Portrayal of Others in Israeli and Palestinian Cinema: The Metaphorical Power Politics of Exclusion and Identification

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Introduction

"The place of culture in national liberation has always been a contested terrain. This is more so at the time the struggle for liberation is being waged" (Massad 2006, 32), and cinema is not an exception. Regarding Palestinians, this was clearly indicated through the notorious case in 2002 in which the refusal by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) to consider Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002) for an Oscar Award generated uproar in the international film world. The Academy's Executive Director, Bruce Davis, stated that the film was ineligible for consideration because it was made in a country that was not formally recognized by the United Nations. Many independent filmmakers and Palestinian rights activists staged a heated cyber protest, and the controversy raised questions about the politics of art, identity, nationhood, and the dogged bureaucratese surrounding one of the most respected international cinema awards (Jacinto 2002).

A similar controversy over the nomination of another Palestinian film for a film festival occurred a few years later. These cases suggest two aspects. First, the maturity of Palestinian cinema is at the level of being nominated for international film festivals. Second, the centrality of cinema in the contested terrain is noticeable. In other words, "the films do not constitute a kind of 'representation' or 'reflection' that is detached from a non-signifying 'reality' or 'historical background.'" Rather "the films, the cinema industries, and political events all form part of a reality characterized by power/knowledge relations" (Khatib 2006, 3).

The reality that Palestinians face in such power/knowledge relations is evidently observed in the daily conflict with Israel. In the cases mentioned above, the struggle developed not only for the purpose of nomination but also in a metaphorical sense: the Palestinian struggle against invisibility in the cultural sphere. Such invisibility was always a stigma imposed on Palestinians. In addition, the emergence of the "other," or Israel in this case, as a nation-state in 1948 deprived Palestinians of their land, property, and the chance to establish their own country. The name "Palestine," which had been used under the British mandate, eventually disappeared from world maps. Since then, "the whole history of the Palestinian struggle has

to do with the desire to be visible" and "Palestinian cinema provides a visual alternative, a visual articulation, a visible incarnation of Palestinian existence in the years since 1948" (Said 2006, 2‒3).

How does cinema work as an arena for struggle? How are the "others" portrayed in Israeli and Palestinian cinema? An investigation of these questions will clarify the utility of culture as a tool for national struggle. Through a comparison of the depictions in Palestinian and Israeli cinema, the ongoing metaphorical power politics will be investigated as well.

A portrait of the "others" most likely depends upon the personality of the director. In addition, the national, religious, and ethnic identity of the producer of a film may strongly affect the overall structure of the storyline. Based on these assumptions, this paper examines films of directors from various origins[1] and analyzes the effects of their backgrounds in their works. Israeli films are chosen from those made by Jewish directors and Palestinian films are selected from those directed by Arabs who have their origins in Palestine.[2] Typical chosen directors include some who are new to the field in addition to well-known ones such as Amos Gitai, Michel Khleifi, and Elia Suleiman. In some case, the directors are known more as actors than as directors. However, this will not affect the analysis since the evaluation is not for esthetic purposes but for metaphorical contents. All works included in this study were filmed in the 2000s and attracted world-wide attention.

1. Israeli cinema

Israeli cinema dates back to the inception of the country, and it has evolved into its own institutions and events. The Israeli Film Fund offers financial support for directors of selected films and promotes productions in Israel. There are several annual cinema events such as the Jerusalem Film Festival and the Israel Film Festival. The former is held in Jerusalem with support from the Jerusalem Foundation, and as of 2012, it is in its 29th year. The latter is held in three different cities in the United States and aims to enrich the American vision of Israeli life and culture. This particular film festival was launched three years after the Jerusalem Film Festival.

When one views the list of films screened at the festivals, few films deal with the issue of conflict in Palestine. Instead, more attention focuses on personal lives, questions of Jewishness, and memories of the Holocaust. The screened films include works by both Israeli and foreign directors. The wide variety of categories and the characteristics of the directors suggest the overall difficulty when choosing specific works for analysis. Among them, one controversial film that deals with a direct attack and revenge between Israelis and Palestinians is *Munich* (2005). Even though it was filmed from the Israeli viewpoint based on an actual event, the film was lambasted by many Israeli critics. Therefore, this study will add another evaluation from a different perspective.

(1) *"Munich"* (2005) by Steven Spielberg

Set after the murder of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics by a team called "Black September", Steven Spielberg's film, *Munich*, follows the story of a secret Israeli squad assigned to track down and kill the perpetrators. The Mossad team, led by Avner, was chosen to search for 11 Palestinians suspected of having planned the assault. They execute their mission in Europe as well as Lebanon, and during the process, they begin to question the morality of the entire mission and fall into self-doubt. The humanities of the hunted Palestinian targets are also depicted in various segments.

This film was nominated for five Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Film Editing, and Best Original Score. Nevertheless, it was lambasted in Israel for many reasons. One reason was its perceived sympathy for the Palestinian cause due to the depiction of human interactions between Israelis and the Palestinians. In addition, considering the Israeli view of the members of "Black September" being terrorists, the film's equation of the Israeli assassins with "terrorists" became the target of criticism. Furthermore, the tone of self-criticism among the Mossad team members was criticized for not reflecting the reality (Urquhart 2005). In the review by Haaretz English weekend edition, the film was mentioned as made by "not too intellectual a director" and was cynically evaluated for its poor quality (Klein 2006).

Apart from these criticisms, another point should be mentioned in regard to "otherness," which is the choice of the languages used in the film. By using a common language for a distinct community, the film indicates the difference between the "self" and the "others." In this regard, one of the typical indicators of otherness and identity is language. When one compares the languages used by the Palestinians and the Israelis, *Munich* has a salient characteristic.

Throughout this film, in which Palestinians speak Arabic with one another, Israelis rarely speak Hebrew, which is their common as well as national language. Instead, they speak English. The Palestinian "terrorists" speak only Arabic in the opening scene, and their conversations are not subtitled. Therefore, for the audience who do not understand Arabic, their communication sounds meaningless. On the other hand, Israelis are depicted as sophisticated enough to speak fluent English. Only one word in Hebrew is used by them in a scene at a dinner table: "Mazal Tov!" (Congratulations).

This difference is based on the fact that the Israeli side is portrayed as the "self" while the Palestinian side is portrayed as the "others." The "self" is described using the language that most of the audience can understand, while the "others" is not. The difference of this representation appears to be the distinction between "Barbaroi" and "Hellenes" in Greek, or in other words, between savage and civilized people. In the case, Palestinians are portrayed as the former and Israelis as the latter.

This is why the inner story of the Israeli characters is depicted as a melancholic distress of elite heroes during the operation while the Arabs simply appear as targets. The distance between them is so wide that they only communicate on a few occasions, and even these meetings were criticized in Israel as depictions of the "terrorist" as a human being. Since differences among the "others" appear to be only a trivial matter, the national characteristics of Palestinians and Lebanese are practically ignored in the story.

(2) *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) by Ari Folman

Another Israeli film is *Waltz with Bashir*, which it is an animated film directed by Ari Folman. As both a fictional and autobiographical work, the storyline is constructed as a recollection of Ari, the main character (named after the director himself), who engages in the war in Lebanon in 1982. One day, a former comrade visits Ari and talks about his repeated nightmares. Listening to his story, Ari suddenly notices that a part of his memory from the conflict in Lebanon is missing. The strange absence of the memory inspires him to begin a trip in which he visits his former comrades-in-arms and re-traces his own footsteps.

This film was screened at the Cannes Film Festival and was also better received in Israel than was *Munich*. One reason may be the fact that the story is based on a common experience of most Israelis: conscription during their impressionable youth. This is a popular genre in Israeli cinema known as a "docudrama," which focuses on experiences based on personal events. Another characteristic of this film is the focus on the war in Lebanon, which is a recent trend seen in several other films such as *Kippur* (2000), *Beaufort* (2007), and *Lebanon* (2010).[3]

Concerning the subject of this study, this film is a clear example of the ignorance of the "others." In fact, "a kind of huge, willed amnesia" in the war in Lebanon is the topic of this particular film (Bradshaw 2008). The missing part of the protagonist's memory is his experience during the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon. It was perpetrated by Falangist, a Lebanese militia, under tacit approval and observance by the Israeli army. Ari remembers neither where he was at that time nor his role in the massacre. In this case, his foes (Palestinians as victims) themselves are left in total oblivion as the "others."

In this film, the Israeli "self" dominates most of the story and the depiction of the Palestinian "other" is almost omitted. The storyline follows the melancholic journey of the hero, while the Palestinians only appear as dead bodies during the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, which is emphasized in the final scene by using actual images of the event. This contrast is appealing in terms of the fact that the core issue of the film is the massacre of Palestinians. The exclusion from the portrayal illuminates the level of interest between the "self" and "others," which is strongly affected by power politics.

War is the setting in which the contrast between the "self" and "other" is most saliently recognized and power politics is reflected clearly. In this film, the complete ignorance of the "others" mirrors the Israeli viewpoint. It reflects the metaphorical power of the Israeli perspective, which attempts to exclude the existence of the "others" (Palestinians) as a subject in the scene. While being on the weak side, what is the metaphorical symbol of Israel in Palestinian films? How do Palestinians describe the overwhelming "others" from the perspective of the occupied people? These questions will be investigated in the following section.

2. Palestinian cinema

Although it depends on the definition of the concept, Palestinian cinema includes a longer history than that of Israeli cinema and dates back to the period of the British mandate. According to the filmography edited by Kamran Rastegar,[4] the first Arab narrative film was directed in 1927 by Ibrahim Lama, a Chilean-born Palestinian who worked in the early Egyptian film industry.[5] An early Lumière film showing a gate of the Old City of Jerusalem was shot even earlier, around the turn of the century. There have been several filmographies from different places in the Arab world including *al-Sīnamā wa al-Qaḍīya al-Filasṭīnīya* (Cinema and the Palestinian Issue) by Hussain al-ʿAwda, *al-Sīnamā al-Filasṭīnīya fī al-Qarn al-ʿIshrīn* (Palestinian Cinema in the Twentieth Century) by Basshār Ibrāhīm, and *Dalīl al-Film al-Filasṭīnī 1935-2000* (A Guide to Palestinian Cinema 1935-2000) by Taysīr Khalaf. Recently, a book was edited by the Institute for Palestine Studies titled *Filasṭīn fī al-Sīnamā* (Palestine in Cinema). Written by Qais al-Zubaidī, the book includes information about 799 films by 450 Arab and foreign directors and comes with a CD.

In most of the filmographies, Palestinian films are defined as "works by Palestinians of all backgrounds—those in pre- and post- 1948 boundaries of Palestine, those refugees residing in surrounding areas, and those who constitute the global diaspora of Palestinians" (Dabashi ed. 2006, 180). There is a significant need to promote Palestinian filmmakers in order for them to continue working in adverse conditions such as under Israeli occupation and with a general lack of established funds. Based on this reason, several Palestinian film festivals are organized both inside and outside Palestine. The first one was convened in Baghdad in March 1973, and in honor of its 30th anniversary in 2003, the Columbia University Palestinian Film Festival was organized (Massad 2006, 33). In addition, annual Palestinian Film Festivals are held in other major cities of the world, including one in London, which is organized in cooperation with several organizations in solidarity with Palestinians.[6]

From the long history of the cinema, it is difficult to choose only few films for an analysis. For this article, the works were chosen according to the characteristics of the directors. Owing to the limited resources and chances of education, only few films are made by

Palestinians living inside the occupied territories—the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Most films are shot by Palestinians who either have Israeli nationality or currently live abroad. Nevertheless, their viewpoints reflect different perspectives from those of Israeli filmmakers. The stories are developed under Israeli occupation and depict the difficult life of the Palestinians. How, then, are the Israelis depicted in these works? What is the effect of the metaphorical power politics in these films? These questions deserve further consideration.

(1) *Jenin Jenin* (2002) by Muhammad Bakri

Jenin Jenin is a documentary by Muhammad Bakri set in Jenin, a northern city of the West Bank. Bakri is a well-known Arab actor with Israeli nationality and has performed in several countries. The story of the film consists of testimonies from the Israeli military operation called "Operation Defense Shield." During the operation in 2002, Jenin became a battlefield between Palestinian fighters and the Israeli army. The refugee camp in Jenin was attacked, destroyed, and sealed off from access to journalists and human rights organizations. Though hidden from the public, the existence of the massacre was pointed out by international society, and Bakri released this film as proof of what actually occurred in the camp.

By simply compiling interviews of the residents of the refugee camp, this film attempts to provide a "voice" based on the Palestinian perspective. In other words, the Palestinian "self" is given a forum to share its story to the audience. Following this intention, interviews with Israeli officials, or voices of the "others," are not included in the film. Israelis only appear as anonymous images during the conflict and as a symbol of violence. This is an exact mirror image of the portrayal of Israelis in Palestinian cinema.

The setting of the film is constructed by the use of a symbolic style, in which the camera follows the director from behind as he walks through the ruins of the camp. This perspective is reminiscent of Hanzalah, the central character in the cartoons by Nājī al-'Alī', Who always turns his back to the people in anger over their ignorance and lack of response to the predicament of Palestinians. Bakri pays homage to Nājī al-'Alī', transforms into Hanzalah himself, and thus partakes in the iconography of his people (Dabashi 2006, 17).

Bakri's self-projection as a victim in Jenin and the anger depicted in the film evoked infuriated responses from Israelis. The Israeli Film Ratings Board banned the screening of this film on the grounds that it presented a distorted version of events. Bakri fought the ban in court, and the Supreme Court of Israel subsequently overturned the decision. Supreme Court Judge Dalia Dorner stated in her verdict, "The fact that the film includes lies is not enough to justify a ban (BBC 2003)." However, denying the existence of the massacre, some Israeli soldiers filed a lawsuit against Bakri for defamation of character. The soldiers

requested that Bakri be charged according to Clause 6 of the Libel Law and expected to use legal means to avoid further screenings of the film. As of 2012, the lawsuit is ongoing, which indicates the difficulty of accepting the narratives of the "others" by Israelis (Zarchin 2012).

(2) *Arna's Children* (2003) by Juliano Mer Khamis

The final film analyzed in this paper is *Arna's Children*. This documentary was filmed by director Juliano Mer Khamis based on his own experiences in the West Bank. The director has an Israeli Jewish mother and a Palestinian Christian father, which means that he is recognized legally and socially as both an Israeli Jew and a Palestinian Arab. This film also depicts the operation in the Jenin refugee camp, but from another perspective.

The film depicts the life-history of the children who grew up in the Jenin refugee camp, their transformation over the years, and their involvement at Arna's cultural center. The director himself was a dance teacher in the center who helped the activities with his mother. Both Arna and Juliano were loved by the residents of the camp because of their devotion and support for the children. However, after Arna died of cancer, the center was closed. After a few years, "Operation Defense Shield" occurred, and Juliano become worried about the children with whom he had previously spent a significant amount of time. Sifting through the debris of the camp, he discovered the tragic changes in the children's lives and recorded the evidence on his camera.

In the middle of the film, there is a remarkable conversation between Juliano and the children. Looking back at their first meeting, the children frankly talk about their first impression of Arna and Juliano. In their talk, their transformation from "them" to "us" is clearly described. Their doubt of the Jewish activists (Arna and Juliano) disappeared over time through direct communication during the activities. This can be considered as the process to incorporate "others" into the "self" by Palestinians. On the other hand, in the beginning of the film, Arna talks about her first contact with the Palestinians during her military service. Although she was a member of the elite team of the Jewish army, her interactions with Arabs slowly changed her perspective and influenced her to open a cultural center in the camp. In this depiction, the audience of the film is provided with a concrete image of the "others" through both sides' eyes.

This exceptional description of the "others" in the film is probably based on the fact that the director was born to an Israeli mother and a Palestinian father. In this case, Juliano can stand both inside and outside the community of contenders (Palestinians and Israelis) or sometimes be compelled to stand on the other side due to his sense of affiliation. A similar feature applies to the director of *Jenin Jenin*, Muhammad Bakri, who has Israeli nationality. However, the story depicted in *Arna's Children* includes a more interactive perspective. In regard to the dedication toward this film, it is ironic that the director was assassinated in the

heart of his activities: the Jenin refugee camp.

Conclusion

This analysis of Israeli and Palestinian films showed a clear contrast in the portrayed images of the "others." In addition, it reflected the politics of exclusion and identification between the "self" and "other." For most films, the representation of the "others" is totally simplified and lacks concreteness. For Israeli films, Palestinians are the "others" and described as enemies or refugees living in a completely different world from that of Israeli Jews. More often, their existence is completely ignored. The same perspective applies to Palestinian films, in which occupation, invasion, and destruction by Israeli forces are described without providing individual images of the "others."

This analysis also found another common tendency in Israeli and Palestinian films: a self-retrospective tone of the main character. In this case, the story's narration is developed from a subjective viewpoint and the "others" are described as the surrounding environment. Although the reason for this tendency was not clarified in this study, it may be a trend of the contemporary period since all the films were shot in the 2000s. At any rate, this tendency strengthens the contrast between the "self" and "others" and contributes toward the results of this analysis.

The "otherness" is the mirror image of the "self," which helps to consolidate identity by distinction and exclusion. In this sense, the denial of the opponent ("others") may be considered a necessary tool for the unity of both the Palestinian and Israelis. Such complete ignorance reflects metaphorical power politics, which attempts to exclude the existence of the "others" as a subject on the scene. In other words, films work as a portrait of the "others," which helps to strengthen the "self." Descriptions, or even the lack of descriptions, establish distance with the "others" and the scope of identification. Either way, it is important since it has implicit power in determining the framework of the conflict. Since the 2000s, the well-attended Israeli and Palestinian films include rich material that helps us to understand such power politics.

Notes

1   The choice of the directors precisely reflects the will of the conveners. For example, at the 2003 screening of "Dreams of a Nation" in New York, the primary criterion for the film's selection was the fact that director was a Palestinian. In this case, the organizers conceived it as a chance for Palestinians to have a forum to share their stories (Jacir 2006, 29).

2   These Palestinians, who currently have Israeli or foreign nationality, are included for selection. "Jewishness," in this case, does not necessarily represent the admitted category by the Israeli government.

3 Israel includes a long history of repeated conflicts with Lebanon (with significant conflicts occurring in 1948, 1967, 1982, and 2006), and the political decisions and strategies during the wars with Lebanon are often controversial in Israeli society. The films mentioned above are directed by Amos Gitai (*Kippur* 2000), Joseph Cedar (*Beaufort* 2007), and Samuel Maoz (*Lebanon* 2010).

4 The editor's name, not indicated in the index of the book, can be easily found in the Introduction written by Hamid Dabashi (Dabashi 2006, 21).

5 It is titled "Kiss in the dessert" ("Qibla fī al-Ṣaḥrā" as the original Arabic title).

6 This festival was held under the sponsorship of Palestine Solidarity Campaign, London Middle East Institute, SOAS Palestine Society, and other organizations. The screenings were held at Barbican and SOAS in 2012.

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