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A Cinema of Nowhere

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## INTERVIEW

### A CINEMA OF NOWHERE

#### AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIA SULEIMAN

*At a time when Palestinian artistic production remains closely tied to the land and confined within the limits of a collective identity, the filmmaker Elia Suleiman is distinguished by an unabashedly critical and individualistic perspective. Far from advocating a return to Palestine or the reunification of the territory, he aspires in his work to "the transgression of national borders" and to a "detachment from the specificity of place."\* In a similar vein, he strives to avoid static notions of identity and territory, seeing dynamism and movement as sources of meaning and artistic creation. He is also one of the rare Palestinian artists to make extensive use of irony and self-mocking.*

*Born in Nazareth in 1960, Elia Suleiman lived for over a decade in New York and is largely self-taught as a filmmaker. His principal films are Introduction to the End of an Argument (1991), Homage by Assassination (1992), Chronicle of a Disappearance (1996), and Arab Dream (1998). Concerning Chronicle of a Disappearance, Suleiman's best known work, film critic Stanley Kauffmann of the New Republic wrote (30 June 1997) that it "is a film of the Absurd. If Ionesco had been a Palestinian and a filmmaker, he might have made it. . . . Like all good Absurdist, [Suleiman] looks at things bifocally: from the point of view of a fly on the wall and under the eye of eternity."*

*Elia Suleiman was interviewed in Jerusalem by Anne Bourlond in February and July 1999. The interview was published in the fall 1999 issue of the IPS's French quarterly, Revue d'études Palestiniennes.*

*Bourlond: You are one of the few Palestinian artists whose work gives vent to an absolutely individualistic point of view. This finds expression in your relationship to space and memory and in your clear rejection of their collective and static aspects. Is the demystification of the place and its specificity always so central in your work?*

*Suleiman: There could hardly be a worse time for me to talk about this issue than right now, given the difficult personal period I'm going through with my father's death. At present, my space is purely illusory and I cannot even conceptualize it. I am living a kind of interiority where the notion of space is*

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\* "Dialogue with Khalil Rabah," *Khalil Rabah* catalogue, Gallerie Anadiel, 1998, p. 25.

not accessible. I just arrived from Nazareth, for example, but I cannot recall a single image, a single geographic trace of the voyage.

The notion of space for me is mixed up with identity. It is true that I have always questioned the problem of identity, in all its aspects—identity and its negation, identity and its position, identity and otherness. But now, I have the feeling that the notion of identity—my identity as a Palestinian—has lost its meaning as a point of departure for my work, at least in political terms.

Here in Jerusalem, the link between identity, memory, and place is very strong. Memory and identity are tied to space, but not necessarily to a real space. Memory in my work is an invention—to my mind, you create the place. You don't exactly reproduce it, you reinvent it. The illusional or deceptive aspect of these notions is reflected in my films.

It's too early to say whether or not this is a temporary state, though when I look carefully at my films, I can see a progressive distancing from this kind of consideration—from the place I come from, the memory. I think I've gotten beyond this place/identity dialectic. And the death of my father has distanced me even further from these territorial considerations and has lessened their influence on my conceptual thought.

*Bourlond: Perhaps you've succeeded in totally deconstructing the specificity of place, to the point that you no longer feel you have either homeland or exile. I'm thinking of the first words of your latest film, Arab Dream.*

*Suleiman:* I don't have a homeland. And since exile is the other side of having a homeland, I'm not in exile. On the other hand, at another level—a non-political level—every place is both a homeland and an exile. What is important is to be able to position oneself in relation to the world, to give a spatial support for your perception of the world. Exile is a privilege in the sense that it makes this possible. Exile is a kind of "place," too. For me, Nazareth and New York are both simultaneously exiles and homelands.

Of course, I am aware of the need for a people to share a common language, a way of living together in security and democracy, but I will always question this collective notion of "nation." As far as I'm concerned, exile is a choice.

*Bourlond: How do you explain this atypical relationship to space and identity, this distancing from reference points that in Palestine are so loaded with meaning?*

*Suleiman:* 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.

In my case, my personal history helps me see things in this way. 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. The concept of "roots" has no

special meaning for me. In my case, land is not an element that creates desire, this magnetic desire that I am constantly seeking in my work. Anything that doesn't have the power to generate emotions does not occupy an important place in my mental framework and my cinematographic images.

Of course, the Israeli occupation has strengthened the link to the land—it's easy to develop an extreme relationship to what has been lost. And not everyone had the same chance I had to break free of this attachment. If you're living in a refugee camp in Lebanon, I can imagine that it would be natural and even necessary to nourish this dream of a particular place, an imagined or memorized place. For me, Nazareth is not the kind of place I could dream of.

Still, I can't say that Palestine does not occupy a part of me. I live in Paris, but I come back regularly. I don't want to free myself of being Palestinian. On the contrary, I want to be fully Palestinian, to reach a total "Palestinian-ness." I am not talking about blood or roots, but a more conceptual notion.

*Bourlond: How is this relationship to space and identity translated in your cinematographic language?*

*Suleiman:* I am trying to create a "decentered" image. Every center point has a narrative, but I want to create an image without a specific center. In the case of Palestine, my challenge is to avoid a centralized, unified image that allows only a single narrative perspective and, on the contrary, to produce a kind of decentralization of viewpoint, perception, and narration.

Palestinians have always been ghettoized in a way, geographically and historically. To translate this metaphor requires a nonlinear cinematographic narrative structure—there is a parallelism between the decentralization of the narrative and of the film's structure. Opting for nonlinearity in the film's narrative mode fits in a perfect synchronization with my intention to challenge the linearity of the story of Palestine. Of course, I didn't create this nonlinearity, it existed on its own. But my films give it expression—they speak of nonlinearity and in fact they *are* nonlinear, especially *Chronicle of a Disappearance*.

*Bourlond: It is true that the film is characterized by a decentralization of viewpoint and narration; geographic nonlinearity, duality of narrative perspectives, plurality of styles. Instead of fighting blurred lines of territory and identity, you use them to serve your method.*

*Suleiman:* The key word here is "nonlinearity." The nonlinear image, which is read through dispersed fragments, is the only way you can make the audience participate in the construction of the image and therefore in the construction of the story, of the discourse. What I want to do is to challenge the director's viewpoint as the only "authorized" viewpoint—I don't want his telling of the story to impose itself as the version of the "Truth." If, on the other hand, you can create an image that calls into question this "Truth" and opens new horizons, you can constantly rewrite the story or at least create the possibility of rewriting the story. That's what my films try to do.

I don't want to tell the story of Palestine; I want to open the way to multiple spaces that lend themselves to different readings. In fact, this is inher-

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ent in every kind of narrative. The perfect example is poetry—poetry, or at least good poetry, always presents this nonlinearity and this lack of one truth, which allows readers to feel they are writing the history themselves. Unfortunately, many people seem to think that the period of nation building that we are going through at present requires a linear discourse,

a single voice, source of a nationalist art.

*Bourlond: This nonlinear structure also characterizes your latest film, Arab Dream. In it we follow the narrator, who is a director looking for a subject for his next film, in his various encounters, the suggestions he's given, and so on. Hence the impression of scattering, of total fragmentation—which I assume is deliberate.*

*Suleiman: That was the psychological state I was in when I finished *Chronicle of a Disappearance*. Actually, *Arab Dream* is a kind of postmortem of *Chronicle of a Disappearance*. I was in that state of total emptiness, inconclusiveness, in which a director often finds himself between films. I was still in Jerusalem, and I couldn't get out of this extreme tension, this binary opposition. My anxieties, far from diminishing, became more intense. The page in front of me wasn't white but black! Which explains the particularly somber tone of the film and the narrator's feeling of despair as he tries in vain to figure out what to do, where to go.*

*Bourlond: Could you say that you're trying to reach another level of cinema, a cinema of the poetic sphere, beyond national characteristics?*

*Suleiman: I am trying to create an image that transcends the ideological definition of what it means to be a Palestinian, an image far from any stereotype. For me, the "total" image, the image that has no substitution, is the poetic vision. Lately I have become more conscious of when I make an image in the poetic realm as opposed to an image still rooted in the ground and stuck in a dialectical relationship with immediate reality—in other words, a politicized image. I used to be satisfied with that type of image, but not anymore. Even if, needless to say, I am aware that you can never really reach the pure poetic image. The poetic image hides various meanings, which makes it an element of communication. The audience can read it as a codirector, almost. Since there is no "authorized" interpretation of the director, they can look at the image however they want. The meaning does not precede the image, but comes in different forms, different clusters and associations. You have to give free rein to your senses to produce the meaning. Unfortunately, Palestinians—and I am generalizing here—have the opposite attitude and want to know what the image means as soon as it appears on the screen.*

The poetic image is the only one that can attain universality. During a screening of *Chronicle of a Disappearance* in Italy, some members of the

audience told me they found it very Italian. The same thing happened in Russia and in Sweden. For me, that's what it means to be Palestinian. It becomes a pretext to make a film that is a language of communication for anyone, anywhere—and without this aspect of “us” and “them.” In my film work, I try to create desire and communication. I realize that there are some scenes in my films—for example, the scene in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* where a young Palestinian woman is looking in vain for an apartment in West Jerusalem—that are anchored in temporal reality, linked to a specific period and place and that will not last. Some day people will remember the film as being of this “period when it was difficult for a Palestinian to find an apartment in West Jerusalem!” I'm not happy about such scenes.

My films are Palestinian because I am Palestinian, the way you'd say a film is French if the director is French. But my films don't deal with Palestine. Palestine is not their subject—though there is still some work to be done about “dismantling the flag.” I am trying to deconstruct this imposed national image, this image constructed by all these cultural actors who are always droning on about what Palestine means to them and who seem to fear that if this image disappears their artistic inspiration will disappear with it. Apart from the army or the government, why do people look to cinema to reinforce the national image and its corollary, the negative image of the other? Otherness can sometimes be the opposite—fascination and desire.

*Bourlond: Some people criticize the egocentric nature of your cinema, though one could respond that the poetic image can only come out of a deep introspection . . .*

*Suleiman: I use myself as the starting point to speak of many other things. From where else can one start?*

*Bourlond: Unlike certain of your critics, you say your films are political. What do you mean by “political”? And is this compatible with your ambition to make a poetic cinema?*

*Suleiman: I am trying to produce something beyond a static ideological position, beyond the ideological definition or representation of what it is to be a Palestinian. This means that my films are very political. My film *Introduction to the End of an Argument* is a good example—it is a systematic refusal of all ideology in representing Palestine and Palestinian identity. To be anti-ideological, of course, can become an ideological position in itself. Hence the need to constantly change the viewing angle.*

My films are “political,” but not dogmatic, for I try to let loose the image until it finds its poetic interpretation. I am not a politician, but a political being. Many people see in my films an assertion of the absence of a Palestinian identity. But cultural production (and thus my films) is in itself an expression of identity. Any artistic creation expresses the identity of a person—a political being—but an identity constantly seeking itself, in perpetual transition, antinationalist. It's in this sense that art is political.

*Bourlond: In this regard, how do you see the role of the funders/producers and the expectations of the public in terms of influencing the nature of Palestinian cinema? Don't they impose a kind of restriction on the creative freedom of the directors? Certain Palestinian directors of the diaspora complain of this problem.*

*Suleiman: It is true that we, Palestinian directors, are not in an easy situation. The Western countries have an agenda, they have country quotas and give you financial aid on condition that you speak about your country. But it's our responsibility to resist this pressure; if you accept the conditions of the funders, if you agree to play by the rules of the game, you give in. At the beginning, I had problems along these lines with the distribution of my films, because I was making funny films about Palestine, while the public expected films on Palestine to be tragic. Now it's different. I have no problem finding funders. Of course, it's not the big commercial production companies, but for my kind of film, it would be the same in New York or anywhere else.*

*Bourlond: What can you say about the Palestinian public? It seems that the cynicism—you would call it irony—and self-mocking of your films leave a mixed impression.*

*Suleiman: My brand of humor or irony is not at all accepted. I have even been accused of treason, of being a Zionist! My approach is considered too critical for a time of national construction that is said to call for unity and even uniformity. They think that Palestinians should all speak with one voice. What we find here is a fear of "destabilization" linked to a place, Palestine, where unity is considered essential. There's also the problem of interpretation of the image. A great part of the Palestinian public, as I said earlier, expects the meaning to be immediate, to precede the image. They're unable to let themselves go, to allow themselves freedom of interpretation; when they judge a film, they judge only if it's good or bad for Palestinians. Their viewpoint is very politicized, but of course the situation is very politicized.*

*Bourlond: Could one say that what's intolerable is not your irony, but the fact that the public is locked in the tragic? Without a sense of detachment from the present situation, humor is impossible.*

*Suleiman: In fact, the Palestinians of Israel are more sensitive to this kind of humor—self-deprecation—in the face of the status quo, of stagnation. It's the humor of the ghetto. It's laughing at yourself to give yourself a little hope. But in such a highly politicized situation, where the dominant discourse is that of authority, and given the tragic nature of the status quo, humor gives way to this supposedly superior value that is political unification.*

Actually, this type of self-critical, self-mocking humor requires a certain freedom. And in a place where the daily reality is occupation and military presence, humor and irony need time to take root. In Nazareth, the audience liked the absurd scenes in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, like the one showing friends sitting for hours with absolutely nothing happening, whereas in

the West Bank the public took offense because these people didn't take up arms! It's interesting to see that the inability to laugh at oneself was found in both Palestinian and Israeli audiences. The Palestinians of the occupied territories, locked in their role of victim and unable to laugh at their oppressor, criticized me for not showing them more as targets of Israeli violence. The Israelis, on the other hand, felt destabilized, intimidated: they did not recognize themselves in these cartoon-figure policemen, and the Palestinians they were depicted as facing in the film were pretty far from the Palestinians they knew. They would have preferred that I represent them with more "realism" so they could counterattack.

*Bourlond: After a short stay in Palestine in 1995 to film Chronicle of a Disappearance, you left again. Does exile allow you more scope for introspection?*

*Suleiman:* I need mobility. Mobility gives a feeling of renewal. I love to be "dislocated," "decentered." Desire and love are decentered in the sense that you never know when and where they will strike, yet you always welcome them. It's what I try to reach in the images I produce. I try to create images that catch you off guard, that carry you into places you didn't know, that offer you a different perspective. It's the only way to delay death. When the place you're in is no longer anything but its own representation, without the possibility of other representations, it's time to leave. During the period before I left Palestine, I had the feeling that I couldn't find my own space anywhere. Even in my own house. The images and the sounds I perceived were no longer anything but representations of all sorts of occupations, intrusions (sirens, the sound of tires). Even the silence had become noisy. It was a violation of my interior space. I was overwhelmed by external reality and being taken away from what was inside me and what is the most precious to me. I needed another perspective that would allow me to *see* again. But now I'm back. Well, more or less, since I am still partly living in Paris.

*Bourlond: You just finished the scenario of your next film. What is it about?*

*Suleiman:* My next film, *Wages of Crime*, goes beyond *Chronicle of a Disappearance*—it will be far more violent and the humor darker. I have the feeling that my style is becoming more minimalist, more pure. I'm pushing the extremes in two genres—hyperrealism and the absurd. So in the film, we have Nazareth, but as a fictitious structure, with a very minimalist approach. Jerusalem—or something that resembles it—also figures in the film, but a Jerusalem plunged in an almost hallucinatory absurdity. The film likewise pushes the extreme opposition between exteriority and interiority. On the one hand, the representation of a total exteriority: Nazareth. On the other, a completely internalized reflection, the dream: Jerusalem. Finally, there is New York, the "finale" that unites the two. But [he laughs] you could equally say, in two words, that it's a chronicle of love and suffering!