

CINEMATIC CROSSROADS: THE INTERSECTION OF SEXUALITY AND NATIONALISM IN PALESTINIAN AND ISRAELI FILMS

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Abstract:

This analysis examines the portrayal of interracial same-sex relationships in Israeli and Palestinian cinema produced during the al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–2008), shedding light on the intricate interplay of post-trauma, nationalism, race, and sexuality. While gay cinema in Israel has a longstanding history, addressing interracial relationships among men since the 1980s, Palestinian cinema grapples with the complexities of self-definition, national identity, and spatial constraints, given its unique status as both national and stateless. This study reveals a divergence in the cinematic treatment of these themes, highlighting how Palestinian cinema, in its pursuit of redefining Palestinian space and constructing a national narrative, has yet to address issues of sexual identity and interracial intimacy within the narrative framework.

Keywords: Interracial Relationships, Same-Sex Cinema, Israeli Cinema, Palestinian Cinema
Nationalism and Sexuality

Introduction

An analysis of two films depicting interracial sex between men in Israeli and in Palestinian cinema produced during the al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–2008) reveals a complex picture of the connection between post-trauma,¹ nationalism, race, and sexuality. Gay cinema has existed for decades in Israel, and since the 1980s, has also dealt with interracial sex between men (Stein, 2010; Yosef, 2002). Palestinian cinema, on the other hand, caught in the paradox of being both national and stateless, is still struggling with the issues of self-definition, national identity, and space (Dabashi, 2006; Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). It would seem that in its attempts to rearticulate the Palestinian space as part of laying down the foundation for a national narrative—to present “a journey through blocked space (Gertz & Khleifi)” —Palestinian cinema has not yet begun to deal with the body in the context of sexual identity and interracial sex. My thanks to the Smart Family Foundation Communications Institute at the Hebrew University for funding this research, to the editors of the *International Journal of Communication*, and to the anonymous readers for their helpful and insightful suggestions

¹ I use the term *post-trauma* based on Caruth’s (1996) definition of the subject’s belated recognition of an earlier trauma and therefore the trauma inherent latency. See also Morag (2009). whether homosexual or heterosexual. Tawfik Abu-Wael’s 2001 prize-winning short film about interracial male-male relations, *Diary of a Male Whore* (*Yawmiyat Ahir*),¹ can be considered a breakthrough. His venture into dealing with this social taboo is striking, not only against the backdrop of the present state of Palestinian cinema but also against developments in the contemporary world and in Islamic pan-Arab cinema.²

¹ The term *ahir* appears here in its masculine form, which is not standard Arabic. It usually takes the feminine form.

² The most expensive film in Arabic cinematic history, Marwan Hamed’s 2006 Egyptian film *The Yacoubian Building* (*Imarat Ya’qubyan*), presents the world of Cairo homosexuals and met with success throughout the Moslem-Arab world. On the other hand, Parvez Sharma’s 2007 documentary, *A Jihad for Love* (USA), describes the underground lives that Moslem homosexuals and lesbians are forced to live

This article will compare Abu-Wael's film with 2006's *The Bubble (Ha-Buah)* by Eytan Fox, a leading Israeli gay director, and will discuss the complex ways the two films can serve as mirror images of each other. Both deal with the post-traumatic intersection of race and nationalism with gender and sexuality. In *Diary*, while servicing an Israeli client, a Palestinian street hustler recalls his violent childhood, culminating with the memory of seeing his mother raped by an Israeli soldier. *Bubble* deals with a love affair between two young men, an Israeli and a Palestinian, which ends tragically when the Palestinian becomes a suicide terrorist and detonates a bomb that kills himself together with his lover. That is, while Palestinian cinema places interracial sex within the reality of the post-traumatic memory of expulsion and loss of home, Israeli cinema places it within the Western urban reality of the gay community that becomes caught up in terrorism.

I contend that these two separate and unique experiences of post-trauma impede what should be the basis of the creation of dialogue: the acknowledgment of the other in its radical otherness. However, whereas *Diary* assumes responsibility over the traumatic past by re-enacting it in the present—while examining the violence within the Palestinian society as well as that inflicted by the Israelis—*The Bubble* assumes no such responsibility. In its dealing with the Palestinian other, in its attempt to “embrace” and understand the other, it projects its own subjectivity (without any attempt to analyze it) onto what ultimately cannot be grasped—the other's subjectivity.

The marked contrast between the two films immediately brings to light the central issues to be discussed here: In what ways is the mirror image phantasmic? How do the films represent the connection between sexual and ethnic repression and the traumatic histories of occupation and terror? Do interracial relationships reproduce the social pathology of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle? Can the posttraumatic fantasy, which characterizes both films, serve as a force behind (at least) a (cinematic) reconciliation? This article offers a close textual analysis as the preferred way to delve into these intimate post-traumatic epistemologies.

Diary of a Male Whore—Hustling in the Shadowy Memory of the Nakba

The plot is revealed through the voice-over of Essam (Tahir Mahamid), a young Palestinian from a refugee family, illegally residing in Tel Aviv and earning his living as a street hustler. The film is bracketed by a car scene in which Essam masturbates in front of an elderly Israeli client and recalls scenes from his youth. The beginning of the flashback depicts the outset of his sexual maturity in an Arab village before it was conquered by the Israeli army. Essam commits sodomy with a sheep, listens to his parents have sexual relations, and secretly watches a village girl, Asya (Ruth Bernstein), as she bathes in a spring. His memories date from when the village was first occupied, his father's murder, and the rape of his mother. The film ends as Essam receives his payment and continues to walk the dark Tel Aviv streets

Diary depicts the traumatic events reenacted in the flashbacks as historically ambiguous. The imprecise timeframe indicates that the film proposes to describe the everlasting character of the Israeli occupation, beginning from the Nakba (“day of catastrophe”) and continuing through the 1967 conquest and the Intifada. In particular, it seeks to portray the trauma of the Nakba as an intergenerational burden. Taking into consideration Essam's age during the flashback (12 or 13), whether the flashback re-enacts events during either the Nakba or the 1967 conquest, it would be impossible for him to be a young man residing illegally in Tel Aviv during either the first or second Intifada. As a result, the tension between the Nakba, the Israeli occupation, and the Intifada—between past, present, and eternal time—magnifies the tension between fantasy and trauma that stands at the core of the film.

in 12 countries around the world. In contrast to Hamed's film, as will be described, Abu-Wael's film undermines all familiar representations of Islamic homosexuality. In contrast to Sharma, who produced his film in exile from within an activist homosexual community, Abu-Wael works in his homeland as a Palestinian director, cut off from community and institutional affiliation. The circumstances surrounding the production of *Diary* illustrate, among other things, the director's complicated situation. In a discussion I had with AbuWael in September 2008, he explained that after many reversals, he finally financed the film himself.

Many Israelis volunteered their services for the production.

Diary places interracial male-male sex between the Palestinian hustler and his Israeli client within a narrative structure in which the post-traumatic memory of the Nakba/the occupation, structured through flashbacks, accounts for the character of interracial relations (anonymous one-time sexual meetings, paid masturbation/voyeurism). In other words, in the present, Essam's sexuality is depicted as post-traumatic. The first clue to causal relationships between past and present is presented in an incident with a prostitute that opens the film and is a portent to the scene in which Essam himself becomes a prostitute.

In the first scene, against the backdrop of nighttime Tel Aviv (cars, people in cafés, Essam walking the streets), his voice-over is heard: "The sheep and the hen were my first females.³ I first slept with a woman the day I arrived in Tel Aviv. My late friend, Abu-Krah, and I got drunk and we looked for a prostitute. I went in first. 'How was she?' 'She has no teeth.' 'No teeth?' he yelled. I answered, 'The mouth between her legs has no teeth.'"

According to Barbara Creed (1994),

The myth about woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces. The *vagina dentata* is the mouth of hell—a terrifying symbol of woman as the "devil's gateway." (p. 106)

The fear of the *vagina dentata* is already visually hinted at in the beginning of the film with a close-up of the prominent teeth of an Israeli woman sitting in a café. The editing cuts sharply between the prostitute incident, with its high level of anxiety, to the present, which depicts the client and reenactments of traumatic childhood memories.

When Essam enters the Israeli client's car and the act of prostitution and memory process begin simultaneously, the editing uses flashbacks to tie together the two traumatic audial-voyeuristic events that to the present scene fantasy



According to Kaja Silverman (1992), the moment of infantile voyeurism signifies "the point of

³ *Diary* alludes to the 1977 Italian film, *Padre Padrone* (Paolo and Vittorio Taviani), in terms of its style and narrative structure, and especially in its portrayal of early sexual experiences involving animals (sheep). See also the reference to Genet's film that follows.

entry for an alien and traumatic sexuality" (p. 156). The child-spectator is unable to decipher what he sees, and therefore, she notes, "The spectacle assumes its full force only later, after it has been internalized as representation" (p.168). The outcome is a complex dramatization of temporality, since the primal scene which "occurs not so much in 'reality' as in fantasy . . . is a construction after the fact. . . it is either constituted through a deferred action . . . or constructed as a fantasy on the basis of some remembered detail" (p.164). Being overwhelmed by the sounds and images of parental sexuality, the outcome—as Freud notes—is a profound disruption of the "conventional" masculinity of the onlooker. *Diary* confers a new meaning on Silverman's paradigm regarding the primal scene: it is not "either too early or too late," as she defines the child's experience with respect to sexuality. But, because of the extended primal scene—that is, the audial connection between being a deferred voyeur to his parents and a voyeur to the rape—the spectating child undergoes the "too early" as well as the "too late." As the incident with the Israeli prostitute demonstrates, the primal scenes in *Diary*, whose impact was revealed to be traumatic only much later—post-factum as it were—had the shattering effect of being both "too early" and "too late" because of the Nakba, thus predetermining Essam's sexual behavior as posttraumatic.

In other words, Essam's fear of vagina dentata (and his prostitution) is presented as resulting from his exposure to the primal scene, the absence of a father figure, and his consequent overattachment to his mother during childhood. Of course, when speaking of the dyadic mother, the projection of the image of the mouth to her genitalia is linked to oral pleasure (Creed, 1994). Nevertheless, the fantasy of the dyadic mother, who symbolically incorporates him, ascribes the castrating position to her: "The image of the toothed vagina, symbolic of the all-devouring woman, is related to the subject's infantile memories of its early relation with the mother and the subsequent fear of its identity being swallowed up by the mother (p. 109).

According to Creed, and contrary to Freud (1918/1991), it can be argued that the genitalia of the mother that were depicted in the voyeuristic fantasy are unconsciously perceived by Essam as castrating and not as castrated. If so, the racialization of the primal scene acts retroactively: During Essam's first sexual experience with a woman as an adult the vagina dentata, which characterized his mother in his imagination, is projected on the Israeli prostitute.⁴ The question is, why didn't Essam's voyeuristic witnessing of the rape of his mother change the fantasy of vagina dentata? That is, why was she not transformed from castrating to castrated in his imagination? I suggest that racialization generates transformation that transcends the text. During the first audial incident, Essam presents himself as innocent and describes his voyeurism as naivety. During the second incident, the Israeli conquest and the rape, Essam fantasizes/remembers himself as a passive voyeur, almost a collaborator. He does not answer his mother's calls, but hides. The film's editing uses cross-cutting to show Essam sitting in silence while she cries to him for help.⁵

As the narrative shows, Essam's inevitable guilt feelings "froze" his (unconscious) perception of his mother before the rape in his imagination. The trauma of the rape, and especially his guilt, preserves the castrating mother in his "sexual memory." If so, the survivor's guilt from which he suffers expands his fantasy of the mother in the primal scene to his perception of her during the rape, so that her phantasmatic "status" remains unchanged. The result is projection of vagina dentata onto the Israeli prostitute and hustling.

By ascribing Essam's interracial sexual relations, especially his hustling, to his past traumatic experiences, the film, of course, severely criticizes the destructive consequences of the Israeli occupation, from the Nakba to the second Intifada, on Palestinian society and masculinity. Still, one of the most subversive aspects of Abu-Wael's oeuvre is that he combines criticism of Israeli society with that of Palestinian society; moreover, he points out the interdependence

⁴ See Edelman (1994). Both he and Silverman emphasize the multiplicity of identifications, the almost queer identification of the infant witnessing the primal scene. See, in contrast, Ohi (1999).

⁵ The rape takes place, as mentioned, during the period of the Nakba. To the best of my knowledge, such rapes by Israeli soldiers only occurred before the Nakba and the establishment of the State of Israel and shortly afterward; that is, until the mid-1950s. See Nitzan's *The Borders* (2006). According to Morris (1999), during the 1929 riots, "leaflets, which seem to have been printed before August 14 [1929] were distributed by Hussein activists in nearby Arab towns and villages. . . . One flyer . . . declared: 'the enemy . . . violated the honor of Islam and raped the women'" (pp. 113, 700).

of Palestinian and Israeli violence. The brutal relations existing between the father and other family members within Abu-Wael's cinematic Palestinian families are reflected in Israeli violence. The violence wreaked by Israeli soldier on Essam's mother in *Diary* echoes his father's violence toward her, both physically and as imagined by Essam in his primal scene fantasy.

In *Diary*, Essam confesses that he did not mourn his father's murder because, as a child, he had been a target of his brutality. In this sense, the constant textual tension between traumatic fantasy and memory creates the (unseen) murder of the father as a phantasmatic unconscious realization and not only as an actual event. As post-traumatic films, both *Diary* and Abu Wael's prize-winning *Thirst (Atash)* from 2001 present Palestinian society as one in which patricide, both imaginary and real, is inevitable and is carried out at least as much by the castrated sons' generation as by the Israeli occupation.

The double function of the flashback as both real memory and fantasy is intensified by its scenic quality, including the transition from the darkness of the car to the brightness of childhood scenes and from the closed space of masturbation to an open one filled with participants and action. For Freud, the term *fantasy*, as many have claimed, is bound to a scenic quality. Similarly, Silverman argues that "unconscious desire generally assumes the form of a visual tableau or narrateme" (1992, p. 160). Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis (1973) also name the phantasmatic "a *mise-en-scène* of desire" (p. 318). In *Fantasme Originnaire* (1985), the two further expand their discussion about fantasy as dramatization in which the subject plays a role. Their analysis of primal fantasies ("*Urphantasiën*"), according to Freud, emphasizes that these fantasies—dealing with the origins of subjectivity, of sexuality, and of sex differences—are scenic (1986).⁷

In *Checkpoint Syndrome* (2003), Furer, a 26-year-old ex-Israeli soldier, gives a detailed description of his army service in the Occupied Territories. Two rape fantasies appear in the book: One is a gang rape that ostensibly took place in a refugee camp and ends with the brutal murder of the young Palestinian woman being raped (pp. 70–73), while the second occurs at a checkpoint and includes torture (pp. 75–77).

"By locating the origin of fantasy in the auto-erotism, we have shown the connection between fantasy and desire. Fantasy, however, is not the object of desire but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no Essam uses memory to direct his primal phantasmatic scenes so that the *dramatis personae* of

childhood is projected, as Laplanche and Pontalis (1986) claim, on those participating in real scenes in the present. This dramatization containing a sequence of images from the past that leaves its mark on the roles played in the present is based on interchanging post-traumatic subject positioning. As a posttraumatic subject, Essam positions himself in the "time of auto-eroticism," as Laplanche and Pontalis suggest. The result is two contradictory subject positions: In the rape flashback, Essam is positioned as "himself" and observes himself as a young man; in the present, during his act of prostitution, he gives pleasure to the symbolic perpetrator, the elderly Israeli, who, given his age, could have been the soldier who had raped his mother. Essam is his prostitute, and so he is positioned as his mother. The elderly Israeli observes Essam in a way that gives him pleasure or sexual stimulation, much as Essam, in the past (during the primal scene fantasy), had observed his mother. Though the incidents are different, of course, the phantasmatic analogy of Laplanche and Pontalis exists. The disparity in age, race, and social standing perpetuate phantasmatic exchanges between the perpetrator and the victim in the victim's post-traumatic imagination.

The film, however, does not relate only to the post-traumatic castration of Palestinian masculinity. As in Abu-Wael's other work, which proves "reciprocity" between Palestinian and Israeli violence, *Diary* reveals post-traumatic memory as bidirectional: the Nakba/occupation also castrates the Israeli, turning him into an (impotent?) onlooker dependent on a Palestinian hustler. The scenario in the present changes the oppressive hegemonic gaze of the symbolic perpetrator, and turns it, sexually, into a look based on dependence. Still, it is clear from the perspective of the "diary" of the male whore that this is only a momentary reversal of power relations within the political reality: In the present, the Palestinian is the illegal resident and the occupation, with its political and economic subjugation, continues; he is dependent upon the gaze of the perpetrator for survival. As a consequence of the Israeli presence in the scopic space, Essam's observation of his mother's rape becomes a masculine version of the Medusa gaze. This, as

I claimed previously, freezes him in the vagina dentata fantasy and in self-objectifying relations. The primal scene paradigmatically emphasizes the isolation of the subject against the backdrop of the union of the parents and imparts knowledge of adult sexuality, a situation exacerbated by the conquest and the rape.

In *Diary*, past memory is neither dead nor alive. It is fixed neither in the stability of nostalgia nor in denial. The past haunts Essam's consciousness in the present through various agents: memory, yearning, trauma, guilt, and the body. The ghost of the past is present in the body, defeated time and again by traumatic memory's overwhelming powers. According to Abu-Wael, nothing can free the Palestinian from his tormenting past—not remembering, not confession, and not automatic day-to-day survival. It is no wonder, then, that *Diary* constructs commensurability between reenactment of past traumatic events and the sexual act in the present as the editing cuts from the groaning soldier to Essam moaning as he climaxes in front of his Israeli client. Representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene. . . . On the other hand . . . [the fantasy] is a favoured spot for the most primitive defensive reactions, such as . . . projection, negation: these defenses are even indissolubly connected with the primary function of fantasy, to be a setting for desire" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1986, pp. 26–27).

What meaning is there in the choice of prostitution based on masturbation/voyeurism? In the transition from phantasmatic-imaginary orgasm to an actual one? And from the Nakba to the Occupation? It is clear from the horrific incident with the Israeli prostitute that Essam's post-traumatic sexuality divorces women from the domain of sexual pleasure. His only prospect, described above as a variation on the Medusa myth, is a reliving of the traumatic *jouissance* with the mother and "planting of the symbolic In the materiality of the body" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1985, pp. 68–69).

Structuring the rape of his mother (and the [supposed] orgasm of the Israeli soldier) together with Essam's orgasm in the present signifies a uniting in traumatic pleasure. Given that the two-fold traumatic violence of conquest and rape irreversibly sabotaged Palestinian sexuality, we come to see, as far as Essam is concerned, physical pleasure is possible only through a post-traumatic ritual of remembrance. *Diary of a Male Whore* asserts that Palestinian male pleasure is totally and paradoxically dependent on the trauma of the (past and present) occupation.

In this world of the *body-subject* (Grosz, 1994), that is, of the subject embodied through his body, masturbation enjoys a special status. *Diary* undermines both the structuring of interracial male sexuality as penetrating and/or being penetrated and the myriad implications of colonial power relations.⁶ Representing the voyeurism of the rape as a continuation of the voyeurism of the primal scene, as discussed previously, completely changes the indeterminacy of the primal scene and the possibility of sodomitical (emphasizing identification with the father and penetration) or queer identification (emphasizing identification with both the mother and the father).

Abu-Wael's decision to represent voyeurism/masturbation rather than homosexual contact as a form of post-traumatic sexuality takes on, I believe, a radical significance, not only in regard to Palestinian castrated masculinity but to potential interracial relations as well. Under permanent occupation, this is but an alienated sexual transaction. Fantasy-ridden masturbation leaves each of them, the Israeli and the Palestinian, the one masturbating and the one looking on, isolated and captive within his own world. The film emphasizes this by almost completely avoiding any two-shots showing them together in the frame.

Moreover, as Laqueur (2003) argues, masturbation contains three components: fantasy, solitude, and insatiability. I believe there is a direct link between them and the post-traumatic reaction. Masturbation, in fact, has a double function: It symbolizes (in a somewhat paradoxical manner) the repetitive nature of post-traumatic behavior, and at the same time, as will be elaborated later, it allows a subversive view of (political, patriarchal, and sexual) repression. In *Diary*, masturbation is unique as posttraumatic repetitious behavior. In contrast to other forms of sexuality, it represents the dominance of post-trauma in the solitary life of the Palestinian male, since, in an almost literal sense, it is based on repetition compulsion. The power of masturbation as a physical accompaniment to post-traumatic reenactment is embodied in its practice, based on continual repetition. In other words, because of its repetitive

⁶ In this context, see Yosef (2002, 2004). He does not discuss Arab sexuality from a non-Western perspective.

character, masturbation probably corresponds more than any other form of sexuality (either penetrating or penetrated) does to traumatic repetition. Essam seems to bodily enact the inaccessibility of past images by repeating them over and over. The repetition embodied in masturbation turns it into both a metaphor for and a performance of this compulsive practice. In this sense, masturbation symbolizes the perpetuation of trauma. Each night the Palestinian male serves as a hustler (post-traumatic reenactment/masturbation) makes him reproduce anew the seemingly interminable past.

The film alludes, of course, to Jean Genet's 1949 novel *The Thief's Journal* (*Journal du Voleur*) and to his 1950 short film, *A Love Song* (*Un Chant d'amour*). Subordinating Essam's adult Palestinian subjectivity to colonial interracial relations is noteworthy, given Abu-Wael's homage to Mohamed Choukri's 1973 autobiographical novel, *For Bread Alone* (*al-Khubz al-Hafi*).⁷ Though most of the narrative elements appear in both, Choukri's world is more dominant than that of Genet in *Diary*. Although Choukri's 1974 novel about Genet, *Jean Genet in Tangier*, is free of orientalism, Abu-Wael apparently abstains from referring more directly to *The Thief's Journal* because Genet's persona is infamously linked to Western sexual projections on the East, especially on Morocco. His diary and well-known film are present in Abu-Wael's film mainly in its use of masturbation as a medium.

As an autobiographical memoir, *For Bread Alone* describes appalling brutality in Choukri's home— escaping his father; life on the street; abject poverty; and his wanderings (from Tangier to Algeria) in a constant search for casual work, food, and shelter. It is also replete with descriptions of his male prostitution, without which he could never have survived, and homosexuality. Choukri's childhood in Morocco, during the 1950s, took place against the backdrop of French colonialism and the 1952 uprising against the French, and that, apparently, is the importance of the homage for Abu-Wael. It is not by chance, therefore, that the changes he makes in the narrative elements taken from Choukri's novel have to do with racialization: Essam's fantasy of love for Asya is replaced by the fantasy of his mother's rape, and oral sex with the old man is replaced by masturbating in front of him. "In order to come quickly I imagined that I was raping Asya in Tatwan . . . What am I doing with this old man who gave me a blow job? I will hate myself and everyone else, if I'll keep doing this . . . he gave me fifty pesetos . . . if so, this is how one falls into prostitution" (Choukri, 1973, pp. 81–82).⁸

Contrary to Choukri, however, who asserts in his novel that learning to read and write at 21 liberated him from the colonial, social, and familial cycles of oppression, Essam remains caught up in these cycles through prostitution and dependence on the overwhelming destructive force of post-traumatic memory. Does the film claim that liberation from the past is impossible? On one hand, as noted, the cycles of oppression take an orgasmic-repetitious form, based on "stimulation" by the past and its "release." On the other, as hinted at earlier, masturbation itself allows a subversive view of repression and alludes to its possible disruption. Though Essam's masturbation is part and parcel of his prostitution—that is, carried out on the borderline between privacy-secrecy and sociability-openness—it is still beyond social panoptic control and defies Israeli society at least as much as it does Palestinian society. Essam's subject position as a witness to the conquest and to rape is problematic and not only regarding the ambivalence of "having-been-there" in the context of fantasy; that is, the issue of Essam's actual presence in the time and place of the trauma. It is also problematic vis-à-vis the extent to which Essam has, to use Peter's (2001) words, lost moral authority, emanating from his being a bystander to an atrocity. *Diary* does not judge its protagonist. The disparaging force of post-traumatic memory and latent guilt produces a constant performance of embodied reiteration in which the imaginary witness, doomed by an overwhelming past, becomes self-oppressive.

The following analysis entails a shift from the nuanced psychoanalytical explorations—mainly of the primal scene—adopted in the analysis of *Diary of a Male Whore* to a primarily cultural analysis of *The Bubble*, especially regarding

⁷ The direct translation from the Arabic is *The Barefoot Bread*. It is common knowledge that the blatant descriptions of sex made finding a publisher in Arabic very difficult. The book was published in Arabic only in 1982, after it had already been translated into English by Paul Bowles and in French by Tahar Ben Jelloun.

⁸ My translation from the Hebrew edition of the book.

such terms as passing, shame, and race. The nature of Fox's film warrants such a shift. *Diary's* linking traumatic histories to queer sexualities is based, as described, on the fantasy of origin and identity; that is, on exploration of the foundation of the Palestinian subject. As I see it, *Bubble*, a film made in a sovereign country, does not require delving into the traumatic origins of the subject (both psychoanalytically and/or historically), as they are taken for granted. *Diary*, driven by the Palestinian lack of state and unrelieved traumatization by a colonial regime, is "forced" to dive into the origins of subjecthood and decipher its vicissitudes from the Nakba onward. In contrast, *Bubble* presents a different version of subjectivity with a stable and definitive identity. In other words, the following shift in methodology from psychoanalysis to cultural studies is an outcome of the huge disparity between the relationships of the two films to their respective political-social contexts.

The Bubble—A Suicidal Israeli Gay Fantasy

The Bubble focuses on forbidden love between Noam (Ohad Knoller), a young Israeli who lives in a bohemian quarter of Tel Aviv, and Ashraf (Yousef "Joe" Sweid), a Palestinian from Nablus. Ashraf lives with Noam and his roommates, Yelli (Aron Friedman), who is a gay, and Lulu (Daniela Vitzler). On their advice he takes the Hebrew name Shimi and pretends to be Israeli. He gradually becomes part of the gay Leftist community. When he decides to tell his beloved sister Rana (Roba Blal) he is gay, she angrily disapproves. Rana marries Jihad (Shredi Jabarin), a local Az-Adin El-Kassam leader, but the morning after the wedding, she is accidentally killed by Israeli soldiers searching for the perpetrator of the latest Tel Aviv suicide attack, in which Yelli had been injured. Jihad tries to force Ashraf into marrying his cousin and threatens to reveal Ashraf's secret if he refuses. Instead, Ashraf decides to revenge Rana's death in Jihad's place. In the final scene, with a bomb strapped to his body, Ashraf comes to the Tel Aviv restaurant where he used to work as a waiter. Noam, his Israeli lover, hugs him in greeting and the bomb detonates.

The film opens with two reversals that are symbolically tied to the phantasmatic ideologies on which it is based: "passing" and the "enlightened occupation" that enable an interracial romantic love. The first occurs in the opening scene at a checkpoint, where Ashraf, together with the other Palestinian men standing there, follows regulations and lifts his shirt. The gaze of an Israeli soldier attempting to discover hidden explosives, one of the symbols of the occupation, reverses when Ashraf returns the gaze (of Noam, a reserve soldier standing in front of him). The militaristic gaze, based on racialization and racial differentiation, becomes, in the queer Israeli narrative, a sexual gaze, following the "love at first sight" formula.

The second reversal is tied to the arbitrariness of the plot that makes the romance possible. Ashraf passes the checkpoint and later goes to Noam's apartment in Tel Aviv to return Noam's Israeli identity card, which he had dropped at the checkpoint. This is a phantasmatic reversal of the *modus operandi* of the occupation in which Palestinian identity cards are handled by Israeli soldiers, and not the opposite. Returning the gaze and the identity card presciently symbolizes, within the political reality of the second Intifada, the geo-psychological space of phantasmatic identity reversals. This denies the reality of the occupation and ideologically makes it "enlightened." These reversals are the cause of a two-fold passing fantasy for Ashraf—both spatial (crossing the border between Tel Aviv and Nablus) and sexual (passing as an Israeli gay in Tel Aviv).

Fantasy about the Palestinian space as open space also appears in Palestinian cinema, including two films released in 2002: Hany Abu-Assad's *Ford Transit* and Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (*Yadon ilaheyya*). In Raed Al Helou's 2004 *Hoping for the Best* (*La'alo Kheir*), awarded the grand prize at Ramallah's First International Film Festival, a car races down the streets of Ramallah. It does not stop for even a moment. The space is open; there are no checkpoints, no fences, no stop signs, and no representatives of the law, Palestinian or Israeli, to impede the car's progress. The falling rain that blocks our field of vision is part of this ambiguous spatial fantasy. A speeding car in an open/closed, infinite/unseen space conforms to the need for a scathing representation of reality and a deep-seated need for delusion. In this way, the fantasy of space in Palestinian cinema strives to liberate space from the Israeli scopic regime, while at the same time admitting to its own helplessness.

In complete contradiction, spatial passing in *Bubble* is constructed as gay fantasy, which disavows its political scopic dimension. Gay liberation, that is, the process of gay-ization that Ashraf undergoes under the supervision and guidance of gay Israelis, replaces recognition of the urgency to liberate the closed Palestinian space as well as the

political-historical factors that created the pathology of the occupation.⁹ It seems as if the Israeli gays give Ashraf refuge and out him. In reality, *Bubble* constructs them as adhering to the spatial fantasy—denial of the occupation—through a semi-colonial act: the gay-ization of Ashraf.

In this sense, despite the interracial love story, *Bubble* is part of the Western model of gayness that Joseph Massad (2007) considers oppressive. In his groundbreaking work, *Desiring Arabs*, he claims that this oppressive discourse, which he calls the Gay International, is the direct outcome of an “orientalist impulse borrowed from predominant representations of Arab and Muslim cultures in the United States and in European countries” (p. 16). Massad argues that the Gay International “produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology” (p. 163). The Gay International especially affects the persecution of the yet un-Westernized poor and nonurban men “who practice same-sex contact and who do not necessarily identify as homosexual or gay” (pp. 188–189). This imperialist-missionary project therefore destroys the sexual beings it wants to “liberate” (pp. 189–190).



Palestinian Passing in The Bubble: Ashraf (right), Noam, Lulu & Yali.

Photo: Karin Bar. Courtesy of Eytan Fox and Gal Uchovsky.

In contrast to *Diary*, Fox’s film contains absolutely no representation of Ashraf’s process of sexual maturity within his society. This exemplifies the problem Massad (2002) points to and thus strengthens his claim that the universalization of gay rights is based on the premise that “‘Oriental’ desires . . . exist . . . in ‘oppressive—and in some cases murderous home-lands,’” and therefore are “re-oriented to—and subjected by a ‘more enlightened’ Occident” (p. 364).

As described, in Fox’s film, Ashraf’s gay-ization is masked as a spatial and sexual enlightened liberation, but in fact, the colonialist gaze at the checkpoint is converted into the gay gaze that controls Ashraf’s behavior in passing rituals—changing his name, biography, attire, accent, bodily gestures, and lifestyle. In this sense, gay Israelis supervising Ashraf’s passing as an Israeli is but a variation on the Israeli surveillance regime. Both at the checkpoint and in Tel Aviv, passing is based on checking racial identity. By making confirmation of identity dependent on the Israeli gaze, *Bubble* denies the pervasiveness of Israeli politics of surveillance. The film structures these gazes as two

⁹ Reference to this is made several times. Despite her request, the group does not join Lulu’s mother, a *Machsom* Watch activist, when she takes her turn monitoring a checkpoint.

different mechanisms of confirmation, while in actuality the same omnipresent gaze tries to determine if he is a Palestinian, an illegal resident, or a potential terrorist.

Structuring Palestinian passing in Fox's queer cinema conforms to the basic definition of passing as "a performance in which one presents oneself as what one is not" (Rohy, 1996, p. 219). I suggest that, under a scopic regime, passing inevitably involves its traumatic failure. According to Carole-Anne Tyler (1994), "In fact, passing can only name the very failure of passing, an indication of a certain impossibility at its heart, of the contradictions which constitute it: life/death, being/non-being, visibility/invisibility, speech/silence, difference/sameness, knowledge/ignorance, coming out/mimicry" (p. 212).

Ashraf's failure of passing is not only the epistemological failure described by Tyler and others (e.g., Ginsberg, 1996) but also the failure prophesized by Massad (2007), or that defined by Homi K. Bhabha as "not quite/not white" (1984/1994, p. 131);¹⁰ that is, one embedded in colonial relations.

Bhabha describes mimicry as an ambivalent and ironic compromise: "[C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (p. 122).

As a form of colonial discourse, mimicry poses as least as much an imminent threat on whiteness as do imitation and appropriation. The failure of passing in the context of the Intifada, as I hinted at earlier, is the result of it being dependent upon a political culture based on the gaze as a means of hegemony, subjugation, and control. Ashraf wants to look like an Israeli, but does not want to be Israeli-Jewish. Despite that, he wants to be gay and look like an (Israeli?) gay. It should be noted that Ashraf participates not only in his stylization as Shimi, a young Israeli, through the gaze of the gays around him but also through his Jew-ization, as exemplified by his adoption of a loving gesture from the Israeli stage adaptation of *Bent* (Martin Sherman, 1979) that he saw with Noam. Should Israeli queer cinema, which structures Jew-ization as the climax of the process of gay-ization, be seen, as Massad (2007) claims, as contributing to "destroying social and sexual configurations of [Arab-Islamic] desire in the interest of reproducing a (Arab) world in its own image?" (p. 189). Is the dominance of the scopic regime a means of avoiding Bhabha's (1984/1994) split, that is, the imminent threat of mimicry?

What happens when an Israeli performs passing? Does *Bubble*, like *Diary*, reveal the interdependences of the Israeli and the Palestinian? Does it expose Bhabha's (1984/1994) double bind of mimicry, "where the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed" (p. 127)?

After someone at the Tel Aviv restaurant exposes "Shimi" as a Palestinian, he panics and returns to Nablus. Noam is despondent over his loss, and Lulu obtains a temporary foreign press card so they can travel to Nablus to visit him. They decide to pass the checkpoint by impersonating French journalists and introduce themselves as such at Ashraf's home. They set up a clandestine meeting between Noam and Ashraf, using the excuse that he invited them to photograph his sister Rana's wedding for French television.

Noam and Lulu's passing is for the most part spatial. They own the cultural capital necessary to insinuate themselves into forbidden spaces.¹³ In a complete reversal of Palestinian passing, Israeli passing, in both senses of the word, is entirely void of racialization.¹¹ Lulu and Noam's decision to pretend to be French rather than Palestinian suggests that Israelis would almost never consider passing themselves off as Palestinian. The two Israelis are not exposed to the gaze at the checkpoint, since in any case, as foreign journalists, they are in an advantageous position. In fact, for a short while, they simply exchange their privileged position as Israelis for a different one. Accordingly, Lulu and Noam's passing does not make them renounce their denial of the social pathologies Palestinians undergo at the checkpoints. Assuming the identity of French journalists, passing into the Palestinian space, and Noam pretending to be heterosexual in Ashraf's home are all temporary impostures that were never meant to lead to closeness to the other, either racially or sexually, or to—similar to the Israeli client in *Diary*—experiences of social marginality and

¹⁰ See also Shohat (1989). ¹³ Israelis are forbidden by law to enter Nablus. During the Intifada, Israelis who lost their way in the territories were at risk of being on the receiving end of riots by the local population.

¹¹ In this context, it is interesting to recall that the term *passing* may be derived from "pass," the slip of paper that granted slaves permission to move about the countryside without being mistaken for runaways (Bennett, 1998).

multiple subject positions. Consequently, the level of spatial fantasy makes the trip to Nablus both practically and symbolically futile in its attempt to structure the Israeli world as open to otherness.¹²

Moreover, Fox's playfulness fantasy relates to these forbidden spaces as unconflictual, free of danger. In contrast, Noam's passing is a dramatic turning point in Ashraf's life. After Jihad, his future brother-in-law, sees him kissing Noam, he is trapped. His reaction during his secret meeting with Noam ("Do you want them to kill me? Are you crazy?") portends the future. *Bubble* represses not only the disparity between Noam's playfulness and Ashraf's falling into a trap but also the meaning of the asymmetric passings. In fact, the mischievous heterosexual passing of Noam in Nablus is the cause of the traumatic failure of Ashraf's heterosexual passing in Arab society.

Eytan Fox's Israeli queer cinema, which contributed to Israeli society's homo-normative legitimating process during the 1980s and 1990s—mainly through the success of the 1997 television series *Florentin* and 2002's *Yossi and Jagger*,¹³—phantasmatically denies racial differences during the 2000s, revealing the failure of *Bubble* to establish queer epistemology in a colonial ethnic-sexual space. The gay-ization of the Palestinian, masked as romantic love, enables the ongoing denial of the occupation, the humiliation of the Palestinian, and their replacement by gay pride. This is especially noticeable because the editing links the Nablus visit with a rave party demonstration against the occupation—a sort of substitute for a gay pride parade.

Judith Halberstam (2005) claims that "shame can be a powerful tactic in the struggle to make privilege (whitening, masculinity, wealth) visible" (p. 220). She strongly criticizes the identity politics of white gay males that exclude the queer adult brown man, the absence of appropriate white gay masculine language for discussing shame, and the role of the brown gay male body in the white shame narrative. She presents (while criticizing) three solutions to the white gay male shame: (a) normalization whereby gay white men can work through gay shame by producing normative masculinities and presenting themselves as uncastrated, muscular, whole; (b) projection/aestheticization; and (c) adoption of "gay shame [that] can be used . . . in ways that are feminist and antiracist" (pp. 228–229).

Unlike the Israeli gay who has come out of the closet and romanticizes gay pride to deal with his shame, Ashraf's situation, in the context of shame as a "gendered form of sexual abjection" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 226), is complex. The tension between being closeted or out that Ashraf is forced to deal with does not conceal the tension between pride and shame (exemplified by his participation in the rave), but rather between (gay) pride and (racial) humiliation. To be gazed at (at the checkpoint) is, for Ashraf, a physical experience of shame involving feminization and castration, which (in contrast to Noam's experience) undergoes racialization and is not transformed into pride. The checkpoint experience, unlike the childhood experiences of the white gay, is not transformed from "abjection, isolation, and rejection into legibility, community, and love" (p. 221). This is true not only because Ashraf is too young to have had the chance to adopt the theoretical language of the adult queer to recognize his sexuality, as Halberstam claims, regarding Western gay communities. For Ashraf, humiliation at the checkpoint is both gay shame and racial humiliation. It cannot, therefore, be reinterpreted or resituated in the gay pride world. The film does not offer the option of recognizing both worlds; the more Ashraf becomes gay within the Israeli community, the more his experiences at the checkpoint are suppressed. *Bubble* does not directly address the latent collusion between the different apparatuses of repression and is, therefore, not critical of the tension between racial shame and gay pride. Israeli queer cinema offers the solution of projection: Instead of recognizing the ethnic humiliation of the occupation, it projects, in Halberstam's words, white gay male shame on the "brown male" in the "white narrative" it rewrites. This projection is intensified through disavowals: first, through the playfulness of Noam's passing, that is, by gaining

¹² In comparison, see Nissim Mossek's 2007 Israeli documentary *Citizen Nawi (Ha-ezrach Nawi)*, which documents the tumultuous life of Ezra Nawi, a Jewish-Israeli plumber and political activist for Palestinian rights, as he engages in a personal battle for his partner Fuad, a Palestinian illegal resident. The film uncovers the deep-seated racism and homophobia that are common in Israeli society. Also, see Massad (2007, footnote 103, p. 188).

¹³ See Stein (2010).

access to vulnerability and humiliation without embodying it; second, through Ashraf's self-gay-ization, displacing racial humiliation with gay pride (arriving late to the rave, for example, he hurriedly apologizes and mumbles something about how hard it was to get there and about the checkpoint, and then immediately joins the party); and third, through romanticizing the terror.

Indeed, is it surprising that Ashraf finds himself at the vanishing point of subjectivity? In structuring the suicidal terrorist, the gay Israeli narrative fantasy reaches its most extreme juncture. What is the relation between romance and terror? Between presenting sexual relations and presenting the suicidal terrorist? *Bubble* offers a more progressive representation of interracial sexual relationships between men than had appeared in Israeli cinema before the turn of the century; that is, it is not based on power relationships tied to the tension between penetrating and penetrated.¹⁴ Ashraf and Noam change positions according to the anal-oral circuit. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994) has written, It may be this . . . that distinguishes heterosexual men from many gay men who are prepared not only to send out but also to receive flow and in this process to assert other bodily regions than those singled out by the phallic function. (p. 201)

Even though the film presents a radical sexual structure freed from constraints of (cinematic) tradition, hierarchy, and perception of the body as a battlefield, the gay Israeli narrative cannot integrate the gay racial body (even if, or perhaps because, the narrative rewrites it, *à la* Massad, as a non-racial body).¹⁵ The result is a fantasy of loss.



Suicidal Gay Fantasy in The Bubble: Ashraf (right), and Noam.

Photo: Karin Bar. Courtesy of Eytan Fox and Gal Uchovsky.

The film does not present the suicide terrorist as a radical fundamentalist Moslem— Israeli society's conventional profile—but as a person whose sexuality is repressed and who despairs of ever being able to live as a proud gay in Arab society; that is, he is tragically unable to work through shame and humiliation. *Bubble* does not take responsibility for the (lack of) awareness and/or the playfulness of the “enlightened” Israeli. By tying *shahidism* to the tragic detachment of a man from his social image as well as to traditional Arab society's attitude toward homosexuality, the Israeli narrative is able to cast off its guilt for both Ashraf's gay-ization and his becoming a suicide

¹⁴ For a discussion relating to the 1980s, see Yosef (2002).

¹⁵ In this regard, see Eytan Fox's declaration during an interview with Yodilovitz (2006): “[Yusef Sweid] was amazing, I am completely in love with him and I think he is brave. No one speaks about it, but he is the first Arab teen idol. He makes 16-year-old girls admire him and not say: ‘Disgusting Arab.’ That is power and it couldn't have happened in the Israel I grew up in. I am very proud of him because of this achievement.” (my translation)

terrorist.¹⁶ *Bubble* chooses to solve this through projection, since the film is unable to contain its own epistemological contradictions in a racial and scopic context. Although I do not completely agree with Massad's vehement belief in a Western narrative conspiracy—inter alia because he regards the various Western queer schools monolithic—it is clear that the starting point for understanding this contradiction is linked, as he claims, to colonialism. I believe it is also linked to colonial guilt, which by and large Massad obviously does not relate to. By structuring a terrorist attack, the cinematic narrative of the Israeli gay during the second Intifada projects the repressed sin of denying the occupation (shame/humiliation) onto the closeted Palestinian gay. Noam pays the price of unconscious guilt when he becomes the victim. But even this quasi-confession of unconscious guilt for denying the occupation undergoes gay romanticization during the final scene of the film.

This scene presents an imaginary picture of Ashraf and Noam as children playing together in a playground in Jerusalem, where an Israeli neighborhood (French Hill), converges with an Arab village (Esawiya). The shift from the romanticized fantasy of lost coupling (the camera circles the two at the moment of the explosion; Noam's words of love contrast with the sight of their shrouded bodies) to that of a shared childhood is anchored in Noam's narration; that is, not in Ashraf's (or the *shahidic* promise of paradise),²⁰ but in a seemingly shared fantasy of reconciliation. Except that Ashraf and his family abandoned Esawiya after their home had been demolished and traded their identity as Arabs holding Israeli citizenship to become Palestinian refugees in Nablus. Furthermore, Noam recalls a conflict from his childhood over whether to allow Arab children from Esawiya to play together with Israelis in French Hill. That is to say, Noam "returns" post mortem to the moment of "enlightened" reconciliation. Ashraf seemingly "returns" (in Noam's fantasy) to the same reconciliation, but in actuality returns to an asymmetric and repressive reality of the occupation. Regardless of the nostalgia for a lost paradise of a common childhood that never occurred, the phantasmatic picture of the two with their mothers is taken from the reservoir of Israeli rather than Palestinian images.

Conclusion: Suicidal Mirror Images

Both *Diary of a Male Whore* and *The Bubble* present mirror images that refer to the perennial other. Both films deal with intimate bodily interracial interaction, and in both the symbolic and actual violence of the Israeli occupation precludes their proximity from being free of either past or present traumas. Also, in both films, the imaginary bodily merger becomes a parting and leads to temporal or eternal loss. In *Diary*, after Essam gets paid, he is seen wandering the streets of Tel Aviv, with the red lights of passing cars signifying future danger. In the last scene of *Bubble*, the lovers' bodies are seen from a high angle shot, in the center of the suicide site.

Will Essam become an Ashraf? This absurd post-textual question makes it clear that, although both films stage a psychic mirroring pattern, there is an essential gap between them, as the immense difference in the nature of the sexual relationship—financial transaction versus romantic love—reveals. Analysis of the main mechanisms of sexual and ethnic repression attests to antagonistic consciousness, which places the Nakba/occupation, the rape, and the hustling, on one side, and that situates racial denial of the occupation, denial of the scopic regime, gay-ization, and homo- (suicidal) romance, on the other.

The analyses of *Diary* and *Bubble* discussed in this article, which point to the striking differences between the depictions of interracial relationships in the two films, seek to examine the significance of these differences. More specifically, they seek to explore what these differences mean to Palestinian versus Jewish-Israeli understanding of male (homo)sexuality, repression, and identification, and they look to examine the place of post-traumatic fantasy in shaping the encounter between the I and the other in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

From the Palestinian point of view, post-traumatic memory determines the subject's identity in the present—whether homosexual, prostitute, or illegal resident—as well as the boundaries of interracial pleasure: lack of contact and Genet-esque masturbatory self-sufficiency. According to Abu-Wael's film, Essam will never become Ashraf. The Palestinian, who as a young man experienced the consequences of the conquest, is mentally and

¹⁶ For a different perspective on the suicide terrorist in recent Israeli and Palestinian cinema see Morag (2008). ²⁰

The dialogue contains jokes about this: "If a homo becomes a jihad, who awaits him in heaven, 70 virgin twins or 70 muscle hunks?"

physically subjected to an endless acting out of past traumatic events. Recalling past events is not a way to consciously embrace Palestinian history, but rather an unconscious compulsive repetition of past traumas: the conquest, expulsion, murder of the father, rape of the mother, survivor's guilt. While the mirror images also reveal the castration of Israeli masculinity, the momentary phantasmatic symbolic exchange of "perpetrator-victim-bystander" positions does not prevent the participants from being subjected to memory, mutual dependence, exploitation, and alienation. The subversive act of masturbation, aimed against the omni-voyeuristic Israeli regime with its politics of surveillance, defines Palestinian cinema as post-traumatic cinema fighting for the national cause.¹⁷ *Diary's* defiance intermingles with its claim of victimhood, and though Fox's film makes a similar claim, his definition of victim is totally different. As I hope the earlier analysis has shown, in Abu Wael's film, victimhood—presented as a direct outcome of Israeli policies of exclusion, occupation, and dispossession—is an ever-reenacted, irrefutable subject position onto which the collaborator's identity is carefully sutured. Therefore, it is not clear how positioning the rape as the constitutive event of Essam's post-traumatic identity stands in relation to Frantz Fanon's claim that "the concern about heterosexual rape functions doubly: it attends, importantly, to violence against women, but it also forcefully masks triangulated desire, whereby the fear—and fantasy—of the penetrated male is displaced onto the safer figure of the raped female" (quoted in Jasbir, 2007). The link in editing between the primal scene and the rape, described earlier, points to the power these events have had on Essam's solitary form of sexuality. *Diary's* retrospective fantasizing turns Fanon's and Bhabha's colonized, apparently "same but not quiet" desire into self-staged victimhood, even at the risk of pathologizing queer sexualities. Moreover, as earlier claimed, both the primal scene and the rape suggest how queer sexualities might form the basis for understanding the link between loss of sovereignty and post-traumatic subjectivity (in this respect, Abu Wael's liminal position as an Arab-Israeli director is very much like that of his protagonist).

Unlike Abu-Wael's *Diary*, Fox's film falls short of explicitly pointing out the historical and social processes that would be the causes of the bubble's bursting. *The Bubble* depicts the terror breaking through the surface of gay playfulness as if despite the gay Israeli denial of the occupation. Even though it subverts previous cinematic representation of interracial homosexual relations, the essential asymmetry is wrapped in a romanticized, self-centered gay fantasy. The failure to acknowledge the radicality of otherness, while ignoring the nature of post-trauma of Israelis living in Tel-Aviv (the Jewish Israeli protagonists' own traumatic subjectivity), results in subjecting the Palestinian other to the world of Israeli gay pride, leaving no place for epistemological mediation.

Both films require the phantasmatic to work through the pathologies of interracial sexual relations—be it a past-oriented fantasy, as in *Diary*, or a future-oriented one, post mortem, as in *Bubble*. But the gap between Abu Wael's endless acting out (that becomes a device for self-examination) and Fox's "benign" ethnocentrism points not only to different options of using the phantasmatic in cinema, or different narrativizations but also, in Bhabha's words, to epistemic violence (Bhabha, 1984, p. 60).

By fantasizing suicidal terrorism, the Israeli gay narrative during the second Intifada (in *The Bubble*) projects the repressed sin of denial of the occupation on the closeted Palestinian gay; that is, on traditional Palestinian society. In this way, it rids itself of any sexual or political responsibility. Nostalgia for the imaginary paradise of a shared childhood is part and parcel of this denial. The sexual celebration of the Israeli white gay produces only a façade of victimhood shared by the Palestinian and the Israeli. Although the suicidal terrorist attack might be interpreted as an unconscious guilt-ridden Israeli act of self-loss, it still ignores the ethnic otherness. Transforming Ashraf into "Shimi" not only makes him invisible but precludes any interconnectedness between sexual and ethnic mechanisms of repression. Projecting gay-ization and the violence of the occupation on the destructiveness of the Palestinian suicide terrorist, while avoiding any subversive attitude towards the (ethnic or sexual) Israeli occupational order,

¹⁷ We should also interpret in this way Elia Suleiman's films, including *The Time that Remains* (2009), as well as films by Michelle Khleifi, Rashid Mashrawi and Ali Nacer. In their book, Gertz and Khleifi (2008) discuss the presence of trauma in some Palestinian films, but do not refer to it as a post-traumatic corpus by definition.

stands in sharp contrast to the ethnic and sexual subversiveness of *Diary*. Till the very end, Noam does not interpret Ashraf's suicide as a mirror-image of himself; that is, as a racially violent projection of Israelis onto Palestinians. Moreover, the deferred deaths of Ashraf and Noam, embodied in the final scene's post mortem redemption, are taken from the Israeli bereavement myth that presents shared death as an integral part of men's comradeship. This myth plays a central role in Israeli society and contributes to forging a gendered and eroticized nationalism. *Bubble* expands the boundaries of this myth in service of the restaging of both Ashraf's Jew-ization and Israel-ization, regardless of the circumstances—Israeli and Palestinian “buddies” dying in a terrorist attack rather than Israeli comrades-in-arms killed in war. In other words, the mechanisms operative in the conflictual interaction between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians stand at the fateful juncture of sexual and national claims to gay pride, love, desire, and pleasure on one hand and of space, rights, justice, and recognition on the other. The collapse of othering stands at the core of these processes and inhibits new possibilities of the self and identity, while curtailing the development of alternative modalities of belonging, connectivity, and intimacy.

Both *Diary of a Male Whore* and *The Bubble* revolve around possible encounters between the I and the other (prostitution, masturbation, gay-ization, passing, romance). In the contested posttraumatic spaces of the 1948 Nakba, the 1967 conquest, and the second Intifada, these encounters are subjected to denial, repression, projection, and fantasy. By proving the unavoidable failure of the (phantasmatic) mirror images of each other, the films, in the end, do not represent a wished-for (cinematic) reconciliation, but rather a reproduction of the unsolvable pathology of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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