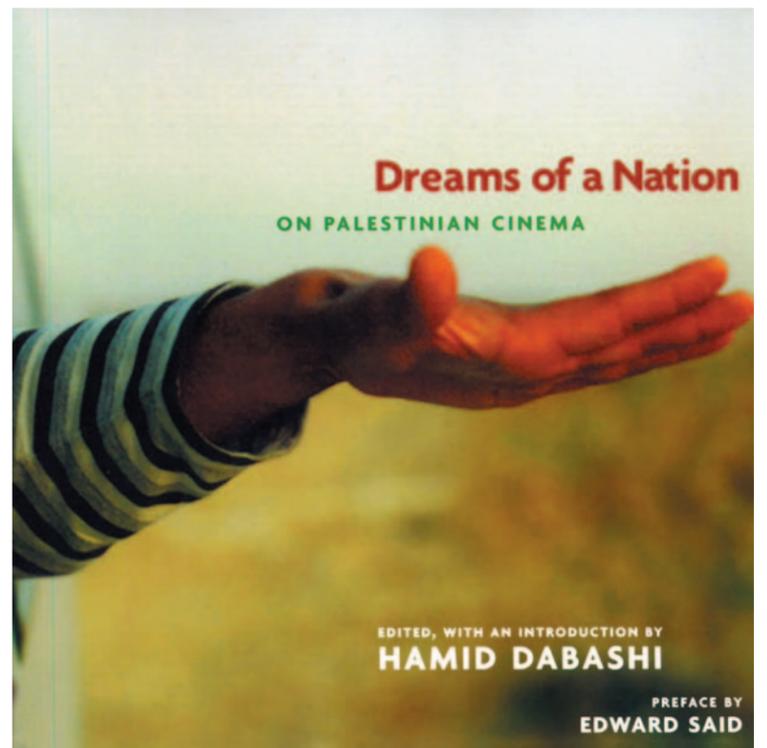


What dreams may come: (Palestinian) cinema/nation/history

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Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema

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“Palestinian cinema must be understood in this context. That is to say, on the one hand, Palestinians stand against invisibility, which is the fate they have resisted since the beginning; and on the other hand, they stand against the stereotype in the media: the masked Arab, the kufiyya, the stone-throwing Palestinian – a visual identity associated with terrorism and violence.”

Edward W. Said, Preface, Dreams of a Nation

No cultural project from, by or about Palestine escapes questions of its nationhood and self-determination. The formulation of a Palestinian cinema is no exception. Whilst the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Language Film, and Oscar nomination, for *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2005), may have brought Palestinian cinema to the notice of mainstream international audiences, the lack of a comprehensive film history from Palestine lies not in the lack of production,¹ but in the fact of its contested geo-political identity.

The controversy surrounding the 2006 Oscar nomination of *Paradise Now* dramatises the tensions in operation as a cultural identity seeks a political one. In a number of online petitions calling for the film’s withdrawal from Oscar nomination, detractors argue that the film glorifies Palestinian suicide bombing against Israeli citizens.² Amongst these detractors, several have lost children during the bomb attacks.³ Where the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), which administers the Academy Awards, is concerned, though, something altogether more mundane is at work – how can we admit a film from a place which does not, as such, exist? Or at the very least, one whose existence is being contested?⁴ In addition, how do we account for the fact that the film was produced by European funds and made by an Israeli-Arab director?⁵ To complicate matters further, *Paradise Now* is catalogued in the Internet Movie Database as being from Palestine/France/Germany/the Netherlands/Israel.⁶ Whilst it is possible to argue against the spuriousness of confining something as multifarious and layered as cultural identity under a sticky label, the Palestinian question, by virtue of its history, frames the argument within the context of its self-identification as a culture-in-exile.

The anthology of essays edited by Hamid

Dabashi, *Dreams of a Nation: On a Palestinian Cinema*, is situated firmly within this context. It is part of a wider socio-political-cultural project called Dreams of a Nation (<http://www.dreamsofanation.org>), which aims to highlight and promote Palestinian cinema through film festivals, critical writings, and an online database of Palestinian films and film-makers. The project is set up, in other words, as a cultural resource, and the organisers hope, eventually, to provide a ‘physical archive’ as well. However, in the case of Palestinian cinema, culture and politics are conjoined twins. The website for Dreams of a Nation specifically states that its mission is to provide a space for Palestinian films, which it defines as those made *by* Palestinian film-makers, and not films made *about* Palestine by non-Palestinian film-makers.⁷ Thus, the political aims of the Dreams project are evident – to provide a space from which Palestinian voices may be heard, faces seen, stories told, and memories made. Invisibility, as Edward Said argues in his preface to the collection, is one of the obstacles facing Palestinian self-determination. Cinema, as a visual medium, has the potential to counteract that invisibility, by making visible that which has hitherto been unseen. Yet, visibility is also a double-headed hydra. There is such a thing as the *wrong kind* of visibility, as Said himself notes, especially the visibility of stereotypes that spread through the media like a virus with no antigen.

Dreams, the anthology, is held in the tension between the two – between providing visibility for Palestinian cinema, and providing visibility for the Palestinian cause *through* cinema, which cannot help *but* address all the attendant issues surrounding that cause, including the negative visibility of stone-throwing anarchists and suicide bombers. It is a tension that is given expression by the inclusion of the text of the keynote speech given by the late Edward Said at the opening of the first Dreams of a Nation film festival at Columbia University, New York, in 2003. Dabashi credits Said with the inspiration for the festival and the Dreams project it is based on (211). That the first film festival to celebrate Palestinian film takes place outside of Palestine is of historical significance, especially when its success enabled the festival to be later taken ‘to Palestine itself’ (209). What is equally significant, then, is that whilst a great deal of critical attention is paid to the history of the Palestinian struggle in the history of Palestinian cinema, what is not explored in any depth in the collection is the question of to *whom* these films might be *addressed*, and what

form this address takes. Nonetheless, in the goals for which it sets itself, *Dreams* succeeds in making an important contribution to an understudied cinema in English-language scholarship. Its mix of critical articles, interviews, personal observations, and film analyses, surveys the issues of Palestinian self-determination from a variety of perspectives.

Film-maker, poet and activist, Annemarie Jacir, provides an account of curating a Palestinian film festival in New York, the aims of which she admits to being designed to introduce Palestinian cinema to the US, and ‘more specifically to film audiences in New York City’ (29). The festival was an occasion to provide American spectators with the opportunity to see and hear Palestinian stories that they have ostensibly never encountered. The implications of such a project is then subsumed under her account of the civil disturbances that took place on the university campus as the Israeli lobby gathered to protest the launch of the festival. Joseph Massad of Columbia University addresses the role of cinema in the struggle for Palestinian liberation, and provides a useful account of how the content and narratives of a range of films produced since the 1970s gave voice to the struggle. He writes: ‘What Palestinian filmmakers have succeeded in doing in the last thirty years is to tell many important Palestinian stories that the world had never heard before’ (44). Michel Khleifi provides an account of his career as a film-maker beginning in the 1980s in the context of ‘anger and revolt’ (45) and moving towards the effort to reconcile politics with ‘the imaginary’ (57), an effort which demonstrates succinctly the difficulty of producing an imaginary, and identifiably ‘Palestinian’ cinema, without also addressing its political milieu. That difficulty is undergirded by Bashir Abu-Manneh’s analysis of two of Khleifi’s films, under the frame that ‘[f]or the last twenty-five years, Michel Khleifi and Palestinian film have been nearly synonymous’ (58). Abu-Manneh, who also works in Columbia University, concludes that ‘[i]n times of capitulation and surrender ... Khleifi’s *oeuvre* ... stands as an important reminder that a better future in Palestine-Israel is not only desirable but *possible* as well. And that is his single most important contribution to his people’s struggle for justice and liberation’ (69). Ella Shohat, Professor of Cultural Studies at New York University, takes the political argument to the feminist cause, eschewing the more traditional anti-patriarchal and/or anti-colonial stance for the exploration of how gender and sexual identities play out in the search for a national one. According to Shohat, nation, race, and gender ‘intersect’

(71) and cannot be taken separately. Hamid Naficy from Rice University discusses the exilic and accented form of Palestinian cinema,⁸ and his contribution may be distinguished from the other essays in the collection in that it attempts to address the *form* employed by Palestinian films and the *modes of address* in which political resistance may be located, modes of address which are conditioned by, and further condition, their state of exile. Nizar Hassan, a documentary filmmaker, offers a farcical account of the bureaucratic entanglements he encountered while trying to enter his film to an international conference, in which the film ended up being submitted as an Afghan entry because the organisers did not recognise the state of Palestine. At the final instance, Hassan was allowed to submit his film as a Palestinian entry but not before wryly observing that Afghanistan had then 'disappeared' from the organisers' website and documentation as a result. The challenges of Palestinian film-making are addressed in closer detail by Omar al-Qattan, a British-Palestinian film-maker, who offers a survey of the perils of working in the midst of political conflict, the problems with funding and the ever-present obstacles of bureaucratic fatuity.

The anthology closes with an extended analysis by Hamid Dabashi, the editor of the anthology and Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, of the films of Elia Suleiman. Whilst continuing to address the political struggles of Palestinians, Dabashi's essay nonetheless engages the use of frivolity in Suleiman's films, and discusses how the film-maker walks the delicate line between tragedy and comedy, between terror and absurdity. The function of frivolity, Dabashi argues, is as a 'substitutional narrative, a manner of storytelling when all else has failed', and that frivolity is in fact a 'noble version of obscenity' (126). Suleiman's films are non-realist, ironic investigations into the condition of Palestinian subjectivity, from which he attempts to 'find a way out of the *cul-de-sac* of representing the unrepresentable' (148). Dabashi equates the freedom of Suleiman's style in the

present as a precursor to the freedom of Palestine, 'tomorrow' (160).

The collection's best contribution to English-language scholarship on Palestinian cinema may be to provide bases from which further work in the field may develop, work which I hope will offer more interrogative perspectives on, for example, the apparent necessity for a Palestinian cinema to be closely identified with Palestinian self-determination, and whether the understanding of a Palestinian national subjectivity need only be about its struggle for freedom. Are there other ways in which that subjectivity might be constituted or addressed? To express the question in another way: to what degree do nations create cinema, and cinema create nations? Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen argue, in their introduction to *Theorising National Cinema* (2006), that 'cinema can be thought of as pertaining to a national configuration because films, far from offering cinematic accounts of "the nation" as seen by the coalition that sustains the forces of capital within any given nation, are clusters of historically specific cultural forms the semantic modulations of which are orchestrated and contended over by each of the forces at play in a given geographical territory'.⁹ If that is the case – that the concept of 'nation' is constructed from an interplay of forces, whether of history, politics, or capital – then the quest for a Palestinian nation, albeit one that is projected into the future, through the exploration of its cinematic history would do well to consider also the quest itself as constituent of a discourse out of which that history is, in turn, also made.

Notes

- 1 An Arabic-language book, *Palestine in Cinema* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006), by Kais al-Zubaidi, purportedly accounts for at least 800 films about Palestine since cinema was invented at the turn of the twentieth century. See the book's abstract at the website for the Institute of Palestine Studies, available online at <http://palestine-studies.org/final/en/books/item.php?id=594>.
- 2 Talya Halkin, 'Petition Slams "Paradise Now" Oscar Nomination', *Jerusalem Post*, 13 February 2006, available online at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagina>

me=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1139395398449. As of 18 September 2007, a quick search in Google for 'Paradise Now Oscar nomination' will bring up the petitions within the top five search results.

- 3 Chris McGreal, 'Bomb victims' parents petition academy to reject movie', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2006, available at <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,17212,00.html>.
- 4 Xan Brooks, 'We have no film industry because we have no country', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2006, available online at <http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepage/s/0,,1752076,00.html>.
- 5 Talya Halkin, 'Petition Slams "Paradise Now" Oscar Nomination', *Jerusalem Post*, 13 February 2006, available online at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagina> me=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1139395398449.
- 6 See entry on *Paradise Now* (2005), available online at <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0445620/>> last accessed 18 September 2007. For a list of funding companies, the *Paradise Now* entry at Hollywood.com, available online at http://www.hollywood.com/movie/Paradise_Now/1738825.
- 7 This is not the space for a thorough theoretical discussion of what constitutes a 'Palestinian' identity, though Hamid Naficy's essay in the anthology cites an example sufficiently illustrative of the dilemma it raises, especially when it comes to the question of Israel. Naficy notes the self-imposed limits that film-maker Michel Khleifi felt he had to place on himself when making his film: 'Khleifi ... [turned] his *Wedding in Galilee* into a Belgian, French, and Palestinian co-production. As a person born in Israel, he could have applied for Israeli funding, as well. However, apparently he refrained from doing so because he feared contamination or co-optation. His fears were strong enough to refuse to show the film at the Jerusalem Cinematheque' (93).
- 8 Naficy's book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton University Press, 2001) explores these concepts in some detail.
- 9 Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, 'Introduction', in *Theorising National Cinema*, eds. Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, London, British Film Institute, 2006, 1-14: 7.