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Articulation, national unity and the aesthetics of living against occupation in Elia Suleiman's *Palestine Trilogy*

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This article interrogates questions of political subjectivity and representation in the context of late modern colonialism, by reading Elia Suleiman's Palestine trilogy against a wider history of Palestinian political articulation. It suggests that Suleiman's films detach the Palestinians' struggle from the national paradigm, and create a political aesthetics that does not reduce the Palestinians to passive victims, nor depends upon their ability to reconstruct national unity and a coherent struggle for liberation. The political importance of this post-nationalism cannot, however, be understood unless it is tied to the specific historical and discursive conjuncture in which the Palestinians exist today. Undoing discourses of Palestinian nationalism, I argue, has become particularly important since the break up of the Oslo accords, not despite, but because of the exigencies of the colonial occupation and the imperative of finding efficient ways of resisting it.

Keywords: political subjectivity; articulation; Palestine; second intifada; late modernity; colonialism; nationalism; post-nationalism; Elia Suleiman; political aesthetics; representation

The Palestinian filmmaker, Elia Suleiman, sits silent as the taxi leaves the airport in Tel Aviv. It is dark and stormy and the Jewish driver, Menashe, can barely see the road behind the heavy rain. Soon, he has lost the way completely. Desperate and confused, he stops the car at the dark roadside, picks up the radiophone and cries: "Elie, do you hear me? What am I going to do now? [...] Where am I? Where am I?"

The next scene radiates colour and light. We are in Nazareth in the year 1948, when Israel was established.

Thus begins *The Time That Remains* (2009), the last film in Elia Suleiman's Palestine trilogy. The film articulates a history of Palestinian dispossession in response to the current political impasse and the despair of the Israeli taxi driver, who can no longer make sense of where he is, and how he got there. In so doing, it brings forth a tension between historical narrative and the creation of new political subjectivities, in ways that both disrupt and contextualise the political aesthetics of his previous two films, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) and *The Divine Intervention* (2002).

The present article interrogates questions of political subjectivity and representation in the context of late modern colonialism by reading the Palestine trilogy against a wider history of Palestinian political articulation. It suggests that Suleiman's films detach the Palestinians' struggle from the national paradigm, and create a political aesthetics that does not reduce the Palestinians to passive victims, nor depends upon their

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ability to reconstruct national unity and a coherent struggle for liberation. The political importance of this cinematic post-nationalism cannot, however, be understood unless it is tied to the specific historical, social and discursive conjuncture in which the Palestinians exist today. Undoing discourses of Palestinian nationalism, I argue, has become particularly important during the past decade, not despite, but because of the exigencies of the colonial occupation and the imperative of creating new efficient ways of resisting it.

Nationalism and the discursive subject

Since the break up of the Oslo accords in 2000 and the beginning of the second intifada, Israel has consolidated a tightening grip over the West Bank and Gaza and unleashed unprecedented levels of violence against the Palestinian population. Conversely, Palestinian resistance has been defined by the fragmentation of national struggle and the absence of a hegemonic strategy for liberation. Despite persistent calls for national unity, leadership and coherent strategy, nothing like a concerted popular struggle in the style of the militant 1970s (*al thawra*) or steadfast 1980s (first intifada) has emerged. In fact, by the mid-2000s, at the putative end of the second intifada, it might well have been the internal conflict and violence between Fatah and Hamas rather than resistance against Israeli occupation that was the most visible aspect of Palestinian politics.

Accordingly, the past decade is often seen as a crisis of national struggle, as a moment of error, which calls for a return to the old paradigms of organised popular resistance and collective unity. Such nostalgia for the past is understandable given the aura of political empowerment that still surrounds the earlier uprisings (Collins 2004; Sayigh 2007). But, it is also highly problematic, insofar as political crises are always indicative of a wider process of social transformation (Hall 1988). Instead of asking how the Palestinian national movement can be reconstituted, it might thus be more important to explore what the perceived crisis is telling about the changing conditions of possibility of Palestinian political subjectivity, and what implications those changes have for the ways in which politics and resistance in Palestine can be understood and articulated in the present. In other words, instead of seeing the second intifada and the fragmentation of the national struggle associated with it as a crisis of political subjectivity *per se*, one might conceive it in broader and more positive terms, as a crisis of representation, which demands for entirely new ways of imagining and representing the political in Palestine.

These concerns form the background of the present study, which focuses, in particular, on the relationships between discourse and the articulation of Palestinian political subjectivity. Discourse, we have learned, is not just a semiotic structure through which objects derive meaning. Rather, it is only in and through discourse that objects as such can emerge and exist, and therefore, the act of articulation is performative rather than reflective of subjectivity (Butler 2008; Foucault 2005; Laclau & Mouffe 2001). Drawing on this tradition of antifoundationalist political thought, I show that the persistence of national unity among the Palestinians depends, in part, on the existence of a discursive framework that supports the constitution and articulation of collective political subjectivity. When that framework ceases to exist or fails to exercise the necessary authority, politics and resistance take on expressions that are unrepresentable and invisible within the discourses of structured popular struggles and nationalism that are privileged in the modern tradition of political theory and practice. Subsequently, I turn to the work of

Elia Suleiman, in order to examine the possibility of an alternative political aesthetics that is attentive to the character of Palestinian resistance in the present context of late modernity.

Transnational political discourses are understood here as discursive frameworks through which a variety of specific needs and desires are, or are not, constituted as political demands and visions that are communicable on a wider regional and transnational level (Khalili 2007, pp. 11–13). They offer a universalising language appropriable by particular subjects, but in so doing they also shape the subject that speaks through them. For the Palestinians, the transnational aspect of subject formation has always been of particular importance, and it is hard to imagine a major progressive political discourse of the twentieth century that would not have intersected with and lent force to narratives of liberation in Palestine.

The political movements of the 1970s and the 1980s represent the high points within these narratives. The 1970s, or the years of *al thawra* (revolution) saw the emergence of a well-organised Palestinian guerrilla movement among the diaspora in Lebanon, led by the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Yasser Arafat. The next wave of Palestinian nationalism, the first intifada (1987–1993), emerged a decade later in the occupied Palestinian territories. Both struggles were successful at creating the Palestinians a voice of their own, but their relatively late emergence – two and three decades after the establishment of Israel – casts their timing and success all but self-evident.

Although there are many reasons for the delay, the exceptional vibrancy, unity and force that became hallmarks of the Palestinians' struggle during these uprisings cannot be understood without reference to the global hegemonisation of secular anticolonial liberationist discourses over the same years. These discourses combined an experience of Western imperialism and colonialism with a strong modernist belief in the inevitability of progress and emancipation, and in most cases, mixed leftist and socialist revolutionary thought with ideas of nationalism and national and cultural liberation (Khalili 2007; Malley 1996; Young 2001). Anticolonial thought had flourished in the Third World already for a long time, but it was only in the 1960s that it became hegemonic as a potent discourse of progressive and liberationist politics the world over. The development was backed by a growing sense of disillusionment with Marxist and socialist orthodoxy in the West. By the 1970s, many of those revolutionary aspirations and hopes that the European and Western Left had entertained within their own societies were transported to anticolonial liberation struggles in the Third World. Susan Buck-Morss (2003) recalls that the marriage of Western and Third World activists in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in a surprisingly coherent, global discursive terrain that made particular, local demands communicable all over the world. In this new historical context, anticolonial discourses of liberation came to signify progress and emancipation not only in the Third World and in societies suffering from colonialism, but also in the eyes of Western left-wing intellectuals and activists.

The emergence of this hegemonic formation was crucial for the rise of Palestinian nationalism. The point is argued in detail by Khalili (2007) who demonstrates that the discursive environment of anticolonial liberation and thirdworldism provided Palestinians ample reference points, inspiration and consistent discourses for the articulation of political subjectivity as well as material and institutional networks of support that empowered the mobilisation and organisation of the Palestinian populace in Lebanon for armed resistance. Also the narrative mode was important. Khalili shows that in the past, especially in the Lebanese refugee camps of the early and mid-1970s, discourses of Palestinian nationalism evolved around heroic representations of courageous fighters,

guerrillas and liberationists. These representations were highly efficient at mobilising popular hopes and action for the purposes of the national struggle. Since the 1970s, however, this framework has been challenged, and in many parts replaced, by a tragic narrative mode, which in the Palestinian case focuses on human suffering. The shift took place somewhere between mid-1980s and early 1990s, and it was linked closely to changes in the sphere of transnational political discourses. Just like the availability and circulation of anticolonial and thirdworldist discourses enabled the articulation of Palestinian nationalism through heroic narratives, the gradual turn to tragic narrative mode has been “profoundly entangled” with the rise of humanitarian and human rights discourses into global prominence, and with the increasing sense of hopelessness that is defining Palestinian experiences on the ground (Khalili 2007, p. 34).

Late modern subjects of colonial occupation

The point Khalili makes is compelling, and I will return to it later. However, what she leaves less examined is the wider historical and political context in which the demise of heroic narratives and the hegemonisation of human rights discourses has taken place. Clearly, this transition has been defined largely by the intensification of global liberal governance, which promotes the humanitarisation of politics and the securitisation of humanitarianism (Dillon & Reid 2000; Duffield 2007), and by the demise of both secular anticolonial and leftist revolutionary ideas over the same period. As for instance Laclau and Mouffe put it, in Europe of the early 1980s, “Eurocommunism was still seen as a viable project, going beyond both Leninism and social democracy” (2001, p. vii). However, along with the end of the Cold War, with the disintegration of the Soviet system and “drastic transformations of the social structure” in what they see as highly advanced capitalist societies, Marxist and communist ideas about power and emancipation began to lose credibility and critical edge, as intellectual reflection of the Left centred around themes such as “the new social movements, multiculturalism, the globalisation and deterritorialisation of the economy and the ensemble of issues linked to the question of postmodernity” (Ibid.).

This context, which is often conceptualised in terms of the crisis of the Left or the political problematic of late modernity, has urged criticism on the continued relevance of modern categories and ideals of political thought and encouraged desires to create new ways to understand and conceptualise politics and resistance that are more relevant to the character of our time. In the words of Hall, “[t]he issue, now, is not *whether* but *how* to rethink” (1988, p. 271, emphasis added). In practice, however, such efforts to rethink the political are often premised on an implicit geography which differentiates between the ways in which politics and subjectivity are understood and imagined in the West and in the presumably “less complex” and “less late modern” societies of the third world.

Laclau and Mouffe provide a case in point. In their seminal work, *Hegemony and Socialist strategy*, they argue that the fall of secular revolutionary and liberationist discourses occurred simultaneously with the rise of a *differential political logic*, which they associate primarily with late modern Western societies (2001, pp. 127–134). To make the point, Laclau and Mouffe compare politics in the highly industrialised West with the Third World where, according to them, brutal and centralised forms of colonial and imperialist domination support the division of the social into two antagonistic camps and encourage the formation of a “popular subject position” that is predisposed to collective identification and unity. In contrast, in the late modern societies of the

West, power operates through multiple points of antagonism which give rise to a “democratic subject position” and to various crosscutting social movements. This, they argue, is why the articulation of democratic demands through large-scale political movements has in the West become increasingly unlikely and why the need to rethink the nature of political struggles is so timely (Ibid., p. 131).

This kind of differentiation might be helpful for understanding the social structures and political nature of late modernity, but from the perspective of the so-called Third World, including Palestine, its value appears limited: one might ask, for instance, if the kind of a neatly divided social structure that is attributed to the colonised and/or exploited Third World societies ever really existed, and whether or not it is a recurrent feature of any colonial situation, irrespective of time and place.

Not surprisingly, analyses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict tend to share similar assumptions. This is evident in the persistent tendency to maintain anticolonial nationalism (secular or Islamic) as the ultimate frame of reference against which Palestinian politics is measured and analysed, and to regard national unity as either an overt or a tacit horizon of expectations. The hegemony of the national paradigm is understandable, given the persistence of Israeli colonialism and oppression and the sense of emergency this places upon scholars working on Palestine, but it raises several problems that are both methodological and political (Stein & Swedenburg 2005, pp. 5–7). One central point to be made here is that political articulation in Palestine cannot exist in a vacuum, detached from the transnational discursive environment. If articulation is formative rather than reflective of political subjectivity, as also Laclau and Mouffe argue, then major discursive changes and shifts are bound to have a profound impact upon the conditions of possibility of collective struggle in Palestine, too, *despite* their being persistently subjected to a colonial relation of power.

Viewed from this perspective, the absence of a coherent strategy and national unity among the Palestinians derives, at least in part, from the parallel fragmentation of the discursive environment in which such a struggle could once take place. Even though the Palestinians are still suffering a brutal and military colonial occupation and therefore preoccupied by a distinctively anticolonial agenda, the articulation of a strong liberationist movement in the style of the 1970s and the 1980s is problematical because the discourses that once underpinned the emergence of a collective Palestinian subject have lost their credibility and capacity to order everyday life transnationally and in the occupied Palestinian territories. In other words, the condition of a colonial occupation alone cannot bring collective unity and enforce a “popular subject position” among the Palestinians. For the collective subject of national liberation to persist, they need a discourse that could reinvest hope and meaning in such a struggle, make it appear credible and worthwhile and make it communicable to other struggles sharing the same paradigm of power and resistance.

Humanitarianism, Islamism and the problem of hegemony

What, then, about those discourses that have replaced the liberationist framework of the 1970s and 1980s? Khalili (2007) observes that the last three decades have been defined by the rise of liberal humanitarianism to global prominence. In this context, discourses of human rights and their closest organisational associate, the NGO sector, have offered many Palestinians new channels and modes of socio-political engagement. These discourses do not, however, provide the Palestinians with a framework of political activism comparable with the liberationist and revolutionary discourses of the previous era, as

also Khalili is careful to point out. Firstly, instead of political and collective rights, humanitarian discourses refer to “human rights” possessed by an individual. Secondly, instead of supporting a unified nationalist movement aimed at the establishment of a *representative* state, these discourses encourage the empowerment of the civil society, and most often in favour of social and political hybridity. And thirdly, instead of locating agency within those constituencies suffering “wrong”, humanitarian discourses are directed towards the agency of foreign, especially Western audiences, who possess the capacity to influence and pressure their own governments or transnational organisations into action. At the same time, the political nature and man-made origins of this “wrong” is often blurred and likened to natural disasters that are unfortunate yet inevitable, and which therefore require humanitarian alleviation rather than political intervention on part of these governments and organisations.

Thus, while discourses of human rights and humanitarian ethos might provide a powerful idiom for the advocacy of the Palestinians’ cause on an international level, they are not particularly efficient at supporting the constitution and mobilisation of a transnational *political* struggle, nor a popular struggle among the Palestinians themselves. Nassar Ibrahim, a veteran left-wing activist living in Beit Sahour, makes the point succinctly: “The danger of making NGOs the sole representation of Palestinian leftist forces is that it gives the false impression that Palestinians are concerned with nothing but their own immediate concerns, as if we care only about this or that humanitarian project.” The problem, he argues, does not have to do with the dominance of the humanitarian and liberal discourses only, but with the failure of Palestinian leftists and secular forces critical of the Oslo framework to articulate an alternative: “With well-meaning but depressing reductivity,” he laments, “we are paraded in front of international audiences to describe our difficulties in getting to the conference, and even applauded for overcoming these obstacles. With even more depressing regularity, Palestinian representatives find they have little else to talk about” (Ibrahim 2003, p. 76).

Compared with the passivity, individualism, victimisation and depoliticisation offered by the liberal humanitarian discourse, discourses of Islamism and Islamic liberation provide a more solid base for the articulation of a collective political subjectivity. This is the case also in Palestine, where resistance is articulated increasingly through Islamic discourses and where a high number of Hamas’s supporters are actually former leftists and secularists. During the 1990s and the early years of the second Intifada, the popularity of Islamic parties grew steadily, benefiting from an oppositional position vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority and the Oslo Accords, and peaking at Hamas’s surprise victory in the Palestinian general elections in 2006. In the contemporary world in which conflicts are articulated increasingly through discourses of religion, Islamism provides Palestinians with rarities such as a coherent narrative structure, a wide community of support and, above all, a share of hope at times when hope itself is in scarce supply.

This notwithstanding, Islamism has not, and probably cannot, reach the same levels of hegemony within Palestine or transnationally as did earlier discourses of liberation in the 1970s and 1980s. Firstly, while leftist discourses of liberation enabled, at least on the level of praxis, a separation of religion from politics and were thus able to accommodate also those Palestinians who had a strong religious identity, discourses of Islamic liberation are not equally open to all Palestinians as many of them are not Muslims. Secondly, violent clashes between Fatah and Hamas demonstrate that Palestinians of all faiths are anything but united behind a hegemonic idea of Islamic liberation or a particular party speaking in its name. In fact, the Hamas election victory in 2006 was interpreted above all in terms of Palestinian rejection of Fatah and its corrupt rule and

ideals, rather than a full-hearted embracement of an Islamist worldview. While this might tell more about the large number of Palestinian political drop-outs who do not associate themselves with any specific party or political stand, than about the *realpolitik* between Hamas and Fatah, the point is clear: Hamas or other Islamic parties in Palestine have not been able to hegemonise Palestinian political spaces.

Thirdly, although Islamism could be counted as an offspring rather than the antithesis of Marxist and secular discourses of liberation, there is an important difference where their respective geographies are concerned. Secular and leftist discourses of national liberation were particularly empowering because by speaking the idioms of Marxist, Leninist, Maoist and Fanonist liberation, and by translating them into a desire for an independent Palestinian state, Palestinians participated in, and became vanguards of a “global” space of solidarity and struggle. I put “global” in quotation marks, because this space was certainly prejudiced in favour of a Western tradition of political thought. Nevertheless, it was a shared political space or “a common discursive terrain in which critics of exploitation and domination could agree (often vehemently, even violently) to disagree” (Buck-Morss 2003, p. 7). Now, however, the hegemony of the West is violently contested, and such discursive unity is no longer available, despite liberalism’s attempts to rebuild its foundations on narratives of a common humanity. The fragmentation of transnational discursive space should be welcomed insofar as it is the product of successful decolonisation and democratisation in political thought, but it has also intensified the problematic of incommensurability on the level of world politics.

Thus, despite a shared suspicion of the United States, Islamism does not communicate very well with contemporary political movements on the left. For Islamists, cooperation with the Left is problematic because, as British Islamic activist Siddiqui (2009) argues, despite sharing a critical stance towards neoliberalism and especially the United States, “the anti-US trend is strongest among those who are also the most anti-religious and – in particular – anti-Islam.” Islamist discourses inhabit a political space whose geography is considerably different from that established by previous liberationist discourses, and despite occasional flirting with the Stop the War coalition, antiglobalisation and anticapitalist movements, the paradigms of power and resistance that these movements occupy are very different. In this sense, Palestinians who articulate their politics through discourses of Islam no longer look to the West for political inspiration and support: the rise of Islamism is indicative of a politics performed primarily in and towards the East.

In conclusion, the absence of national unity in Palestine does not emanate solely from the internal dynamics of the Palestinian society nor Israeli attempts to truncate resistance. The fragmentation of the national struggle needs to be understood also against a discursive environment, which is no longer able to support the articulation of such struggles as it used to in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, in their inability to constitute a “united popular struggle”, “coherent strategy” and “clear goals”, Palestinians are certainly not alone. In addition to exhibiting a radicalisation and Islamisation of Palestinian resistance, Palestinian politics after Oslo are indicative of political and social disintegration and of the loss of a hegemonic space of political articulation. In this sense, at least, the so-called crisis of the Left that is associated with late modernity is not at all far from the political problematic of the second intifada.

Therefore, what might be most important about the present situation is the variety of subject positions that lay beyond the polarising representations of victimity and Islamic militancy, as well as beyond modern discourses that emphasise collective unity.

Dominant media representations notwithstanding, the lack of a hegemonic political discourse in Palestine does not imply a neat division of political space between liberal and “moderate” (Fatah, International NGOs), and the Islamic and “radical” (Hamas), but a division of space between these two and *something else*. That is, struggles that cannot be articulated, political subjects that have no discourse and therefore cannot be represented or understood as a political force. What is lacking representation is a multitude of hybridised, late modern subjects of colonial occupation whose lives are profoundly entangled in politics and resistance without articulating a hegemonic struggle.¹

Suleiman and the disappearance of the collective subject

How, then, to imagine this space of politics beyond articulation? I am ending the article by exploring the question through the work of Elia Suleiman. The loss, indeed, the impossibility of hegemonic political articulation in the current socio-historical context is a central topic in Suleiman’s *Palestine trilogy*, as is the search for a different aesthetics of Palestinian politics - aesthetics that seeks to detach the claims for land and life from demands for coherence, clarity and unity of their struggle.

The Palestine trilogy, which consists of *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) *Divine Intervention* (2002) and *The Time That Remains* (2009) has developed in parallel with the political situation in Palestine. *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, filmed during the Oslo peace negotiations and composed of fragmented, disjointed and mostly absurd scenes, depicts Suleiman’s (semi)fictive visit from exile to Palestine to make a film about “the peace”.² The first part, set in Suleiman’s hometown of Nazareth, revolves around congested horizons, repetitious quarrels and expressionless Palestinian individuals observed by the equally expressionless figure of Suleiman himself. Here, one can rarely see open landscapes or views from Suleiman’s window, either due to the camera angle or because the view is blocked by something. Outside on the street, one is confronted either with inexplicable fights or passive, silent individuals. Suleiman’s own parents lead a frail, limited life confined to their apartment where his father spends days by smoking the water pipe (*shisha*) and playing in solitude a computerised version of backgammon (*tawla*), a popular Middle Eastern board game which is played in street cafés and which should normally symbolise the sociality of (male) communal life in Arabic culture.

In the second part, set in Jerusalem, Suleiman’s character is accompanied by A’dan, a Palestinian woman looking for a place to live as a single woman. On a general level, the film appears to be lacking in direct references to the national struggle. Although there are a few points at which familiar representations of the Palestinian struggle are displayed, they are exposed as somewhat expired. This is the case, for instance, in the scene in which Suleiman sits under a Palestinian flag in an empty restaurant in Jericho, disturbed by the blinking fluorescent bulb to the point of having to leave the scene. Here, the irritating quality of visual and sonic noise emanating from the bulb stands in a direct relation to the diminished grandiosity and authority of the Palestinian flag and the singing voice of Umm Kalthoum in the background. Palestine it may be, but it does not quite work. Similarly, in another scene, we are invited to feel arousal and excitement at the sight of a hand grenade and a gun that lie on the table in A’dan’s dark Jerusalem room, in a set which is coloured after the Palestinian flag and which emulates the designs and the atmosphere of the militant 1970s. However, a few scenes later, these items, and with them the representation of the militant Palestinian, are exposed as

merely symbolic facades: the gun and the grenade that lie on her table are just cigarette lighters. Through a careful interplay of signs of danger and banality, Suleiman encourages the audience to read more resistance and militancy into the Palestinian subject than might actually be on offer.

Divine Intervention, filmed after the breakout of the second intifada, follows a seemingly similar aesthetic insofar as this film is also composed of fragments and separate, absurd scenes. But, here scenes cumulate more readily into a recognisable storyline: a story about Elia Suleiman, his ill father, and Suleiman's own unfortunate love affair with a Palestinian woman from the West Bank. Also this film starts off in Nazareth, whose communal life is revealed to be rotten. Later on, the film moves to Jerusalem and to the al Ram checkpoint at the outskirts of East Jerusalem, which is the only place where Suleiman can meet his West Bank girlfriend. During the film, the oppressive and ubiquitous nature of Israeli occupation becomes clearer as our gaze is focused, together with Suleiman's own silent gaze, on the madness of West Bank checkpoints and Israeli soldiers.

At the same time, the film also portrays several, very popular scenes in which Palestinians resist Israelis, such as the one in which Suleiman destroys, albeit unintentionally, an Israeli tank by throwing an apricot stone at it; or when his girlfriend defies the checkpoint by walking past the soldiers as if on a catwalk. Towards the end, this mixture of everyday pressure and everyday resistance explodes in a scene in which Suleiman's by then ex-girlfriend reappears as a victorious and divine Palestinian ninja fighter who emerges from behind the stereotyped, *keffiyah*-wearing cardboard-Arab which is used as a training target by an Israeli shooting club, and miraculously defeats the Israeli military.

Now, how are these films positioned in relation to the Palestinian national struggle? A highly conventional interpretation is offered by Gertz and Khelifi (2008), who discern in recent Palestinian cinema a tendency to bring forth the heterogeneity of Palestinian society while striving, at the same time, to construct and reaffirm national unity. This, they argue, is done through a sustained interest in Palestinian everyday hardship that highlights the collectivity of Palestinian suffering and thereby "unites the people, merging them into a single community with one story and one hope" (Ibid., p. 144). Gertz and Khleifi do admit to several ambivalences within Suleiman's cinema, but they place also his work squarely within this trend. Despite a manifest oscillation between the modern and the postmodern, "unity", they argue, "has not disappeared in Suleiman's first films, and neither has the homeland or the Palestinian story" (Ibid., p. 186). Although *Chronicle of a Disappearance* highlights Palestinian loss, "the loss of voice, the loss of identity, the loss of home and the loss of the director", in the end these losses are revealed "to have been the result of Israeli action" and therefore locatable within "a wider narrative of national unity" (Ibid., p. 176). In *Divine Intervention*, the reconstruction of national unity.

This interpretation, however, might be more telling of the hegemony of nationalist interpretations in all things concerning Palestine, than of the actual character of Suleiman's work. For what I would argue is that instead of striving for national unity, Suleiman's films go to great lengths to emphasise precisely the opposite point, that is, that the struggle has to exist and develop despite the *absence* of national unity and the *impossibility* of collective political articulation, because the conditions of possibility that once supported the articulation of political subjectivity in those terms are no longer there. One obvious problem here – the problem that I have already explored via Laclau and Mouffe – is that the simultaneity of suffering in the hands of the occupier is not

enough, in itself, to constitute a central striving for national unity in real life or contemporary Palestinian cinema, or to transform underlying socio-political heterogeneity into a “single community with one story and one hope” (Ibid., p. 144). The commonality of a lived experience alone, even if it is recognised as *a common*, does not translate directly and on its own into an experience of national unity and mobilisation of a collective struggle. What is also needed is the construction or existence of a discursive and affective framework that is powerful enough to support the articulation of such a struggle and to provide it with the necessary hope and meaning.

At the same time as these films comment on the unrepresentability of Palestinian experiences and the impossibility of collective articulation, they contemplate also the relationship between the Palestinians’ struggle and transnational politics. This is increasingly clear in *Divine Intervention*. Compared with the earlier film in which references to Palestinian nationalism were scarce, the second film is full of Palestinian symbols. However, on most occasions, these symbols are exposed as just that, in a manner that is similar to the idiom of the earlier film: as mere representations, signs that might have steered every day experience at some point of the Palestinians struggle, but that do so no more. This is the case for instance at the point where Suleiman uses a red balloon sporting Arafat’s face to escape the checkpoint. In this popular scene, Suleiman sends the balloon across the heads of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers patrolling the al Ram checkpoint and uses the confusion caused by the balloon to smuggle his girlfriend from the West Bank to East Jerusalem. The balloon, too, flies far beyond the checkpoint, reaching the most symbolic sights of the occupied Jerusalem, including the al Aqsa mosque. This scene refers not simply to the legacy of Palestinian nationalism but more precisely to the legacy of leftist, secular political tradition that used to support it. Arafat is a staunchly secular figure and given the Marxist–Leninist underpinnings of the militant 1970s with which his person is most gloriously identified with, the red balloon that conquers Jerusalem carries not just a message of nationalism, but more specifically, those hopes and disappointments that the promise of secular anticolonial liberation once offered for the Palestinians.

Also the very title of the film comments upon the wider discursive climate that characterises our era, and the shrinking space of hopes in which the Palestinian’s struggle is constituted. If the conditions of political articulation are defined currently by discourses of human rights and humanitarianism on the one hand, and discourses of Islamism and religious fundamentalism on the other, *Divine Intervention* reaches towards both of them simultaneously. Humanitarian intervention has been one of the key notions that defined the expansion of the liberal human rights ethos to the level of world politics and into a dominant discourse of global security and warfare during the 1990s. Subsequently, one of the most frequent demands by Palestinians and pro-Palestinian activists during the 1990s and 2000s has been the appeal for international intervention on humanitarian grounds so as to hold Israel accountable for its crimes. This notwithstanding, no such interventions have taken place to date, even though they have been employed in other locations, such as Kosovo, Rwanda or Iraq and Kuwait during the first Gulf War and more recently, Libya. In this sense, liberal humanitarianism has not filled the space of hope and promise that was left in Palestine after the demise of revolutionary and secular anticolonial movements.

In this context, the fact that the Palestinians increasingly place their hopes in the divine register and on the idea that salvation will come from above might not appear surprising. Indeed, this is what happens in the film, as ultimate salvation descends from heaven, in the form of a Palestinian ninja fighter who defeats the IDF with every

possible narrative of Palestinian liberation as her armour: She fights as a crucified Jesus with an aura of deferred golden bullets around her head (Christianity); with a golden star and crescent that pierce the enemy's chest (Islam); with a golden map of Palestine which acts as a shield against the enemy's bullets (secular nationalism); with a golden hand grenade which blows the enemy away (the Palestinian guerrilla fighter); and with a slingshot that she wields perfectly (the children of the First Intifada). The invincible Palestinian ninja might thus appear as a celebration of Palestinian resistance and endurance in the face of the occupation. But beyond the immediate sensation of excitement and pride lies a message that is far less optimistic, perhaps even tragic, for does this scene not comment on the impossibility of the task expected from the Palestinians, sooner than on the actuality of Palestinian resistance? The Palestinian ninja does not highlight the human, but the supernatural – indeed divine – nature of the powers that are required of Palestinian resistance if it is to defeat the enemy. It is almost as if Suleiman is admitting that there is no way the Palestinians can defeat Israel by themselves. And what makes this admission tragic is that from his secular perspective, the prospects of either humanitarian or divine intervention for the sake of Palestine seem just as unlikely.

Beyond unity: the aesthetics of living against occupation

What, then, about Suleiman's politics? Are political pessimism and a sense of loss and evolving tragedy the only messages in his films? Not really. Equally important are banal scenes of everyday life in which Palestinians manoeuvre and defy the impact of the occupation through assertive tricks and gestures, which affirm their right to life, land and joy. Such aesthetics of living against occupation is pronounced already in *Divine Intervention*, but the trilogy's last part, *The Time That Remains* (2009), which was filmed around the putative end of the second intifada, offers the most nuanced account. In this film, also the stakes of the problem – how to sustain a struggle against military colonial occupation in the age of late modernity, which is characterised by the dissolution of collective subjectivities and teleological narratives of liberation – become increasingly clear.

Unlike the previous films, the third film clearly wants to tell *a* story, a history – but only so long as this history is tellable. It offers a narrative of the *nakba* (the events of the 1948) and of Palestinian dispossession and loss through the tale of Suleiman's own family and especially his father Fuad, who stayed in Nazareth in 1948 to resist Israel and to stick to his home. The first part depicts the family's gradual adaptation and assimilation to Israel until the early 1980s, when Elia has to leave the country in the aftermath of his own political awakening. The story follows a relatively clear chronological order and direct references to the struggle for Palestinian liberation are frequent, but actual resistance against Israel, if it takes place at all, is situated high up and mostly outside Palestine. By the end of the first part, Fuad has become an aging, tired and politically resigned man. The locus of collective resistance is moving closer down, however, to the streets of Nazareth where the Palestinian youth, including young Elia, riot against the Israeli police.

The second part starts off nearly three decades later, leaving behind the first intifada, the Oslo interim accords, and the second intifada. It depicts Elia Suleiman, now grey-haired himself, return to Nazareth to say farewell to his aged mother, and his silent ventures to the West Bank town of Ramallah. The time lapse corresponds with a subtle change in style. The narrative and political confidence of the first part is gone: Nazareth

in the late 2000s is portrayed in a manner that is just as absurd and nonsensical as it was in the two earlier films. This is manifest in the home of Suleiman's mother, where the traditional Palestinian family structure has been replaced by a postmodern constellation of displaced, deterritorialized individuals: the elderly, ill lady, her gentle Filipino housekeeper, and a helpful neighbour, a Palestinian policeman who serves the Israeli state while lending a hand in domestic chores wearing the police uniform, pink rubber gloves and a flowered kitchen towel. Here, assimilation to Israel seems near complete. Only the old lady carries distant, largely hidden traces of Palestinian history and of the events of the 1948 but the time is ticking: also she is soon passing away.

Nazareth is not all Palestine, however, and the effects of a military occupation vary across space. Throughout its history, Israel has colonised the Palestinians through assimilation (the citizens of Israel), dissemination (the diaspora), and incarceration and siege (the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza). This cartography is embodied in the trilogy: in each film, a journey across space tends to indicate a change in the political problematic. In search of resistance and political hope, *The Time That Remains* looks at the occupied Palestinian territories, at the besieged Ramallah where Suleiman travels in a tightly packed minibus via Jerusalem.

There, following a pattern similar to the earlier films, his character is soon joined by a strong female. This time it is a young *kefiya*-wearing Palestinian woman, who sits defiantly in the same crowded bus, bear-headed, surrounded by male passengers and a pornographic image attached to the driver's broken sunshield. This feminine figure, which stands in defiance of both the military occupation and the patriarchal orders of the Palestinian and Israeli society, is central to the trilogy as a whole. In *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, it is marked by A'dan whose attempts to find a room is frustrated in East and West Jerusalem alike: first because she is a woman, and then, because she is an Arab. In *Divine Intervention*, a similar figure is evoked in a scene in which Suleiman's girlfriend – who later turns out to be the ninja – breaks Israeli blockade simply by walking past the checkpoint, looking stunning and totally unaffected by the grim surroundings and the sight and sound of machine guns.

The Time That Remains follows a similar ruse when a young mother insists upon her right to the land and brings to halt a noisy clash between Palestinian (male) demonstrators and the Israeli military simply by pushing her baby's buggy self-confidently past the soldiers and demonstrators, along the firing line. Both sides are brought to standstill. When a stunned Israeli soldier finally reacts, threatens her with a machine gun and orders her to go home, she pauses, takes off her sunglasses and replies boldly "Me go home? You go home!" – and carries on walking.

The scene is emotionally appealing, but its actual importance lies in the ability to raise intriguing and difficult questions on the ends and effects of Palestinian political action and resistance. As soon as the woman has passed, the men resume fight. The Israeli soldiers hide behind army jeeps and fire rubber bullets at the demonstrators. The Palestinians chant and yell, wave the Palestinian flag and throw stones. This is iconic Palestinian resistance as it is known through decades of media and news broadcasting, but compared with the uncompromising vigour of the mother affirming the Palestinian street successfully as her territory and her home, the demonstration is lacking in meaning. It appears as noise, as action that might have been important and effective in the past, for instance in Suleiman's own youth in Nazareth when his generation rose up against Israeli rule for the first time, but which is not able to turn the tables between the coloniser and the colonised anymore. Both are locked in their respective positions.

What scenes such as this one do is to deconstruct hegemonic, masculine articulations of Palestinian resistance and nationalism, not because these forms of protest or national liberation as such would be a bad idea, but because they are no longer, in the particular socio-historical and discursive context that we share, able to challenge the order of the occupation nor to provide a meaningful and hopeful framework for collective political action. In their place, the trilogy suggests a different affective aesthetics which dwells beyond the oppositional logic of anticolonial nationalism and which centres on ideas of resilience. Suleiman, who observes the Palestinians in the West Bank from the perspective of an outsider, admires it at distance. Hiding behind a wall, he spies an Israeli tank on the street. Suddenly, a young, smartly dressed man steps suddenly out of his home to throw the rubbish. The man crosses the street walking in a relaxed, light and exaggerated way, doings turns and twirls while talking in a mobile with a friend about latest electronic music, DJs and an upcoming party at the *Stones* restaurant in Ramallah. The barrel of the tank follows his each move closely at a few meters distance, but the man seems totally unbothered. Suleiman, on the other hand, dives down as soon as the barrel points at his direction.

In the next scene, young women and men dance trendy electronic music, immersed in a shared space of moving bodies, rhythm and desire. An Israeli army jeep drives by the nightclub, announces a curfew by loudspeakers and orders everyone to go home, but to no avail. The dancers behind the club's large windows cannot hear them, the music is too loud and they simply do not care. They are attached much more closely to contemporary global cultural and social circuits than to the territorialising regimes of military occupation imposed by Israel. These Palestinians do not bother to fight against the occupation: they simply bypass it, the best they can, but in so doing they also effectively reverse, or render meaningless, the economy of desire and representation that underpins colonialism. Suleiman's Palestinians appear as utterly seductive and belonging to our age. Israel, in contrast, is clumsy, ossified, heavy and stuck in the past. Even the soldiers in the jeep seem to agree. They keep repeating the call for curfew, but their eyes are fixed on the dancing collective, and their bodies move in the rhythm as if they, too, desired to be in the Palestinian party.

The political aesthetics that these films construct is thus feminine, affective, situational and tied to space. But is that all that can be aspired to under late modern colonialism, and is it enough? Suleiman's films do not offer real guidance on how to reconstitute the Palestinians' struggle in the present context of late modernity. The trilogy evokes easily Michel de Certeau's theorisations of everyday resistance (de Certeau 1988), yet also problematise such reading, for it is really not clear whether these acts of resilience are able to obtain much, apart from small, separate tricks and victories. Such scenes of everyday resistance may look appealing and empowering on the screen, but even in these films, it is only the imaginary Palestinian ninja that has the keys to accomplishing real change.

Perhaps even more problematic is the fact that his aesthetics of living against occupation is essentially liberal in kind. Suleiman does not set just any kind of life and vigour against the occupation. His Palestinians shake the occupation off through the full embrace of, and subjection to, new biopolitical regimes of liberal desire. As such, these films do not offer a proper critique of contemporary power relations, or tease out what might be done about the variety of challenges that liberal governance is posing to political and social movements at large. Moreover, although his films might reflect experiences of everyday resistance among certain social strata in Ramallah, which is a relatively affluent, cosmopolitan town with close ties to the Palestinian diaspora in the

USA and Europe (Taraki 2008), they are not equally available nor attractive to all Palestinians. Indeed, there are no reasons why a film could not create an aesthetics of everyday resistance that is less tied to Western, liberal and consumerised cultural forms and sensibilities, had it been the objective.

Accordingly, the trilogy offers a political aesthetic that cannot pretend to represent all Palestine, and that offers no guarantees of success. This could seem overtly tragic and inadequate, was it not for the fact that those earlier narratives of liberation, which were supposed to apply for all the Palestinians and have those guarantees, did not succeed, either. This is why the tension between history and becoming is ultimately so central to the politics of these films. *The Time That Remains* retells the history of Palestinian dispossession and struggle, because without knowledge of that history, the scope of injustice and violence that frame Palestinian experiences in the present is inarticulable and unrepresentable. At the same time, it brings forth the importance of letting the future form itself free from that history. Soon generations that have no personal attachment to the events of the 1948 are the only ones that exist. On what basis, in what idioms and through what kind of practices will the struggle for justice in Palestine then be articulated?

The politics of these films cannot, therefore, be apprehended through questions of what Palestinian resistance looks like, how it should look like, nor reduced to a supposed affirmation of national unity against all odds. The relationship that the trilogy establishes between politics and representation is far more painstaking and concerns the very foundation on which a struggle against injustice can be based and articulated in the present time. Amidst the silence and passivity with which Suleiman observes the violence around him – violence which is impossible to put into words for its absurd nature and lack of a narrative that would do justice to it – these depictions of minor resistances and active subjects do not constitute national unity or a narrative, nor does their political value depend on its continued existence. Amid the impossibility of collective articulation, amidst implosive communal and social relations and the loss of words and signs through which to articulate resistance, Suleiman's films recognise that a return to old paradigms of resistance is not viable, and try to identify space for new openings. In so doing, they create a late modern aesthetics of life against occupation which neither reduces Palestinians to passive victims nor accepts that the validity and importance of their demands should depend upon their ability - indeed, continued need – to construct a “united national identity”, “coherent strategy” and “clear goals”.

And, tactically speaking, this might be a wise move indeed, given that the conditions of possibility, which gave rise to the hegemonic unity of Palestinian nationalism during the 1970s and 1980s, might no longer exist. The relevance of the Palestinians' struggle cannot, at least for the time being, be based upon expectations of a return to national unity and to the “right” kind of resistance, for such expectations will most certainly be frustrated. This, and not just an ethical commitment to radical democracy or multitude of struggles is why the Palestinians' struggle has to be set free from the modern aesthetics of popular politics in which collective unity is privileged as a precondition of political right.

In conclusion, the strong sense of unity and political purpose that characterised the Palestinian national movement in the past was conditioned by the existence of a transnational discursive field within which such articulations were possible and politically meaningful. However, during the past two or three decades, this discursive framework of political articulation has been steadily disintegrating. This process can be traced to socio-political and economic changes that are associated with the problematic of late

modernity and with the so-called crisis of the Left, and as such it is indicative of the wider crisis of politics and political representation that characterises our era.

The importance of Elia Suleiman's work lies in the attempt to create new ways of understanding and representing the struggle for Palestine. The trilogy does not offer a profound critique of contemporary power relations or of a possibility of dissociating them, but it takes seriously the question of how to construct a transnational anticolonial struggle in the context of late modernity, which displays the disintegration of earlier narratives of liberation. The recent emergence of a multitude of political struggles associated with the Arab Spring has given this endeavour a new air of promise. As these struggles demonstrate, the construction of new political discourses of becoming that are fiercely persistent, yet not dependent on the existence of clear goals and a unified collective subject, is an endeavour in which the "complex" and "late-modern" societies of the industrialised West have no privilege.

Notes

1. On the notion of late modern subject of colonial occupation, see also Junka 2006 and Junka-Aikio 2012.
2. See Bresheeth 2002 for a more detailed analysis of the film.

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