial subjectivity.

FROM THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SEXUAL RAPPORT TO DECOLONIAL FANTASY

Many scenes occur at al-Ram checkpoint, which sits at the intersection between the West Bank and Jerusalem, wherein E.S. parks his car to meet with his partner, Woman (played by Manal Khader). E.S. and Woman never speak to one another, but they stare at each other and hold hands in a sensuous manner. Their romance exemplifies what Lacan (1998) terms "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel": their sexual relationship is impossible because the Real of colonial difference is a castrating force symbolized by the materiality of the checkpoint, whose sign

functions as the bar responsible for the double division of the colonized subject.

Goodman conceives of this impossible relationship as akin to “fellow moviegoers” as opposed to lovers (2024, 85). For Goodman, this Real impossibility is characterized by “silent spectatorship,” which invites us “to intervene in the image as a democratic public against that image’s authority” (2004, 86). This “silent politics of the spectator” de-fetishizes the colonial look, which reduces the image of the Palestinian subject to a stereotype; this de-fetishization and democratization of the image occurs through the *sumudic* silence and decolonial Gaze of E.S. and Woman. According to Goodman, this de-fetishizing and democratic praxis of spectatorship in Suleiman’s cinema “is the creation of a public” (2004, 88)—a demos with rights. In essence, with agentic or intentional silence, Suleiman aims to represent the unrepresentable (i.e., the Real): the binational state as a dialectical third space of political antagonism beyond the deadlock of binary nationalisms. This third space would be the culmination of decolonial power.

E.S. can cross the checkpoint back and forth without an issue because he has an Israeli passport; however, Palestinians in the West Bank, like Woman, are often humiliated and denied access—nevertheless, E.S. experiences a sense of impotence, which leads him to resort to all sorts of fantasies involving Woman. In contrast to the humiliation experienced by Palestinians from the West Bank, an obnoxious Israeli driver in a sports car blasting Amr Diab’s “Wala Ala Baloh” passes the checkpoint quickly without a sweat.

As an Egyptian, I had two reactions to this scene: (1) it is a case of cultural appropriation of Arabic music by an Israeli colonizer, and (2) it is Suleiman’s critique of Egypt’s normalizing position as a feeble mediator in the so-called ‘conflict.’ Anna Ball argues that Suleiman reframes the emasculation of male Palestinian subjectivity, particularly within the space of the border-checkpoint, as a form of “emotional and moral strength” or a “manifestation of *sumud*...an altogether more self-aware, enduring and cerebral masculinity” (Ball 2012, 89–90). For Ball, this reframing of impotence as nonviolent resistance, or *sumud*, facilitates a heterogenous “renewal of the structures of both [the Palestinian] nation and [Palestinian] masculine identity” (2012, 86).

In *Seminar XX*, Lacan (1998) famously proclaimed, “La femme n’existe pas” or “the woman doesn’t exist.” A surface feminist reading would lead us to believe that Lacan is a misogynist. However, Lacan is critiquing masculine *jouissance*, so he argues that ~~Woman~~ does not exist except as an object of fantasy in the phallic order. In occupied Palestine, the phallic order is also a colonial order invested in mythic *jouissance*. This is why E.S. fantasizes about ~~Woman~~ as a sexy bombshell, who can cross al-Ram checkpoint uninterrupted. In the fantasy, the divine violence of her sexual power makes the Israeli watchtower collapse. Suleiman addresses the feminine logic of not-whole (*pas-toute*) informing the radical aesthetics of the film’s counter-ideological fantasy sequences:

As opposed to masculine aesthetics, masculine violence which is not aesthetic, which can be less fluid and is many times confrontational,

therefore is always violating and violated; always creating a binary opposition. In the film, I play a little on that... between me and her... despite the fact that I'm experiencing a paralysis, or impotence. The imagined other is this feminine aesthetic violence which manages to win them all (Suleiman and Stutesman 2004, 87) [emphasis added].

The bombshell metaphor is apt here, as we will see later, and it is reminiscent of The Woman in the Red Dress from *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999). Woman is wearing a pink dress and sunglasses. She moves like a model on a catwalk, and her choreography is synchronized with the electronic music soundtrack. It is no coincidence that characters in Suleiman's films move like modern dancers:

When I'm asked what I would do if it wasn't film, I think it's choreography. You can see that in the film. It's really what I indulge. It's the temporality of all the movements in the frame that are carried by the elements /characters (Suleiman and Stutesman 2004, 86) [emphasis added].

Woman's decolonial Gaze disturbs the Israeli guards, whom she transfixes. This fantasy sequence exemplifies the not-whole (*pas toute*) logic of feminine *jouissance*. Speaking of *The Matrix*, Israeli hasbara (propaganda) is essentially a form of simulacrum, wherein the myth of "the only democracy in the Middle East" is premised on the erasure of Palestinian culture, that is, ethnic cleansing (Pappé 2006). To maintain this simulacrum, the pro-Israel media in Euro-America repeatedly exposes the public to simulations of peace in the form of the so-called "peace process" toward a hypothetical "two-state solution" recommended by the United Nations and human rights organizations. However, the reality is that at least three potential states (Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza) can form the basis for a new federal entity: Palestine. The other simulation is the phrase "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," which implies power symmetry when no such thing exists in reality.

THE WISDOM OF THE DISPOSSESSED: ON SULEIMAN'S CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

A powerful scene in the film shows us a lost European tourist in Jerusalem, who approaches an Israeli policeman to ask for directions to The Church of the Holy Sepulcher. However, the Israeli policeman does not know the way, probably because he is a European immigrant, so he brings out a blindfolded Palestinian man, who was detained in the back of the van. The detained Palestinian man was able to provide multiple directions to the Church while blindfolded. The blindfolded Palestinian made me think of Tiresias, the blind prophet and oracle of Apollo in Thebes from Sophoclean tragedies, which speaks to the wisdom of

Palestinians as the Indigenous people of Palestine.

Like many instances in the film, the scene is repeated with a variation: the detained man escapes. As a filmmaker, Suleiman thinks not only like a poet and a choreographer, but also like a composer, who works with themes and variations: "The musicality of the film's structure is important" (as quoted in Porton 2003). Instead of writing melodic themes, Suleiman creates tableaux organized contrapuntally.

At some point in the film, Woman disappears without explanation. She stops showing up at the checkpoint to meet with E.S. like usual, so the spectator may assume that she has been detained or worse. This leads E.S. toward the climactic fantasy sequence of the film, wherein Woman plays a fida'iya. Again, *The Matrix* is alluded to because she can dodge bullets, levitate, and accomplish all sorts of ninja feats like Neo and Trinity. In *The Matrix*, Neo (the One) represents Moses, for he is meant to liberate chosen people from the matrix and lead them to the promised land of Zion, in the desert of the Real. And here, we must pause to reflect on the film's title.

The transliteration of the original Arabic title is *yad ilāhiyya*, which means "divine hand." Divine intervention refers to Biblical miracles like YHWH splitting the Red Sea. The character of E.S., for example, is introduced in the film through a shot of him driving a car while eating an apricot. He then nonchalantly throws the pit through the car window at an Israeli tank on the side of the road, thereby exploding it instantaneously. Divine violence is possible in revolutionary cinema.

However, divine hand accurately describes one of the central motifs in the film: the hands of E.S. and Woman coming together to signify love and the impossibility of the sexual. As such, the divine hand that Suleiman refers to is Woman's hand, the hand of love that makes the pain of colonialism a bit more bearable. Later, this hand of love becomes a revolutionary hand responsible for divine violence—the kind of violence that can destroy colonial law (Benjamin, 1996), which is not only unjust but also untrue.

THE FIDA'I AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF COLONIAL FANTASY

In the climactic fantasy sequence, *Woman* becomes *Palestinian*, wherein, according to colonial difference, "the Palestinian doesn't exist." The Palestinian subject does not exist except as an object of fantasy in the colonial order (i.e., a terrorist). In Suleiman's words:

Palestine does not exist. It has no borders. It has all the chaotic elements that lead you to question space, borders, and crossings, even if none of these elements, in itself, is valid. The Palestinian people is partitioned into various segments, but there is no real border. This chaotic status quo gives you a kind of freedom. It's the best place to reflect on space. (2000, 96) [emphasis added].

However, a *fiḍa'i* (self-sacrificer) is distinct from an *irhabī* (terrorist) or even a *jihādī* (one who struggles in the path of Allāh). In the film's climactic fantasy sequence, five Israeli agents are seen firing their guns at seven cardboard targets of a *fiḍa'i*. The image of the *fiḍa'i* is sexually ambivalent, for the face is covered with a *keffiyeh*. Only the decolonial Gaze of the *fiḍa'i* remains, which causes great anxiety for the Israeli agents since they are trained to dehumanize this ideological fantasmatic figure. The iconic *fiḍa'iya* indexed by Suleiman is Leila Khaled, a Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine member.

Six target cardboards fall except the central one, behind which a *fiḍa'i* appears and enacts divine violence. At one point, the *fiḍa'i* reveals their face, and we discover it is Woman. She uses her *divine hand* (1) to juggle grenades that explode and then reveal the Palestinian flag; (2) to throw darts at the agents, which carry the Islamic symbols of the crescent and the star; (3) to hold a metal shield shaped like a map of historic Palestine and then uses this shield as a boomerang weapon with which she destroys a helicopter; (4) to throw her *keffiyeh* like a lasso with which she pulls the enemy's guns; and (5) to throw stones at the enemy using a sling. This guerrilla tactic came to prominence during the First Intifada but is also a reference to a technique used by David to defeat Goliath in the Old Testament, which brings to mind Said's statement about himself being "the last Jewish intellectual...The only true follower of Adorno" (2001b, 52). I read that as a conceptual point about pan-Semitic non-identitarian affiliation. Is Suleiman the last Jewish filmmaker? He thinks so:

I don't see anything Jewish about statehood. In the conceptual, spiritual sense of the word. Of a diasporic experience, of always resisting power, authority, and centeredness, of making affiliations with nondominant authorities. The list is endless to what we can say is Jewish. It is my affiliation. It's what I thrive on. Not only in my daily life, but in my films. In the construction of the image. Look at my being in the frame. It's completely marginalized. I am almost a present absentee or an absent presentee. I make sure that I don't have any weight that could attract authority. I try to exist in a form of translucency so that I do not contain the whole frame. When you decenter the frame, it gives a democratic reading... This is very Jewish. I mean conceptually. Not tribally. By refraining from any sort of possession of authority (as quoted in Suleiman and Stutesman 2004, 92).

Finally, Woman uses her *divine hand* to throw a grenade underneath her to disappear like a *jinn*. By deconstructing sexual and colonial fantasies, Suleiman demonstrates the revolutionary potential of traversing oppressive and violent fantasies. Suleiman explodes the phallic fantasy of masculine jouissance and the colonial fantasy of mythic jouissance by using these fantasies against themselves. This meta-critique becomes more apparent later in the film as a *mise-en-abyme* strategy when we see E.S. in his apartment rearranging the film's nonlinear plot using sticky notes on two walls to distinguish between what could have been the film and what is the film. The nonlinearity of Suleiman's meta-cinema is a

function of a “decentralization of viewpoint, perception, and narration”, which serves as a metaphor: “Palestinians have always been ghettoized in a way, geographically and historically. To translate this metaphor requires a nonlinear cinematographic narrative structure” (Suleiman 2000, 97).

CONCLUSION: LOVE, RESISTANCE, AND THE REALITIES OF CONTEMPORARY PALESTINIAN CINEMA

Love in Palestine is an impossible but necessary discourse undergirded by non-sexual rapport. Fantasies are then superimposed onto this impotence to cover over the Real of colonial difference, which is traumatic. The fantasy is a screen onto which E.S. projects his revolutionary ideals about Woman, whose function is sustaining a counter-ideology of resistance against occupation. As such, the film frames the Palestinian unconscious through decolonial fantasies of liberation.

However, the fantasy-screen also blocks something from the spectator’s view, which speaks to the limit of fantasy vis-à-vis desire. The counter-ideology of resistance is still an ideology, a discursive-fantasy, so the material question of liberation praxis remains. It is a question that entails critique and self-criticism, which, for Suleiman, gets translated through a poetics of dark humor as *ridiculing colonial power and ironizing decolonial resistance*. For Suleiman, “being humorous with the Palestinians is an act of love, not an act of cynicism” (as quoted in Khader 2015, 25).

Whereas the Gaza Strip is entirely isolated, Suleiman’s hometown of Nazareth is geopolitically proximate to the West Bank. In other words, Suleiman is undoubtedly committed to the collective struggle to decolonize Israel and liberate Palestine (Halper, 2021), which signifies concretely “a binational Israeli-Palestinian state” (Said, 1999). Gertz and Khleifi acknowledge this when they describe the world of Suleiman’s cinema as “this third, open, heterogenous space” (2008, 166). However, a Gazan filmmaker would not be able to produce this kind of arthouse cinema, not because they cannot, but because it requires backing from Euro-American film financiers. This led Ball to critique Suleiman’s “willful rejection of national fraternity” as retaining “a level of elitist and artistic privilege” (2012, 90).

Furthermore, bourgeois Euro-American film financiers with a liberal sensibility vis-à-vis the Palestinian cause are more sympathetic toward a sophisticated *cinema of fantasy* than the kind of gritty *cinema of the Real* or *cinéma vérité* that we may get from Gazan documentarians, such as *From Ground Zero* (Masharawi and Nikolov 2024). This is not an argument about which cinema is better, for both types of cinema are equally necessary. However, I am alluding to the question of class struggle within Palestinian cinema, which mirrors the diverse politico-economic realities of Palestinian citizen-subjects in Israel, the

West Bank, Gaza, and beyond.

Let us consider Gazans as the lumpenproletariat of the Palestinian liberation struggle. Palestinian citizens of Israel may seem like the bourgeoisie, even when many of them are part of the working class. The divide-and-conquer colonial tactics used by Israel to alienate Palestinian subjects from one another, of course, come out of the imperial rulebook passed on by the British Empire (e.g., the Sykes-Picot Agreement). Suleiman treats this (post)colonial alienation with a sense of irony in his autobiographical cinematic trilogy, particularly in *Divine Intervention*.

Another way of framing (post)colonial alienation in the context of settler colonialism is through Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *internalized oppression*, wherein the oppressed internalize the oppression they are subjected to. In the process, they may repeat the oppressors through sub-oppression, which is how the Palestinian Authority, headed by Mahmoud Abbas since 2005, is perceived, for instance.

The Palestinian Authority is sub-oppressive not only because it is an undemocratic and corrupt administration but also because it cooperates with Israel. However, Suleiman does not focus on the sub-oppression of the Palestinian Authority; instead, he is interested in how sub-oppression manifests in Palestinian civil society, a case of widespread horizontal violence among neighbors, which Gertz and Khleifi describe as "a violent system of vicious cycles, Sisyphean acts" (2008, 187). Suleiman portrays Palestinian neighbors hating one another as a way of demonstrating how colonial oppression results in self-hatred, which is then projected as the hatred of the Other.

As Slavoj Žižek (1998) puts it, "the neighbor elicits the hatred that the subject experiences internally, given the superego's tyrannical relation to the ego" (1998, 6). The Biblical commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", is a superegoic or cultural demand for us to do something artificial regardless of our unconscious desire, which is singular yet has pluriversal reverberations. The colonial situation further complicates this superegoic demand. The Arab psyche, in general, suffers collectively from a sense of defeat or failure vis-à-vis the Israeli settler colonial project. The Arab subject hates being colonized; therefore, they also hate other colonized beings.

Sub-oppression is an obstacle in any liberation struggle and requires self-criticism (Al-Azm 2011). Self-criticism is one of Suleiman's strategies in the film, in addition to critiquing the Zionist ideology; both are accomplished through frivolity, absurdity, irony, or ridicule (Khader 2015). We encounter one of the protagonists early in the film through a wide shot of him as a defeated Palestinian man standing next to his car during the day while smoking and sighing. He throws away the bud of his cigarette, gets into the car, and turns it on.

We later learn that this man is a welder and E.S.'s father. Cut to him driving through a neighborhood; the spectator is inside the car. He waves at his neighbors while cursing at them in Arabic, which signifies the division of subjectivity between a friendly ego and an unfriendly unconscious. The scene is absurdly humorous because the cursing does not stop; it escalates. The English

subtitles do not capture the nuances of Arabic swear words, meaning this film is intended for Arab (or Arabic-speaking) spectators. The insults are all sexual in nature and target family members.

The unfriendly, or unneighborly, unconscious signifies the repression of sexual desire, which manifests as projected aggression. After all, love and hate are two Imaginary passions that help subjects manage the anxiety they may experience from encountering the traumatic Real. Love is a discourse that slides into fantasy, the path E.S. takes. Hate is an impotent reaction to the Real, the father's route, which eventually gives him a heart attack and kills him—not to mention the material effect of the Israeli police confiscating his welding workshop and car.

The film is replete with hateful neighbors: a man who throws his trash in his neighbor's yard, an old man who punctures a young boy's football and destroys a narrow car slope, and our welder who beats the old man for doing these things. Meanwhile, two elderly men—reminiscent of Statler and Waldorf from the Muppet Show—are sitting on top of a roof, observing the neighborhood imploding for their perverse entertainment.

Nevertheless, colonial being does not foreclose the possibility or potential for decolonial thinking. Decolonial thinking is thinking beyond the Israeli colonial ideology, which interpellates Palestinians as colonial subjects. However, Palestinians are *more* than colonial subjects. This "more" or this excess will be referred to below as "the Palestinian character." In a sense, it is aspirational instead of an essentialist identity.

In Suleiman's words, "I want to be fully Palestinian, to reach a total 'Palestinianness.' I am not talking about blood or roots, but a more conceptual notion" (2000, 97). The possibility of decolonial subjectivity then stems from an unconscious form of thinking that arises from the rich discourse of Palestinian culture, which subverts and critiques the Israeli colonial ideology. This cultural discourse is the *Palestinian Other of the Other*, which is negated in Israeli colonial ideology. In the words of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, "the aggression against Palestinian culture is a part of the premeditated and conscious Israeli operation to eradicate *the Palestinian character*" (as quoted in Beshara 2024, 33) [emphasis added]. He adds:

Palestinian cultural expression became, for Israelis, an immediate danger, for it firstly negates the allegations about the destruction of land by a culturally productive people and secondly because such cultural expression provides a very dangerous testimony as to the anti-cultural operation on whose essence the Zionist presence was founded. Thus, as Palestinian culture expressed the relation of the Palestinian people with their land and their history, the conflict became about confirming this relation and nourishing it on the Palestinian land and abroad as well as reviving the Palestinian memory, as to its history, to such an extent that it penetrated international cultural consciousness. This made Israel resort to dealing with the developing Palestinian culture as an immediate danger to its philosophy, ideology, claims, and rights. (as quoted in Beshara 2024, 33-34).

Putting aside my previous misgivings about class and positionality, Suleiman's cinema is as vital as the cinemas coming out of the West Bank and Gaza because *Palestinian cinema is a form of Palestinian cultural expression*, which amounts to cultural resistance (Said 1993) to the imperialism of the Israeli settler colonial project. This cultural resistance is *the negation of the negation*, that is, the negation of the Israeli colonial ideology's negation of Palestinian cultural expression, for *to exist is to resist*. This is the radical philosophy behind Suleiman's revolutionary cinema. To make cinema, as a Palestinian filmmaker, and to exist as a Palestinian character within this cinema is a form of cultural resistance.

The scene epitomizing the Palestinian ethic of existence as resistance is when E.S. is stopped at a traffic light in Israel. He looks to his right to see a billboard advertising a shooting range with the image of a Palestinian wearing a keffiyeh and holding a knife as the target. The ad says, "Come shoot if you're ready." He looks to his left and sees a Zionist who is parading the Israeli flag on his car, so E.S. decides to put on his sunglasses and plays "I Put A Spell On You" by Natacha Atlas as a way of throwing shade at the Zionist driver next to him.

The existence of a Palestinian subject enjoying Arab aesthetics disturbs the Zionist driver and causes him anxiety. This is the effect of cultural resistance, which challenges the ideological framing of the Palestinian or Arab as an object of colonial fantasy. The billboard is the jumping-off point for the film's climactic sequence, which is a traversal of the colonial fantasy. Ben Werdegar writes about the decolonial function of fantasy in the film as "a method of reiterating the desire for a return to a peaceful, unoccupied Palestine" (2020, 61). Traversing colonial fantasies is the path toward decolonial power.

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