Asia Pacific Screen Awards in 2009, Elia Suleiman won Jury Grand Prize for *The Time that Remains* (2009) and the film was also nominated for Best Film that same year.

Cannes Film Festival 2009 Nominated for a Palme d'Or to Elia Suleiman

**Directed and written by** Elia Suleiman  
**Produced by** Michael Gentile and Elia Suleiman  
**Cinematography by** Marc-André Batigne  
**Film Editing by** Véronique Lange

**Cast**

Ali Suliman…Eliza’s Boyfriend  
Saleh Bakri…Fuad  
Doraid Liddawi…Ramalla IDF officer  
Elia Suleiman…ES  
Menashe Noy…Taxi Driver  
Ehab Assal…Man With Cell Phone / Tank  
Tariq Kopty…Neighbor  
Ziyad Bakri…Jamal  
Maisy Abd Elhadi…Woman in West Bank taxi  
Avi Kleinberger…Government Official  
Baher Agbarya…Iraqi soldier  
Yaniv Biton…Haganah Soldier  
Nati Ravitz…IDF Commander  
Zuhair Abu Hanna…ES Child  
George Khleifi…Mayor  
Lutuf Nouasser…Abu Elias (as Lutuf Neusser)  
Yasmine Haj…Nadia  
Alon Leshem…IDF Officer  
Amer Hlehel…Anis  
Samar Tanus…Mother  
Lior Shemesh…Police Officer  
Alex Bakri…Man Who Shoots Himself  
Ayman Espanioli…ES (Teenager)  
Nina Jarjoura…Rose  
Leila Muammar…Thuraya  
Tareq Qobti…Neighbor  
Shafika Bajjali…Mother (80)  
Isabelle Ramadan…Aunt Olga  
Daniel Bronfman…Policeman at bridge  


Ali Jaafar: The Time That Remains (Sight & Sound, June 2014)

Tragic elements pervade The Time That Remains. The third part of Elia Suleiman’s trilogy, which began with Chronicle of a Disappearance (1996) and Divine Intervention (2002) and charts the story of Palestinian dispossession and displacement since 1948, is his most ambitious effort to date. Beginning in 1948 on the day his hometown of Nazareth officially surrendered to the Israeli army and continuing through to the most recent Intifada, the film artfully interweaves the personal and the political. Suleiman even used his own parents’ diaries for inspiration while writing the screenplay.

Suleiman is something of a contradiction. The 49-year-old is, along with Paradise Now director Hany Abu-Assad, the most prominent Palestinian director working today, yet he has only made three features. In person, he is famously loquacious and mischievous, while on screen he has studiously developed a near-silent persona, his deadpan gaze at events before him a subtle testament to the frequent absurdity of the Palestinians’ plight.

While raising independent financing for any project is never easy, particularly one dealing with as contentious a political subject as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Suleiman had to contend with an unusual amount of obstacles this time. In 2007, when production only weeks away, Suleiman saw the project’s original financing collapse at the last minute. He spent the next few months fruitlessly trying to raise the necessary money before salvation came in the form of London-based Saudi entrepreneur and film enthusiast Hani Farsi, as well as respected French film sales company Wild Bunch.

The Time That Remains is unquestionably Suleiman’s masterpiece. With a lean running time of 110 minutes, the film skillfully veers between absurdist sketches and scenes of emotional poignancy. In one moment, a Palestinian youth leaves his house, oblivious to the Israeli tank stationed directly at his door. As the youth talks on his mobile, aimlessly moving from side to side, the tank’s oversized gun barrel tries to keep up with his every moment. The mechanical wheezing of the tank becomes comically over-exaggerated as the youth continues his mundane conversation before returning inside. Elsewhere, scenes of Suleiman visiting Nazareth to look after his aging mother – their encounters played out without any dialogue – are almost unbearably moving.

Suleiman’s triumphant return (it is seven years since Divine Intervention was released) coincides with a renaissance in Palestinian film-making. In recent months, film-makers such as Annemarie Jacir, Najwa Najjar, Sameh Zoabi and Scandar Kopti have all emerged to make their first feature films. Tawfiq Abu-Wael – whose auspicious 2004 feature debut Thirst garnered plenty of critical kudos – is also reputedly hard at work on his sophomore project Tanathor.

Suleiman spoke to Sight & Sound about the experience of making his third, and best, film to date.

Ali Jafaar: ‘The Time That Remains’ is more outwardly expansive than your previous films, yet you manage to retain much of your earlier use of silence and stillness. How did you balance these elements?

Elia Suleiman: The challenge was to say a lot with a little, as in a haiku poem, where only a few words are used. The words are very understandable, such as ‘sun’ or ‘light’. You have the democratic space to read the simplicity that is being offered to you and to enter further into another layer of meaning – in the most successful cases, to infinity.

I try to avoid singular metaphors. I try to avoid references that have only linear narrative. I am inexpressive in my films for the same reason: if I start to express myself then I am simply putting my dramatic reactions in there, which is something I do not wish to do, because you need to give the spectator space to see what they want and to see with marginal narrative guidance. This is where, I think, the spectator is able to gain the pleasure of co-participating and realise the inner emotion that she herself feels. A lot of what we feel in this film is not necessarily expressed on the faces of the people who are engendering it: it is expressed in an interior fashion. I think there is an intimate complicity between the spectator and this inner emotion. You might giggle at a humorous moment, or it might produce the solitude of a tear. The response is something quite intimate and personal. I would like to keep it that way.

This is a very personal, autobiographical film. You used, for example, your father’s diary as source material. How did you manage to keep an objective distance from this subjective history?

That was the challenge, to tell you the truth. I thought about it a lot when I was writing the script. I did not want to fall into an epic genre even though this is in many ways an epic film. I wanted to maintain – and to see if I could succeed in maintaining – a very static, tense frame with a tableau-like theatricality while retaining the historical feel of the film.

I decided not to enter into what makes up a lot of the epic films: the sensationalism, the bombastic and predictable scenes. I wanted to remain completely unpredictable and yet tell something specific about the period. Each episode is, in some respects, a film within itself. Each episode is related to the following one, so repetition is a risk to be taken to, for example, remind the viewer that the person now falling apart as an old man is the same person who was stubbornly holding his stained gun as a youth. To create that kind of association through minimal information was another challenge.
How did you pick which episodes or which incidents to portray? For example, the film doesn’t show the events or aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. For me, it would have been very predictable to go into 1967 and the Six-Day War. I wanted to hit on tones that are usually on the margins, and there are those who will make the connections with better-known aspects of Palestinian history. To go to the centre of this narrative would have been an easy target, and I do not like easy routes. I want to challenge myself all the time in order to reach the moment of surprise. I didn’t have a strategy, but I knew for sure when I wrote the script that I would start the film with an image of surrender. That was precise.

What’s interesting is that when you play yourself in the movies it is a stylised version of you, whereas anybody who knows you would attest that you don’t stay silent too long.

You’re wrong. In fact I spend most of my life in silence. I am a silent observer. I can sit dreaming for seven or eight hours, static. The onscreen silence fits how I spend a lot of my time. What is stylised is the posture, because it is an image and you have to take care to achieve an unexpressive pose. Silence is a model of living, but it is not necessarily what you see of me when I am talking. I have these two extremes. I am not just an artist who is hypersensitive and timid, I am also somebody who is cares about politics, philosophy, concepts and the intellectual and conceptual strata. Not wanting to sound pompous – somebody once said that I was an intellectual who makes movies. I think there is a bit of truth in that.

Describe the experience of directing somebody playing your father, mother and even a younger version of you?

It was a new experience for me. A lot of things were new to me because I am not exactly somebody who has made a lot of feature films. I still don’t have a lot of experience in cinema and film-making. Somehow, fortunately, I matured making this film – and it’s still only my third. It was difficult to direct a child at the start. I chose him without auditions. He was a kid from Nazareth who looked like me. It was the same with the teenager. I simply hid my insecurity in directing this child. Saleh Bakri, who plays my father, is a professional actor. He has amazing intuition. He feels the things [he portrays]; I did sit with him and talk about my father. What he did, which was fairly fascinating, was to go into town and meet a lot of people who knew my father, and sit for hours listening to them, as well as listening to me and looking at photos and chronicles. I started to guide him on my father’s tics: for example, when Olga arrives, the looks and embarrassment at the breakfast table, and the humour my father had. He managed it perfectly.

How do you see this film in relation to the first two?

Do you view them as a complete trilogy?

I’ll say yes, but only rhetorically at the moment. I need a few months to conclude this question; I might have said this film ends something at some point, but it might have been promotional sloganism. I didn’t know that I was making this film until I looked at it. I didn’t know the totality of it. I don’t think that I can be a spectator of the film now. Perhaps in six months or a year I might sit with you and have critical things to say about it. I am not in that position yet.

The film had a very troubled production history.

I keep thinking I should jot down in my mind some of things that have been done to these films by people who seem to be their guardians, but in reality are something else.

A lot of film-makers go through exactly the same experience. There is a system that consciously functions to maintain its own power. It’s a disturbing phenomenon, since this system was created, I believe, for student film-makers, for people who want to make films. Without wanting to cast myself as the victim, since I have managed pretty well, I think people should know what a director has to go through.

This film was not only crushed before it was made, there was an attempt to kill it entirely. Even when they decide not to finance you, there’s a level of overkill – they try to ensure the film will not be made at all. This is quite dangerous. These people who are the natural inheritors of bourgeois society have a liberal façade but inside are quite racist. They are the people who rule the show. However, this is not what is important now because we have made the film. This topic must stand on the side and wait for a moment of tranquillity – the difficulty of making a film should be written about and read with a lot of space and tenderness, not aggression, despite its tragic element.

Do you think this is your most subversive film?

I don’t make subversive films. This is a term that stuck to me because I am Palestinian. When you are Palestinian it is easier for people to say you are subversive. I don’t think that there is anything subversive about a movie where a family takes a certain route that is both personal and intimate.

Nor is there anything cruel in it, apart from the cruelty of life in a certain locale. What I show in the film is history. It is fact. It is not subversive at all. The Arab Liberation Army, who were supposed to protect the Palestinians, ended up begging for food from the houses of villagers they were coming to protect. They were sent to fight without ammunition. They were a burden on the Palestinian villagers. If we’re still debating what Israel did to Palestine then something is wrong.

Sixty years after the fact, we’re still saying they did not destroy Palestine, they did not expel people, they did not execute, rape and massacre Palestinians. I cannot believe that we still have to debate such an issue. It is evident in every centimetre of Palestine. Similarly, what the Arab countries did at that moment, making deals with the colonial powers – including the ‘Zionist entity’, as some of them still call it today – is not up for debate. They make a lot of noise, but in the end all they have done is maintain the status quo.

Philip French in The Observer (29 May 2010)

Born in Nazareth in 1960 to Arab parents, Elia Suleiman studied cinema in New York and made his first short films there in the 1980s, before settling in Jerusalem in 1994 and creating a department of film and media studies under the aegis of the European Commission at Birzeit University, the first college of higher education in the Palestinian territories. He emerged on the
undermined. In the 1960s, his son, Elia, attends a school where the Arab choir sing patriot Israeli songs. The young Elia is taken aside and spoken to first for having told other kids that the Americans are colonists and later for having accused them of being imperialists. Meanwhile, his mother keeps up a correspondence with the exiled family in Jordan whom she'll never see, and Fuad performs a succession of quietly heroic acts, among them rescuing an injured Israeli soldier trapped on a bridge under a truckload of explosives. This doesn't prevent him from being arrested on suspicion of gun running.

Repetition is one of Suleiman's comic strategies and he uses it to great effect through a series of encounters Fuad has with military patrols that interrupt him and a friend as they fish at night in the sea (“Why aren't you fishing in Galilee?” their interrogators inquire). A succession of scenes involves a deranged neighbour who douses himself with kerosene and threatens to commit suicide. This recalls the bizarre comic incidents with the sad, mad uncle in *Amarcord*. Another Felliniesque anecdote centres on a Palestinian so aroused by watching Israeli girl soldiers hitchhiking at night that he has his wife act out this fantasy to dangerously comic effect.

Time goes by: the TV set relays events in public life, people get older, fashions alter. Yet nothing really changes except for the acceptance of the fact that things don't improve. Elia and his friends are excited by a screening of Kubrick's *Spartacus* shown in the school hall. They identify with Kirk Douglas's rebellious slaves against the Romans, but their own attempts at resistance are futile and Elia is warned that he must leave for a while or face arrest. And so things go on, comically, tragically, existentially. There's a remarkable sequence, shot from a distance in a single take, of police and young demonstrators fighting over an injured insurgent in a hospital corridor.

 Appropriately, the movie’s final statement is another long take of odd incidents at an A&E unit, a metaphor for a stoical world of pain and mutual suffering, concern and neglect, of hopes briefly raised and then dashed. *The Time That Remains* is humanist cinema at its finest and the absence of sentimentality, the gentleness of the cynicism and the curbing of rancour are remarkable.

*Natalie Handal: “The Other Face of Silence”*  
*Guernica, 1 May 2011*

Could an Israeli soldier, tank, or checkpoint appearing in one of Elia Suleiman’s films be no different than a pushy New Yorker, speeding cab, or the Carnegie Deli appearing in one of Woody Allen’s films? “The desire to express in an art form and to compose a tableau and vignette, whether it’s humorous, burlesque, or poetic comes simply from a desire to compose an image for cinema,” he says in the interview that follows. “It is not my fault that when I go to Ramallah there is a checkpoint and therefore it interrupts me and a friend as they fish at night in the sea (“Why aren't you fishing in Galilee?” their interrogators inquire). A succession of scenes involves a deranged neighbour who douses himself with kerosene and threatens to commit suicide. This recalls the bizarre comic incidents with the sad, mad uncle in *Amarcord*. Another Felliniesque anecdote centres on a Palestinian so aroused by watching Israeli girl soldiers hitchhiking at night that he has his wife act out this fantasy to dangerously comic effect.

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under Israeli occupation, it’s nearly impossible for the Nazareth-born filmmaker to avoid being accused of trying to score political points, and his work of being deemed inflammatory. To wit, shortly after The Time That Remains was released in Israel, a politician attempted to have Suleiman declared an enemy of the state and his passport revoked.

The Time That Remains is partly based on his father’s diaries as well as collected anecdotes, photos, and family memories. It is an idiosyncratic film, not uncommon for one of today’s most interesting filmmakers. In this tragicomic drama the character Suleiman plays has a somber face and is mute. But this muteness witnesses, and silence has a voice. You may not be aware you’re hearing, but you are. Continuing the semi-autobiographical explorations of his first feature, Chronicle of a Disappearance (1997), which won Best First Prize at the Venice Film Festival, and the critically acclaimed Divine Intervention (2002), which won the Jury Prize, the FIPRESCI International Critics Prize as well as Best Foreign Film Prize at the European Awards in Rome, The Time That Remains was in the official competition of the Cannes Film Festival.

What sets Suleiman’s latest film apart from his previous works is its more reflective quality. The Time That Remains weaves through a series of specifically framed melancholic and comic vignettes starting in 1948 and spanning sixty years of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this tapisserie, we watch the characters’ trials and tribulations during that period. The father, Faud, is a resistance fighter who—like Suleiman’s father—is beaten by Israeli soldiers in 1948. The film follows Faud’s resistance, fighting against the Haganah. Later in the film, a boy depicting Suleiman as a youth appears singing patriotic Zionist songs at school and being scolded for calling Americans “colonialists.” Then we see him as an adolescent and then as a middle-aged man when he returns to see his dying mother.

Suleiman’s accurately composed moments, farcical and tragic, leave the viewer aching. His way of giving details a breath and voice, making them actual narrators, is moving and a powerful transmittance of the occupation’s audacity. In one of the most affecting moments of the film, Suleiman’s character returns to present-day Nazareth and the West Bank to find a more perplexing landscape. His silent communion with his mother is a culminating point. He seems to be saying: the portrait of this quietness tells our story but warns not to misunderstand—this is a determined presence, not an absence.

Suleiman currently resides in Paris and is a faculty member at the European Graduate School (EGS). He lived in New York City between 1981 and 1993, and during that time directed his first two films, Introduction to the End of an Argument (1990), and the acclaimed Homage by Assassination (1992). In 1994, he moved to Jerusalem where the European Commission entrusted him with the mission of creating a Film and Media Department at Birzeit University. He is the recipient of numerous awards including the Rockefeller Award (1992), the Prince Claus Award (2008), the Black Pearl Award (2009), and Variety Magazine Middle East Filmmaker of the Year (2009).

The Palestinian filmmaker, soon heading to Havana to begin work on a short film, remains faithful to his platform: the steady shot and minimalism. How will this master of finding his way into and out of disturbance and stillness approach his next film? As he leaves the quiet corner of the Lucerne Hotel’s lounge, where the interview was conducted, I get the feeling it’s what he didn’t say that was most precisely articulated.

—Nathalie Handal for Guernica

Guernica: The opening scene of your new film, The Time That Remains, is a short film in itself. The driver is speaking to his dispatcher, asking for Eli Menashe, while the passenger in the back, played by you, sits without ever saying a word. The driver says, “I really don’t need a storm. What’s going on here? We have lost our way, where do we go now, where are you? Where am I?” Can you talk about this scene?

Elia Suleiman: I have a tendency to initiate all of my narratives with a scene that launches the narrative but in itself does not belong to the narrative. In my first film, the second shot starts with a woman who is supposedly my aunt. She enters and gives a tedious monologue that gives the impression that all of the people mentioned are going to be entangled in the narrative. But in the scene that follows we no longer see her. In Divine Intervention, kids are chasing a Santa Claus. I never strategize but this gives me an entrance into the film. So in The Time That Remains, we witness an Armageddon at the beginning of the film. Evidently, it is not a normal storm. It is a strike from heaven and the taxi driver is lost on many levels. I wanted to initiate a flashback. He asked, “Where am I?” and in the pretext of that question, recount [the events of] 1948. How we got here, is in fact, the real question. I also wanted to introduce myself as a narrator who just arrived from the airport, not a central voice, so I am in the shadow. I am in a shadow half existing in order to bring me back later on. It fits the structure to start the film with an anecdote. The Israeli’s taxi driver has the same name as me, Eli. And, Eli means God in Hebrew. He asks, “Eli, Eli, where am I? Do you hear me?”

Guernica: So in your work, every moment stands on its own, but still comes together. They could be isolated moments yet they all weave themselves together.

Elia Suleiman: Absolutely. You expressed it very well, and that is how I write the script. I work on layering that mounting and minting of that tableau-program—the background, movements, choreography. It is a kind of subliminal montage; it does have continuity. How do you make a scene fit with the scene next when it’s not related but just is rhythmically, is difficult to achieve. But sometimes I get stuck on the tenth scene and it does not rhyme with the scene before and rather than continue and come back to it later, I spend days not advancing. It’s crucial to choose your work place—some places lend themselves to you and others don’t.

They objected to the looting scene in script, because they said, “We are a moral army, we never steal.” I told Avi, “They stole a fuckin’ country and didn’t feel moral about it.”
Guernica: Another striking scene is when the Israeli soldiers are stealing from the Arab houses. It is based on stories you heard but is also symbolic of what comes next for Palestine and Palestinians. How did this scene come into being?

Elia Suleiman: It wasn’t initiated…perhaps in the back of my mind. Israel, the Israelis, and the rest of the world have been brainwashed. They don’t think of pre-1948, they have no idea of Palestine was in Israel, who we were before ’48. As if we were born in 1948 according to them. They have no notion that we had a country, houses, rebelled against the Ottomans and the British. They think history in that region started in that moment. The influence that brings this kind of scene in carries the burden of all these questions and preconceptions that a lot of people have or don’t know about the history of the region. About the looting in particular…I was shooting for a location in my neighborhood, and told a neighbor I wanted to shoot a scene from her balcony. She told me, “Come, I’ll show you something.” She showed me bullet holes in walls of her house. She explained that in 1948, she had just returned from her honeymoon in Beirut where she bought embroideries and other souvenirs. One day she walked into her house and found the Haganah wrapping all the embroideries and gold. They were looting her house. When her husband tried to prevent one of them (from the looting), they scared him by shooting. While telling me the story, she started to tear up. Sixty years later and it was as if it had just happened to her. I was so moved, disturbed, and angry, I told her I was going to take some revenge for her by creating this looting scene. I shot it outside of her house.

Guernica: And does your family still have their house?

Elia Suleiman: I shot Chronicle of a Disappearance, Divine Intervention, and this film at my parents’ house, sometimes intentionally placing the camera in the same position. In Chronicle and The Time That Remains, the camera is in the exact same position when my mother is in the kitchen eating ice cream. I wanted to create that chronology, but she passed away before she could appear in The Time That Remains. Her sister took her place. The camera bears the burden of time passing. It was part of the spirit of the film. And to speak about the looting a little more for those who think it was just a few embroideries and a bunch of photos, the whole country was looted and stolen, whether inside the house or the land. I wanted to just hint at that reality. I wanted an Israeli tank in the film and my line producer who is a good friend, Avi Kleinberger, asked the Israeli Army knowing they were not going to give it to him. Indeed they refused, but it wasn’t because of the tank or that scene. They didn’t care about the script, or 1948. They objected to the looting scene in script, because they said, “We are a moral army, we never steal.” [Laughs,] I told Avi, “They stole a fuckin’ country and didn’t feel moral about it.”

Guernica: A reoccurring symbol of seeing and not seeing, the real and the surreal, is projected in the film—like the scene in the field when the Arab men are blindfolded and kneeling, awaiting life or death. Is it your way of showing history and to inspire people to not just accept any version of the creation of the Israeli state?

Elia Suleiman: I wanted to hint at two things. This image that you saw in 1948 continued to be seen in 1967, during the Intifada, and today. The Haganah dressed as Arabs and infiltrated. They started doing this before 1948. This continued in 1967 until today. There is a very well trained brigade just for that. What I wanted to show with the blindfolding of Fuad’s character is that when he smelled the nature around him, he could see the landscape.

Guernica: There was a similar scene in Divine Intervention, when the soldier asked the blindfolded prisoner to give the passers-by directions.

Elia Suleiman: Exactly. In The Time That Remains, it is more emotional, less burlesque. The fact that these people who are imprisoning the Palestinians do not know the landscape and have no idea where they are while these Palestinians belong to land.

Guernica: Your work transcends the boundaries of Palestine, and in doing so invites you into another’s reality in order to connect with your own. So, it’s an informative agent both personal and collective. Can you speak further on that?

Elia Suleiman: The desire to express in an art form and to compose a tableau and vignette whether it’s humorous, burlesque, or poetic comes simply from a desire to compose an image for cinema. It is not my fault that when I go to Ramallah there is a checkpoint and therefore it enters my film. Tell me a way to avoid that politicized image. The fact is that the police are everywhere, the army everywhere and occupation is total. Whether it’s a love story or a thriller, you place the camera and these realities will cross the frame. What cinema can do is the reordering of this reality from a certain chaos or from a certain order into an aesthetic dimension. So I take the element and highlight them with a certain temporality, with sound and movement that becomes this tableau that you are seeing.

Guernica: Before I started recording, we spoke about whether Americans really know or don’t know what’s going on in Palestine and you said it’s not a conspiracy but it’s a patronizing attitude sometimes. Can you expand?

Elia Suleiman: To think that we are disconnected in some way serves the occupation whether it’s through indifference or a distancing. It is a colonial approach of making you a subject and them the spectators. That is disturbing and counterproductive. And then suddenly they are surprised or find it alienating that the microcosmic effects of Palestine are happening in the U.S., France, and England, whether it’s from the Islamic movements or immigration factors. Keeping a false purity of their countries will harm them eventually. I don’t understand when my film is screened at MoMA, and I’ve lived here for fifteen years, and the same question is asked, “How do you think we can solve the problem of Palestine?” The problem has to be solved with that spectator.

Palestine is about how we drink the water, whether we are being ecological or not. Palestine is our way of exercising our daily living. That’s what’s going to solve the problem of Palestine. It’s also how we think of ourselves spiritually. This kind of
This particular spectator who comes to spend twenty minutes or dedicates an hour and a half to gain a little extra knowledge from a Palestinian director is a false notion. People should come for pleasure of watching the film, not from the perspective of learning something new from history. In my case, it is the wrong place to be. I do not teach history in my films. I don’t have a linear point of view or argument. What I do in my films is to live the human experience; human, whether in Nazareth or anywhere else in the world. There are no solutions in my films. What is interesting and ironic is that, on one level, their [industrialized] ways are arrogant as they try to find ways to solve the problem of this ‘other.’ And at the same time, these countries have delved into globalizing the world and now the negative effects are coming back to them. Look at Egypt, these people are shit-scared. Either they start opening up culturally and spiritually or they find another way to connect instead of thinking of themselves as the benefactors of the oil and spoils of the country. This is disturbing, but again, it is having its counter-effect on them. When I watch President Obama talking, I find him sometimes regressive and infantile in the way he expresses his support for Egypt. On one level, it is about American interests and on the other, he is maybe reminding us about the books he wrote.

Guernica: Israeli cinema has made recent attempts to address their occupation of a fort in Lebanon. Films such as Waltz With Bashir. You seem to think that this trend echoes Hollywood’s post–Vietnam War movies reflecting one point of view, that of the psyche of the white soldier, not of the masses being killed.

Elia Suleiman: I did not see Lebanon and don’t want to see [it]. To think of a film from the point of view of a tank barrel is already so inhumanly positioned. This is when film can reveal itself scandalously. I don’t like the films of Amos Gitai. Everyone thinks we are the closest friends on earth. But I have to finally come out and say it. I am not an admirer of his work. I think four or five of his earlier films—documentaries—were very well done. I am speaking cinematically, not about his politics, which is not the point. The films you are speaking of have to be analyzed a bit. Some don’t mention the word Palestine. There is this genre of liberal Zionist films that’s representing Palestinian suffering and spilling some liberal sympathy too. Then there are better filmmakers who don’t go there. There may be a couple in the middle doing interesting cinema while tackling some politics. But this genre you mentioned, that started a few years ago, such as Waltz, seem to be inspired by the Oliver Stone syndrome. They are a kind of political consciousness of the occupation, of this ‘other’ that they don’t actually comprehend and do not make any attempt to culturally approach. They are comfortable with ‘other’ as a mass. There is a confessional aspect in these films of the army’s implications. I am not agitated by them because I am not interested in them cinematically, whether it’s by an Israeli, American, or any nationality.

Guernica: How about the Arab perspective? You mentioned some Arab countries boycotting your work. There are debates surrounding Palestinians in Israel being boycotted by Arabs. What do you think about that?

Elia Suleiman: There are different kinds of boycotts. The boycotting of the Palestinians from Israel by Arabs is obsolete. It existed years ago when the Egyptian critics—government-paid, scandalizing media types—wanted to be more Palestinian than Palestinians. Some accuse us of normalization with Israel and that comes from a shallow study of the situation. When I made my first film, I was attacked viciously but in a provincial and local setting—calling me a Zionist collaborator. It is easy to live in this brainwashed ambience. The boycott that concerns me is the boycott against Israeli intellectuals, academics, and cultural figures. That boycott has to be continuously reevaluated. I am for it, with caution. I was against it during the Lebanon War, and I suspended my boycott. But some of the boycotters boycotted individual Israelis, some of whom are political activists, filmmakers. They are a little overdosed with their sentimentalism for the cause. There are very respectable filmmakers whom I like very much who were boycotted by the cultural Arab scene, like Simon Bitton and Avi Mograbi. It is not about them coming to do charity for the Palestinians. These are very moral politicized cultural figures. There is a need for a critical approach to any boycott, case by case. My position is that nobody should be sacrificed. It is a complicated issue. I am for it and I see it has an effect. But I will not—and it depends on the moment—I did not say no to showing my film in Israel. Now should I have boycotted Israel with my film? It is sensitive. I come from Nazareth. I come from one hour away from this reality they are living, and they are where I’m living. So is it better they see or not see the film, a film where I’m living. I come from Nazareth. I come from one hour away from this reality they are living, and they are where I’m living. So is it better they see or not see the film, a film that speaks about who we are and the nature of conflict, 1948? I chose to show it. I prefer they come to the theater and we have a discussion. But in my contract, the film is in my hands so that I have a distributor who’s not concerned with where the film is shown [the film is distributed globally, and by IFC in the United States].

Guernica: The film travels different decades to show the changes the characters have gone through during the conflict. But unlike Divine Intervention, which was fiercer, more dynamic, The Time That Remains is quieter, more reflective. Talk about that aesthetic choice. And I am curious about your notion of hope?

Elia Suleiman: I am curious about it too. I am stretching myself a little too far from the true daily feeling that I have. First about the film, if I was who I am today, at this age, and living the time of Divine Intervention, that moment when it was the second Intifada and violence was around me, would I have made the same
Elia Suleiman:

I met him by accident and he asked me what I wanted to do. We talk about it now. I was still in my twenties then and I was a young and he was a glamorous star in his fifties. I can see why people were so close to me. The moment happened. Did it happen at all? My memory becomes the process of elimination. But it is where you have to do the interrogation. It is a mixture of how I naturally fell into a point of view [with my] camera, very personally, and at the same time this personal point of view identifies with these filmmakers. So a combination of things gave me the faith that I was in the right place.

The same thing I say about silence I could say about poetry. People in power tend to find poetry dangerous to them because it is dislocating, they can’t catch it, can’t control it. They prefer coherence, what’s blunt and has clarity.

Guernica: What other filmmakers and films have been important to you as an artist?

Elia Suleiman: The Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu and the Chinese filmmaker Hou Hsiao Hsien. They made it possible for me to make movies. When I saw their films, I thought, “These people are so close to me.” When positioning a camera for the first time, you ask yourself, “Should I place it here and not up there?” It is a process of elimination. But it is in that place I feel at home, behind the camera. It is a way of expressing something personal and for something personal this is where you have to do the interrogation. It is a mixture of how I naturally fell into a point of view [with my] camera, very personally, and at the same time this personal point of view identifies with these filmmakers. So a combination of things gave me the faith that I was in the right place.

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Guernica: How about poets? Your films are like poems.

Elia Suleiman: My mentor is the English writer John Berger. I can say he gave me the faith. He made me think I can do it. We talk about it now. I was young and he was a glamorous star in his fifties but he saw something in me. We identified with each other. I met him by accident and he asked me what I wanted to do. I said cinema because I felt I needed to say something. I didn’t know cinema. It turned out to be true. I surprised him ten years later. He was a guardian angel. Now we are extremely close friends. The credit belongs to him.

Guernica: How about poets? Your films are like poems.

Elia Suleiman: Primo Levi had great influence on me. Still does. I am always in admiration of him particularly when I feel down. I admire a man who can reignite hope with so little, with a tin in a concentration camp. I would probably go the Walter Benjamin way.

Guernica: Your choice of music is very interesting, from Natacha Atlas to old Arabic songs. The songs are like characters. How do you choose the music in your films?

Elia Suleiman: Music and sound, like the image, for me are at the forefront. And yes, the music I employ in the film is not background. The songs themselves are narrators, so they are
Elia Suleiman: What you are calling silence is not necessarily just my expressionless expression, it is also the sounds that I create to create the silence. It is really the ambience of silence that I create. Aside from that, silence can be intimidating, sometimes provocative, sometimes a form of resistance because it dislocates. It also leaves an empty face to be filled and the spectators with the possibility of participating in imagining the space. But I stress it is not strategic. It is my cinematic tendency. I never asked myself if I should do it in another way. There are a lot of questions that come out of the silence. It is so close to the infinite. There is an unease somewhere but also a spiritual serenity that you can exercise when you have that form of silence. But also intimidating to those who should be intimidated such as certain power structures. They don’t adhere to silence. They want as much noise as possible so they can capitalize on it, so they can contain and control. The same thing I say about silence I could say about poetry. People in power tend to find poetry dangerous to them because it is dislocating, they can’t catch it, can’t control it. They prefer coherence, what’s blunt and has clarity.

Guernica: In response to a question of what Israelis’ think of The Time That Remains, you said at a recent screening that “Even with a situation like Egypt, we have to ask what the Israelis think.” What do you think of the situation in Egypt, and will it have any effect on the Palestinian situation?

Elia Suleiman: With these regimes being toppled, you start to think, “The world can be better.” We’ve had so many disappointments.

Guernica: Does the title of the film question what’s The Time That Remains for Palestinians, for Israelis? Is time running out? Is an end near?

Elia Suleiman: The title is a warning sign. There is little time remaining—what can we do to save what seems not savable. But what’s happening in Tunis and Egypt may have elasticized that time remaining. It’s no longer a shrinking sight. These revolutions may have invented, in a day, and maybe further expanded the dimension of the time that we live in. Living more intensely, more lovingly, with more camaraderie, that is in itself resistance.

Guernica: Finally, to come back to the opening scene, which might very well be the last scene, where is Elia Suleiman?

Elia Suleiman: I am more at peace than I’ve ever known myself to be. My connectedness to the world is more intense. I am more attentive to the humanity around me.

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 bureaucratese 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-operative, 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 film-makers 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 rucksus 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 raise 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.”

**COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 31**

Nov 24 Terry Gilliam, *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*, 2009

Dec 1 Béla Tarr, *The Turin Horse*, 2011

Dec 8 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, *A Matter of Life and Death/Stairway to Heaven*, 1946

**CONTACTS:** ...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu ...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu ...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com ...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com ...for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

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