BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Samirah Alkassim

*Visualizing the Palestinian Struggle* is both a historiographical and theoretical project that approaches the study of films about the Palestinian struggle through the intertwining of aesthetics (form) and political discourse. The book comprises three chapters, two interludes, an introduction, and a conclusion, with back matter of filmography, bibliography, and index. Terri Ginsberg discusses and theorizes the following intersecting ideas, conditions, and developments as they pertain to the subject: marginality, the *hasbara* phenomenon, contemporaneity, the dialectical image, and the recent growing shift in academic solidarity with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in Western public opinion about Palestine-Israel.

Ginsberg frames the selected films as being variously marginalized by global, hegemonic film and media industries. These include production resources to distribution/exhibition platforms, discursive lives, and the institutional silencing and suppression of dissenting voices. Not only are these films central to Ginsberg’s discussion, but their ideological formations, tendencies, and directions are analyzed. Key to this intervention is the role of dialectical montage, which allows for the activation of montage editing, cinematography, and sound design to be self-reflexively deployed. This is the subject of the films discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3 examines films that approach dialectic arguments through the image, emphasizing the role of *mise en scène* and melodrama. Each chapter is organized as a layered analysis focused on close readings of three films. Each film analysis begins by establishing the material conditions of its production and exhibition, which include details about funding sources, biographical information about filmmakers, and audience/critical reception. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of the film’s structural elements, which then launches Ginsberg’s dive into the theoretical concerns of the book. The result is an intellectually engaging immersion into the subject of enquiry in a book that bridges the fields of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and film studies.

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Chapter 1 addresses the period following the second Intifada (2000–2004). Then, North American (and occasionally Israeli) filmmakers often responded to the coverage of the mainstream media establishment of the Israeli occupation and aggressions in presumably informative films. Ginsberg describes the majority of these films as relying on “political messaging and melodramatic pathos” (p. 8) to engage the audience in their narrative strategies. By contrast, Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land: U.S. Media and the Palestinian Conflict (2003) by Sut Jhally and Bathsheba Ratzkoff, Zero Degrees of Separation (2005) by Elle Flanders, and Still Life (2004) by Cynthia Madansky are examined as “counter-challenges” to these tendencies (p. 17).

While Ginsberg questions some of the messages of Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land, she concedes that it presents a “reasoned analysis of media representation” (p. 8) of the Palestinian struggle; its use of dialectical montage, between images and within image/sound combinations to comment on the IDF abuse of power, emphasizes a disjunction between the rhetoric of corporate media and the proof of documentary footage. Ginsberg argues that this reflects the dissimulation of the US media and Israeli claims to a lawful response (pp. 9-15).

Zero Degrees, by contrast, a more complex film and perhaps the cornerstone of this chapter, is an experimental documentary that combines archival and home video footage to debunk Israeli foundational mythology. The film focuses on cultural diversity signified by two intercultural Palestinian/Israeli queer couples (one lesbian, one gay, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Palestinian-Israeli), who respectively live in Israel and the West Bank. In so doing, it counters any notion of a homogeneous and monolithic Israeli identity. The film’s formal elements and structure simultaneously queer “entrenched knowledge and sensibilities about the struggle” (p. 16). Ginsberg points out that this is not the same as depicting queer life under Israeli occupation; rather, it produces a radical refraction of “the Palestinian-Israeli struggle through a cinematic lens that may be designated ‘queer’ in a political-aesthetic sense” (p. 17). In doing so, Zero Degrees reinforces multiple and intersecting layers of oppression: settler colonialism, heteronormativity, xenophobia, and ethnic nationalism. Another experimental work, Still Life both documents and “cinematically critiques” (p. 16) the violent effects of occupation on Palestinian daily life in the occupied territories, which include the Gaza Strip before the Israeli 2005 withdrawal. The result is a disabling of “the fetishistic consumption—racializing incorporation—of human suffering” (p. 29) found in many Palestine-solidarity films that focus on abjection of the subjugated. Instead, through the layering of information, the film positions the viewer as “a radically alterior [sic] interlocutor,” who cannot ignore the realities presented by the film (p. 30).

Chapter 2 focuses on leftist films produced during the 1970s, informed by the global militant Third Cinema movements and solidarity struggles: To Live in
Freedom (1974-5) by Simon Louvish, and The Palestinian (1977) by Roy Battersby, starring Vanessa Redgrave. Ginsberg details how each film met with different challenges in its screening life and pressure on the filmmakers, producers, and exhibition entities by organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Defense League in the US. While each film is given generous critical attention, the chapter’s centerpiece is Ginsberg’s discussion of Occupied Palestine, in which she theorizes the contemporaneity-effect found in its lingering relevance today, 40 years after its release. She also discusses the importance of time as stolen and occupied, not only in the sense of lost histories or historical disruption for the diaspora and internally displaced, but in terms of labor in the Marxist sense of “human life and work transformed into commodity-value” (p. 44).

In To Live in Freedom, Ginsberg sees the “anti-aesthetic” function of satire “as a potentially revolutionary gesture” in disturbing social hierarchies (p. 56). Its focus on Israel’s racist treatment of Palestinians and Mizrahim (oriental Jews) foregrounds the systemic racism and classism as fundamental problems in the Zionist project. The film also places Palestinian perspectives at its “critical center” (p. 61). In an interview with exiled intellectual Fouzi El-Asmar, who breaks the fourth wall, he addresses the camera/spectator to warn that classism, not nationalism, will cause further turmoil in the region (p. 63). The Palestinian by “BBC veteran” (p. 66) Roy Battersby narrates interviews with Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and archival material of the Palestinian struggle, including footage shot in the refugee camps during the Lebanese civil war. Ginsberg attributes most of the film’s negative backlash to its explanation and justification of Palestinian armed resistance as participating in the anti-colonial struggles of the Third World (p. 67). She discusses the effect of a film about popular class struggle that relies on the star power of British actress Vanessa Redgrave, who is framed both as observer and interlocutor, and who undergoes a transformation similar to that of the intended spectator.

Chapter 3 departs from the rest of the book by focusing on recent commercial fiction films produced in countries allied with Palestine to varying degrees (Iran, Egypt, Britain/Israel). These films were variously marginalized in their exhibition lives: Canary (2002) by Javad Ardakani; Gate of the Sun (2003) by Youssef Nasrallah; and The Promise (2011) by Peter Kosminsky. One of the few Iranian feature films made about the Palestinian struggle, Canary is about a Palestinian family living under the Israeli occupation. Although never screened publicly in Iran, it had a successful run at international film festivals, including in the US. Ginsberg attributes this to a “strategy for evoking empathy” (p. 91), which she sees as operating on both the linguistic and allegorical level. To unleash meanings that bypass censorship, Canary uses spoken Arabic and a caged bird that represents imprisonment, as well as the role of a child protagonist. But on a deeper
level, a pan-Islamic and pluralistic solidarity are asserted throughout the film, despite the fact that the main character is Christian, which helps veil the former from international censors.

By contrast, Ginsberg argues that *Gate of the Sun*, a 270-minute-long film, based on Elias Khoury’s novel by the same title, resists allegorizing the subject. The film employs mirroring devices, including splitting the narrative into two halves, that respectively project two historical eras: the 1948 Nakba, and the post-’67 Naksa (p. 101). Ginsberg sees the film, consistent with other Nasrallah films, as integrating realism and melodrama while politicizing them.

An additional contrast to the above two films, *The Promise* is a four-part narrative television series produced by British Channel 4. It is structured as a series of flashbacks told by a narrator whose dying grandfather was a soldier in the British Mandate. The narrator is reading his diary, which recounts his experiences in Mandate Palestine, as she travels to Israel, ostensibly to accompany a friend preparing to join the IDF. Partially financed by an Israeli company, Ginsberg sees *The Promise* as a *hasbara* piece that reflects a “soft Zionist position” (p. 112). It presents the Nakba as an unfortunate outcome in its narrative of discovery (p. 112) and employs the Palestinian suicide bomber trope, even as it draws interesting parallels among European fascism, Irgun violence, and IDF violence.

While no less provocative and pioneering than the other chapters, chapter 3 raises new questions that are answered upon reflection. It begins by situating the Israeli *hasbara* phenomenon, which has increased in power since 2000 and has since come to regulate allegiance to the state in all Israeli cinematic/media productions. While this explains in part how *The Promise*, an Israeli co-production, participates in *hasbara*, it is unclear how Ginsberg is positioning *Canary* and *Gate of the Sun* in relation to *hasbara*. In previous chapters, she had established that the Palestine-solidarity documentary films of the 1970s, and the more recent wave following the Second Intifada, rely on dialectical montage to advance their critiques of Zionism. Chapter 3, by contrast, argues that recent narrative commercial films/television programs advance their critiques within the image dialectics through *mise en scène* and melodrama. While it may be challenging for non-film experts to grasp the meaning of the dialectical image, and how it intersects with the *hasbara* phenomenon, such questions invite further scholarly inquiry for researchers to develop new modalities of film studies.

*Visualizing Palestine* is a groundbreaking resource on films of Palestine solidarity. The book presents a valuable teaching tool at the undergraduate and graduate levels. It would make essential reading for the study of Palestine cinema for its simultaneous analysis of marginal films and their critique of the hegemonic systems that silence them. To use any part of this book would be an affirmative act of solidarity.