

Written and Directed by Elia Suleiman
 Produced by Humbert Balsan
 Cinematography by Marc-André Batigne
 Film Editing by Véronique Lange

Elia Suleiman...E.S.
 Manal Khader...Woman
 George Ibrahim...Santa Clause
 Amer Daher...Auni
 Jamel Daher...Jamal
 Lufuf Nuweiser...Neighbor with American van
 Read Masarweh...Abu Basil
 Bassem Loulou...Abu Amer
 Salvia Nakkara...Adia
 Naaman Jarjoura...Uncle
 Rama Nashashibi...Um Elias
 Saiman Natour...Friend
 Fairos Hakim...Bus stop shopkeeper
 Khalil Jarjoura...Number 6 man
 Hamada Shamout...Basil
 Nazira Suleiman...Mother

ELIA SULEIMAN (28 July 1960, Nazareth, Israel) has directed 7 films: *Chacun son cinéma* ou *Ce petit coup au coeur quand la lumière s'éteint et que le film commence*/To Each His Cinema (segment "Irtebak", 2007), *Yadon ilaheyya/Divine Intervention* (2002), *Cyber Palestine* (1999), *War and Peace in Vesoul* (1997), *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996), *Harb El Khalij...wa baad/The Gulf War... What Next?* (1993), and *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990).

This is the only film appearance by Manal Khader (7 September 1968, Jerusalem, Israel)

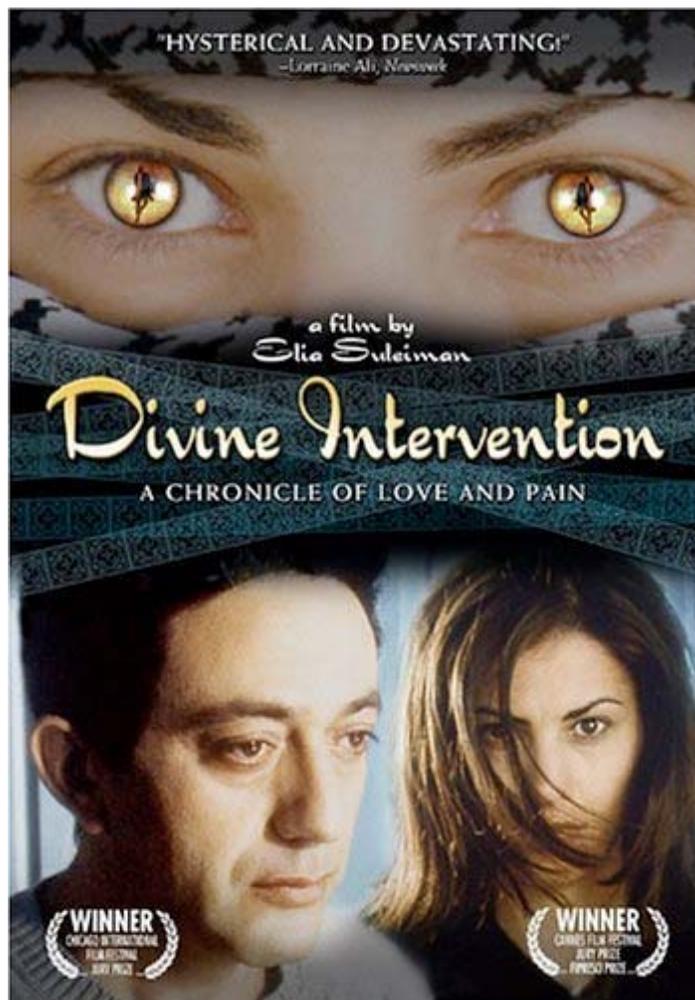
Jeremiah Kipp: Violence Before the Storm. An interview with Elia Suleiman. Filmmaker, 1/16/03

I have no strategy," says Palestinian writer-director Elia Suleiman. His latest film, *Divine Intervention*, doesn't follow the cause-and-effect structure of narrative cinema – though there is a strong sense of planning and architecture in its arrangement of scenes. Opening with a bleeding, beaten Santa Claus pursued by a gang of angry children through the hills of Nazareth, immediately followed by an angry older man's drive through the ghettoized streets cursing at his neighbors, Suleiman paints allegorical pictures of social, political and mental chaos. Often framed in extreme wide shots, the characters are seen as ants scuttling about; an oddly comic effect that undercuts the trauma and hostility inherent in a story about Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Though *Divine Intervention* is given weight and depth by the filmmaker's presence (implicating himself as an onscreen character named E.S.), Suleiman veers away from naturalistic behavior and realism at every turn. His film is shaken up by larger-than-life fantasies involving a magically bulletproof woman (Manal Khader) passing through a border checkpoint, or transforming into a black-clad ninja who single handedly takes down a cadre of Israeli soldiers. The mundane harshness of daily life in Nazareth, where neighbors toss garbage bags into each other's yards or wait for buses that never arrive, is given bleak comic counterpoint by the onslaught of these broadly absurd fantasies.

An apricot pit casually tossed at an enemy tank causes an explosion. A command post collapses from one Palestinian's defiant stare. At one point, the soldiers burst into a buffoonish choreographed dance. These vignettes never stray far from overt slapstick, which is perhaps why Suleiman prefers calling them "gags" instead of "messages". If they don't provide comfort, at least they can be viewed as an outlet. It's better than the uneasy shot repetition of the filmmaker and his fantasy girl sitting in a car together at the Jerusalem border, no words

November 27, 2007 (XV:14)
 Elia Suleiman **Divine Intervention**/Yadon Ilaheyya 2002
 92 minutes



exchanged, their hands desperately

But the scene that provides a tool comic-tragic labyrinth is of the of yellow Post-Its that outline like to make. Through the artist's provides order amid the chaos. In some strategy at work. In his epiphanies, disturbances and allows a window into his

Suleiman was born in Nazareth, New York. His previous feature, *Disappearance*, followed character E.S. and his return to exile. *Divine Intervention* is and *Pain*, and can be seen as a kind plays "himself" and there are story, these films are informed by



The E.S. of his films seems to lack the temerity it takes to make a film like *Divine Intervention*. The character is silent, stone-faced, and marginalized by images and situations much larger than he is. The filmmaker in person, miles removed from his onscreen self, is a vivid personality: boisterous, caustic, and verbose. *Filmmaker* sat down with him at the Mayflower Hotel shortly before a New York screening of *Divine Intervention* to discuss his creative process.

Filmmaker: Why did you choose to open with Santa Claus being attacked by a group of kids?

Elia Suleiman: I absolutely wanted this to come first. We had to start with an action scene that would unfasten the spectator's seatbelt. I didn't want them to have weighty preconceived notions of what it means to watch a Palestinian film. These kids who don't give a fuck about Santa's sweetness. They have lost their innocence. I think it is a declaration of the film's viewpoint; it shows the breakdown of communication in Nazareth. It also loosens things up for the spectator. After that, it's normal for the spectator to anticipate the brutality that might happen and the kind of humor my film has. And I was able to express my personal vendetta against Christmas.

Filmmaker: Your satire has been described in the American press as being very different from what we're used to here. Could you mark the distinction?

Suleiman: I'm not sure satire is a good word. When they say burlesque, maybe that applies a little more. When they say irony I go for it very much. Or gags. All of these are incorporated into the humor. I don't know if it's a matter of East or West, though. In today's world, I don't think you can segregate what is oriental and what is occidental. Those cultural codes have mingled in many ways, and some oriental codes are much more occidental than the Occident. But it's simplistic to talk this way. When you talk about globalization today, there's a certain degree of homogeneity involved.

It is interesting to ask the question of what is East and what is West. When you talk about [French auteur] Robert Bresson, he was quite an *oriental* cineaste. If you were to ask me what sort of cinema has inspired me, or the cinema that I self-reflect in the immediate sense, I would think of oriental cinema as well – but from the *far* Orient. I don't see any affiliation of my cinema to that of the Middle East.

interlocked.

for navigating Suleiman's filmmaker poring over a wall scenes within a film he would arrangement of events, he this sense, perhaps there is placement of moments, lowbrow comedy, Suleiman experience as a Palestinian.

and has also lived in Paris and *Chronicle of a* Suleiman's stone-faced, silent Israel from a self-imposed subtitled *A Chronicle of Love* of sequel. Since Suleiman elements of his life within the his real-life situation.

Filmmaker: Some reviews have compared your sight gags to Jacques Tati.

Suleiman: Some people use Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati as references. It's funny that you bring up Tati because he was not an influence on me at all. I do admit it was shocking to see *Mon Oncle* for the first time, which happened after I completed my first feature. There were many similarities between my work and his sense of humor. But it's not so unnatural that two people have similar sensibilities in the film world. It is, after all, a big world. There are many people making films. This is something that's bound to happen.

In another sense, it's flattering when people compare me with Tati. I have seen what I great filmmaker he is. But I'm not sure who came first, him or me.

Filmmaker: Do those references bother you?

Suleiman: It doesn't annoy me at all, because I respect their sensibilities. If I were to be compared to someone I don't feel comfortable with, *that* would be annoying.

Filmmaker: Your approach seems non-naturalistic. Do you make a conscious choice to push for the surreal or absurd?

Suleiman: When I make a film, I have no strategy. What initiates the work is a tickle, which is to say an inspiration. When I see an independent image in daily life, I see potentiality there. When I write it down in my notebook, I make a tableau. I allow myself to figure that raw material, which can be enhanced and choreographed.

Since I am not satisfied with this initial departure, I continue to add layers of volume and weight. When it gains enough layers, when I feel it is ripe enough to become an image or a scene, then I let it go. I release it into the poetics of the image without any preconceived confinement, and it takes its own departure. Later

on, the image belongs to the spectator, each according to his or her own association, desire or pleasure. In doing so, they associate and co-produce the image. That's what makes it interesting.

Filmmaker: Are you interested in how this process works?

Suleiman: The magical part of this cinema is my search to dig out a moment of truth as sincerely as possible. I'm fascinated by how this works, but I cannot answer why. I can only speak to what makes a gag funny to me, as a person who laughs at his own jokes. But because of the cultural baggage that I carry, it becomes less of a joke and more of a layered tableau. It's not anecdotal, it's not superficial – it is the cinema. What makes the construction of the gag possible for me is based on the temporality of making it *in that moment*.

The reverse is also worth contemplating. Let's say I make a gag (as I do in the film) where there is a repetition. This repetition is circular as time progresses, forming a haiku. The second or third time you see the same scene repeated, it's worth imagining the spectator's response if I had put the scene a little earlier or a little later. They might say, "We've just seen him! Why are we seeing him again?" Or maybe, "Oh, we've forgotten about this guy!" As far as I'm concerned, there is only one place where this kind of gag or burlesque can go in the repetition. When I believe it must be in that specific place, the spectator can also consider why it is in exactly that place.

The judging process for art is individualistic, since we don't all have the same temporality and rhythm. It is not a uniform process, so it's interesting seeing a thousand people in the screening room, all laughing. It is not intellectual, it is not strategic, and it is not intentional – it is just something you can sense.

Filmmaker: Do you feel foreign to questions about the strategy or intention of making your film?

Suleiman: "What was my intention making the film?" Intention? "What was my strategy making this film?" Strategy? "You think that making it humorous makes it so-and-so rather than so-and-so?" It is not a choice! It is the character that I am made of, with all the experience I have that leads to the ambience of the film. You can never come to any site-specific pinpointing where there are one or two factors that can determine a filmmaker or an artist.

Filmmaker: While you say that there is no strategy, you do make certain artistic choices before you make the film.

Suleiman: When you work, it's not strategy. If you feel like it works, then you find the harmony in what you are trying to create. This is why I chose to make a film involving the father and not the mother, or the father and not the neighbor. The process of the artist at work is an emotional feeling at many times. Why does the painter choose one color and not another? Sometimes I have just a sensation. If I have an answer, I don't posit it for you in the image.

In the writing of the film, you could say I employ some strategy. I write extremely precise notes in the script. The script is very, very precise. When I have finished the script and am allowed to shoot it, I have done all my homework. On the set, I leave my homework behind. I don't carry the script around. I give it to the assistant director and only refer to it when I'm at a moment of loss.

By letting go, it is a way of maintaining the creative process while on the set. It is not an application of the script I had written a year earlier. My creative energy is maintained, and it also maintains the present of the moment that the spectator sees in the film.

Filmmaker: You respond directly to what's in front of you while shooting.

Suleiman: I think that's great, because if the script were 100 percent represented in the film, then it would all feel archival. It would feel like the past, not the present. There is a reality to the present that you cannot control: the direction of the wind, the way the flag is blowing. These are not for you to decide. It's not only you – it's the elements, the actors, the birds and all of the things that enter the shot despite you.

Filmmaker: You are in some way involved in collecting these elements, though. What is your casting process like?

Suleiman: I am not at all interested in the psychology of acting or in Stanislavski's techniques. That means absolutely nothing to me. I think of the characters as being based on certain funny mannerisms, and I choose the actors as I would experimental dancers. I am interested in the imperfections they bring with them. That becomes their power and rawness.

When I chose the gunners for the ninja scene, I could have chosen acrobats. They are doing stunts. [The performers] sweated a hell of a lot when we filmed their dance. At one point, they grew



frustrated and said, "You made a mistake [in casting us]. You need acrobats to perform in this scene, and we cannot do it!" I told them they were chosen because I wanted that awkwardness. That lack of synchronization makes it fresher, a little bit inside out.

Filmmaker: What about casting the role of the father?

Suleiman: Sometimes I choose people who are close by, and sometimes the actual people. Using my own father in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* was an example of this. Between making *Chronicle* and *Divine Intervention*, my father passed away. Some of the story is about him getting sick and dying. When I cast the actor (Nayef Falhoum Daher) playing my father, I gave him completely different body mannerisms than my actual father had. The actor is a much more somber person, very stiff. If you see *Chronicle*, my father was more active and lively. It was a conscious choice to blur that level of reality.

Since I often use myself [as an actor] in my films, people wonder if these are biographies. They are not autobiographical at all. When I come in as a character, we know that is "me" when I am [seen in the film] working on the script. On the wall, you see the text [on yellow Post-Its]. One says: FATHER GETS SICK. Let's say the scene is about a script I'm writing. It is a blur between autobiography and reality. I wanted to put "reality" in quotes. This makes the fantasy sequences a potential reality and the reality scenes a question mark.

Filmmaker: Just because you're putting yourself in the movie doesn't make it a documentary.

Suleiman: It is an extension. I think that it's so close to being myself sometimes that it's so far. I think it's a *document* by way of an ambiance that I create, and I am there. It is an extension of myself, but I am someone without psychology. I am a reference. I am more on the side of the spectator. I am also watching.

Filmmaker: When you shoot in different cities, do you respond to them in a different way? Do Nazareth and Jerusalem become characters as well?

Suleiman: I consider the architecture and the state to be the protagonist, normally. You see that the ambiance of Nazareth is different from the ambiance at the checkpoint, even though these two locations are an hour away from each other. The fact that they are different is so important historically, politically and socially. People might not know this in terms of geography, if they don't know anything about the situation. They might think the Nazareth characters are Israelis and Palestinians. Which is of course a misreading. But some will understand that simply through the ambiance that the film gives off.

If this film triggers some curiosity about those places, those people can go read a book about the geography and politics. But the *space* is what happens. This is the *stage*. Of course, it comes to us – and it is not about me imposing my reality to the place. It's obvious that when you go to Nazareth, you feel that ghetto very strongly. It's much more intense than what I tried to project with the characters, the humors, the lightness of my film. But we are kidding ourselves there. You will see the tension and violence of the space in that checkpoint, and that is important. Even though I did not show brutality in front of the frame, many people feel the potential

violence in those spaces. You could call it the silence before the storm.



J. Hoberman: *God on Our Side: Divine Intervention; The Settlers; Close, Closed, Closure* (*Village Voice* January 15 - 21, 2003) *Divine Intervention*, the provocative second feature by the talented Palestinian filmmaker [Elia Suleiman](#), might equally have been called *Human Frustration*. This comedy of hanging out desperately wants to make something happen but despairs that anything ever will.

The movie opens with the ridiculous image of a wounded Santa Claus chased by a band of boys through the scrubby hills outside Suleiman's (and Jesus') hometown, Nazareth, the largest Arab-majority city within Israel's 1948 borders. So much for the Christmas spirit. Conceived in the warily optimistic aftermath of the Oslo accords, Suleiman's first feature was titled *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and concerned his own dislocated return to Israel after a dozen years in New York. *Divine Intervention*, an extension of the earlier film but far less ruefully serene, is subtitled *A Chronicle of Love and Pain*. The love is very specific (for the main character's father rather than his nonexistent fatherland); the pain, generalized.

Suleiman's Nazareth remains a place of pervasive entropy, a low-grade pressure cooker, albeit even more riven by petty hatreds and sullen feuds. The protagonist's father (Nayef Falhoum Daher) drives through his neighborhood, smiling at its denizens and venting his spleen from the safety of his car. The residents casually toss their garbage over each other's walls or savagely attack the soccer ball that some kid has inadvertently kicked into their property. The more docile wait for a bus that never runs. You might say that the ghetto attitudes of these uncivil neighbors make manifest the absence of a Palestinian civil society.

Like *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, *Divine Intervention* has no narrative. Events, sometimes reduced to gags, unfold as a distanced series of bada-boom sketches and vaudeville turns. (Suleiman's recurring riffs and situations recall the structural comedies made by James Benning in the 1970s.) The emptied-out mise-en-scène and precise compositions, usually framed by a static camera in middle-shot, create a theater of absurdity. There is frequent emphasis on off-screen action, and as befits his solemn slapstick, Suleiman makes deliberate use of sound. His adroit timing complements a musical notion of structure. Because the deadpan director appears as himself, his movies have elements of psychodrama, as well as silent comedy.

Suleiman, credited as the character E.S., is not present in the movie's first section. He arrives on the scene, immediately after

his father falls ill, and is seen driving from Jerusalem to Nazareth. Finishing an apricot, E.S. tosses the pit out the car window and continues on as it blows up an Israeli tank. (This scene, and others like it, had to be shot in France.) The gag might be taken as a form of nonviolent resistance, passive aggression, or ulcer medication. Things are less funny when E.S. is halted at the Al-Ram checkpoint between Jerusalem and Ramallah. Here crazed Israeli soldiers—uniformly played by veterans of the Israeli Defense Forces who have experience as border guards—brandish their automatic weapons and reroute the traffic. They cannot, however, stop the sexy young woman (Manal Khader), who is E.S.'s dream girl or perhaps his guardian angel, from boldly sashaying across. She checks their guns with a glance. Then their command post collapses behind her.

In contrast to such brutish military clods, E.S. appears as a sensitively ineffective intellectual. He never speaks but he's always watching. Continuing to meet at Al-Ram, sad-eyed E.S. and his grave, comely angel sit together in a car, holding hands, and silently observing the overwrought border guards capriciously fuck with Arab traffic, confiscating goods and bellowing "Am Yisrael Chai." The angel is virtually the only woman in the movie and she too is waiting for something to happen. The most E.S. does to amuse her is to inflate a pink balloon with the ludicrous image of a smiling Yasir Arafat and send it floating over the checkpoint into Jerusalem, where it perches on the Dome of the Rock. Then she leaves him.

A movie of long, expressive silences, *Divine Intervention* articulates things that have never been articulated, at least on the screen. Haunted by terror, Suleiman uses artifacts to speak for him. Stopped next to an Israeli Jew at a traffic light, E.S. dons his shades and plays an Arabized version of "I Put a Spell on You." (As the song is sung in English, you have to wonder who will get the joke.) The most extreme voodoo has the IDF practicing their marksmanship, as if rehearsing for *A Chorus Line*. The target is an image of the angel. Abruptly, she comes to life, rises whirling into the air, makes a halo of their bullets, and protected by a shield in the shape of a unified Palestine, turns unstoppable ninja—a David to their collective Goliath who turns their weapons back on them and ultimately blows up an Israeli chopper. *Divine Intervention* was made before the Al Aqsa brigade began recruiting teenage girls as suicide bombers, but the fantasy is there—even in the mind of a fellow as charming, civilized, and rational as Elia Suleiman.

Divine Intervention was warmly received last May at Cannes, where more than one critic remarked upon the irony that Suleiman's absurd comedy was the most "Jewish" movie in the competition. A sense of waiting for redemption notwithstanding, *Divine Intervention* strikes me as more generically Eastern European. It requires no stretch of the imagination to transpose its specifics to the prison house of nations that was czarist Russia. But while Suleiman's Nazareth has certain affinities to the corrosive shtetl satire of a Mendele Mokher Sforim and he has compared himself to Woody Allen's Zelig, his E.S. is closer to the "superfluous" men of 19th-century Russian literature—politically alienated by virtue of his intelligence, yet compelled by historical circumstance to take political life, including fanaticism and terror, into account.

Suleiman is a self-identified Palestinian but he appears neither nationalist nor Marxist. He may have been raised a Christian but he is hardly fundamentalist. He's a man of reason. What is more superfluous than Suleiman's daydreams of vengeance in a country where they are daily enacted? Except insofar as this elegant farce

reflects a deep human tragedy, the title *Divine Intervention* may not even be ironic.

from http://www.rickmcginnis.com/movies/divine_intervention.htm

There's a deep rage and an abiding sadness at the heart of Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention*, but at first it's hard to see anything beyond what seems, at first, like an absurd, almost plotless story set in a quiet but edgy Nazareth neighborhood.

Suleiman makes an audacious start to his film, almost entirely skirting the film's overwhelming context—the ongoing civil war between Israel and Palestine—in favor of a portrait of an aging suburb where the inhabitants—mostly men, mostly middle-aged—taunt each other almost constantly with petty bickering. As it's been pointed out by many reviewers, this part of the movie recalls the absurd, rambling films of Jacques Tati, but with a nagging, menacing undertone.

It feels like violence could erupt at any moment, as neighbors provoke each other by undoing road repairs and flinging garbage into each other's gardens. One old man, quietly losing his welding business, suddenly has a heart attack, and the scene shifts to Jerusalem, where his son played by the director, loves and visits him in the hospital.

The son, who's having an affair with a woman from Ramallah, can only meet his girlfriend in an empty lot overlooking an Israeli checkpoint, where they watch soldiers humiliate Palestinians passing through. While their lives hover in stasis, they both fantasize about resisting and rebelling, in a series of increasingly audacious, hilarious fantasy sequences. One phrase keeps recurring, as graffiti, a message on a post-it, and as a title for one of the film's sequences: "I'm crazy because I love you."

Suleiman lets these words float over everything in his almost silent film, making you wonder who's crazy—the Palestinians, the Israelis, or both—and just who loves whom. The ambiguity is inspired, and beautifully undercuts what might have been a poetic protest message. His film is a remarkable message from a frequently ignored segment of the Israeli and Palestinian people, whose wish for a return to normalcy and a life we take for granted here is, as far as they can see, being buried by both Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat.



From Wikipedia

Divine Intervention is a 2002 film by the Israeli Palestinian director Elia Suleiman, which may be described as a surreal black comedy. The film consists of a series of brief interconnected sketches, but

for the most part records a day in the life of a Palestinian living in Nazareth, whose girlfriend lives several checkpoints away in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

One lyrical section features a beautiful sunglasses-clad Palestinian woman (played by Manal Khader) whose passing not only distracts all eyes, but whose gaze causes Israeli military checkpoint towers to crumble. The director features prominently as the film's silent, expressionless protagonist in an iconic and powerfully moving performance [that] has been compared to the work of Buster Keaton, Jim Jarmusch and Jacques Tati.



from <http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=79485>

No Room for Palestinian Film at the Oscars by Leela Jacinto, Dec. 20, 2002

In a snugly fitting mini, with her stilettos clanking a beat to the soaring music score, a young Palestinian woman sashays slowly past a checkpoint while the security-obsessed Israeli soldiers, their walkie-talkies emitting robotic voices, watch stupefied at this magnificent transgression.

Festering rage morphs into burlesque fantasy in *Divine Intervention*, a Palestinian feature film directed by Elia Suleiman that has won international acclaim for its wry examination of life under Israeli occupation.

Subtitled *A Chronicle of Love and Pain*, the film takes a look at the daily nightmares of Palestinian life in the region, where neighbors dump garbage in each others' yards, lovers are reduced to holding hands in cars parked in the twilight buffer ones at checkpoints, and balloons soar gloriously free over a land troubled by watchtowers barbed wires and weaponry staring in every direction.

But there was no heavenly intercession for *Divine Intervention* this year at the gatepost of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), the selection committee behind the Oscars.

During a conversation with the film's producer Humbert Balsan in October, Academy Executive Director Bruce Davis informed Balsan that the film was ineligible for consideration in next year's Best Foreign Language Film category because *Divine Intervention* emerges from a country not formally recognized by the United Nations.

It was a degree of cinematic statelessness that sparked a furor in the international film world, a controversy that raise troubling arguments about the politics of art, identity, nationhood, and the dogged bureaucratise surrounding the most coveted cinema awards in the world.

In the Service of Politics

Shot in Israel and France by an international crew, *Divine Intervention* has been doing the rounds at international film festivals this year, picking up fans, promoters, distributors and an impressive array of awards including the prestigious jury prize at the 2002 Cannes film festival and the European Film Award/

So when word of its stymied Oscar aspirations spread mostly on the Internet many independent filmmakers and Palestinian rights activists launched a heated cyber protest, with action alerts calling on people to write protest letters to the Academy.

Enraged filmmakers from across the world denounced the move, saying that art had been "put in the service of politics" while producers noted that the Academy had, in the past, considered entries from territories the U.N. did not consider countries such as Wales, Puerto Rico, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Experts also noted that unlike Taiwan, which has no official recognition at the United Nations and is considered by Beijing to be a wayward province of the People's Republic of China, Palestine has had observer status at the United Nations, where it has had a Permanent Observer Mission since 1974. Palestine is currently recognized as a nation by more than 115 countries.

In a statement released earlier this month, Feda Abdelhadi Nasser from the Permanent Observer Mission of Palestine to the United Nations expressed dismay over the decision. "It is truly regrettable that the Palestinian people, in addition to being denied the most basic of human rights under Israel's occupation, are being denied the opportunity to participate in competitions judging artistic and cultural expression," he said.

All on the Phone

In its defense, the Academy has maintained that *Divine Intervention* was never formally submitted for consideration.

"The film was never actually submitted to us," said John Pavlik, an AMPAS spokesman. "It was never anything beyond a couple of telephone conversations in which, from what Bruce [Davis] told me, he indicated that the film will probably not be eligible because there are several problems that remain to be solved. But the Academy did not have to make a decision on whether to accept a film from Palestine because nothing was submitted."

But Keith Icove, vice president of Avatar Films, the movie's U.S. distributor, maintained that it was the response from the Academy that prompted the producers not to submit the film for consideration.

"Yes, the film was not formally submitted, but underneath that decision was the fact that it was not recommended," said Icove. "It wasn't like we were told 'well, submit it and we'll see what happens.' We were emphatically told that a film from Palestine would not be eligible."

Ruling on the Rules

Among the many tricky issues surrounding the entry is an Academy rule that countries submitting entries for the best foreign film category should submit an entry after a selection is made "by one organization, jury or committee which should include artists and/or crafts people from the field of motion pictures."

We try to make sure that committees are made up of filmmakers, artists, and craftspeople so we don't have a situation where ministers and bureaucrats are trying to make committee referrals," said Pavlik. "Of course, some countries are good about it,

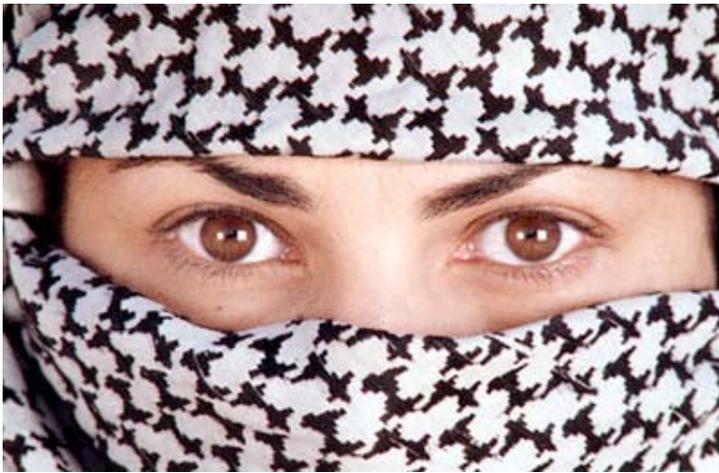
others aren't. But there has to be a committee that can decide and send a selection as the country's best picture of the year."

The rules also state that the film must first be released in the country of origin and publicly exhibited for at least seven consecutive days at a commercial theater.

Rights groups, however, charge that with the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli occupation since early this year and with curfews a daily facet of Palestinian life in the territories, cinemas in the area have been non-operational, if not destroyed.

But the Academy's special rules on the foreign film category makes no mention of any U.N. recognition of a country and by all accounts, the Academy has been accepting selections based on earlier precedents. "Taiwan and Hong Kong has been submitting entries since the '50s they have a precedent that has been established," said Pavlik.

Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations in 1971, when the People's Republic of China was recognized as the island's legitimate authority. Hong Kong was a British territory for 100 years before it returned to Chinese rule in 1997.



Matter of Identity

But while Taiwan and Hong Kong have an established cinematic tradition, Palestinians in the territories have not managed to develop a robust film industry.

The reasons, according to Hassein Ibish of the Washington-based American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, are not hard to arrive at.

"I think it's very difficult to produce a thriving national film industry under a military occupation where there is no independent state as a reference," he said.

Although a new generation of female Palestinian filmmakers have been making their mark largely because women in the territories find it easier to maneuver restrictions than their male counterparts. Suleiman's success with *Divine Intervention* is by all accounts a first for the Palestinian community.

Painful Issues

But when it comes to matters of categorization and identity of the filmmaker and his film, there are several complex issues at stake.

Although Suleiman spent his early years in Nazareth, a northern Israeli city with the largest Arab population, he came of age in New York City, where he lived for 12 years before returning to Nazareth to make his first film, *Chronicles of Disappearance*.

And though he is a citizen of Israel a minority called Arab-Israeli by most Israelis Suleiman considers himself a Palestinian.

But the 42-year-old filmmaker, who is also the lead actor in *Divine Intervention*, has never lived in the West Bank or Gaza, territories under the official control of the Palestinian Authority.

For Suleiman, the ruckus over his second feature film has been particularly troubling. Reached on his cell phone in Paris, where he is currently promoting the film, the director-star said he preferred not to dwell on the controversy.

"I'm outside the terrain of such a discussion," he said. "I myself have not lived in Palestine, but the title of Israeli doesn't fit me. I have nothing of Israeli culture. And aesthetically and culturally, I keep trying to cleanse myself from this political rhetoric. I really stand outside it. I'm resisting it," he said.

Alarm Bells

Although Suleiman rejects attempts to slot him, the Academy's verbal deterrent to having the film admitted has raised alarm bells that the organization might be operating under double standards in several film and activist circles.

When James Longley, producer-director of the recently released documentary, *Gaza Strip*, first heard about the fracas through e-mail, he immediately got in touch with the Academy, threatening to return his 1994 Student Academy Award for his earlier documentary *Portrait of Boy With Dog* unless he was satisfied with the explanation provided by the Academy.

While Longley said he was currently corresponding with the Academy, he maintained that, "if the Academy does not make a statement to the effect that in the future they would accept official entries from Palestine in the same way that they have accepted films from other entities that are not officially recognized as states, I will send back my award."

On his part, Pavlik insisted that it was "not in his place" to provide any reassurances about future Academy decisions.

The Battle Lines Are Drawn

But Longley warns of the political aftershocks of the incident.

"This spins out of the realm of films and into the realm of politics and in this case, very contentious politics," he said. "It brings out all the stereotypes about Hollywood and the whole discussion about to what extent the Academy is a politically motivated body. Because of America's enormous cultural and political influence around the world, it is important that the Academy be perceived as fair and honest, and not just a protector of particular political viewpoints."

"Sometimes Hollywood tries to be more royal than the king about the Mideast conflict," said Ziad Doueri, the Lebanese-born director of the acclaimed feature film *West Beirut* and former camera operator of Hollywood director Quentin Tarantino. "The United States talks about Palestine, [Israeli Prime Minister] Sharon talks about Palestine, but in Hollywood, the Middle East conflict is the last taboo..."



FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 2000

SPRING 2008 SCREENING SCHEDULE:

Jan 15 Mervyn LeRoy GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933 (1933)*
Jan 22 Jacques Tourner CAT PEOPLE (1942)*
Jan 29 Irving Rapper NOW, VOYAGER (1942)
Feb 5 Billy Wilder ACE IN THE HOLE (1951)
Feb 12 Billy Wilder WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1957)
Feb 19 François Truffaut 400 BLOWS (1959)
Feb 26 Masaki Kobayashi HARA KIRI (1962)
Mar 4 Robert Altman MCCABE & MRS. MILLER (1971)*
Mar 18 Hal Ashby BEING THERE (1982)*
Mar 25 Sydney Pollack TOOTSIE (1982)
Apr 1 Krzysztof Kieslowski The Double Life of Veronique (1991)
Apr 8 Jane Campion THE PIANO (1993)
Apr 15 Clint Eastwood UNFORGIVEN (1992)
Apr 22 Ingmar Bergman THE SEVENTH SEAL (1957)

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