

Mobilisations on Stage -  
The Image of the Real and the Verity of the Image.  
Beirut 20.11.2009

Small exercise:

- 1) Try to keep the first image that comes to your mind when I say Israeli-Palestinian Conflict now. What does it show? Who made it?
- 2) Think about a film or a still image about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict that impressed you. What does it show? Where was it shot? In the territory itself? Elsewhere? Is it indoor or outdoor? Does it resemble the image you saw before? Maybe there are more images coming up now.

### **The Image of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

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I was asked to present a paper on "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Image" for this conference on Mobilization on Stage. Yet I cannot associate the images of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with mobilization anymore. What I observe feels rather like stagnation. At least this is true for the films that are dominating the festivals and attract crowds.

It seems that the term Israeli-Palestinian conflict in connection with documentaries always carries a mobilizing concept; a concept that includes a certain movement. In this presentation I want to talk about directions of movements rather than mobilization.

Movement 1: The situation on the ground, be it in the 67-territories or the 48-territoires, is deteriorating constantly and quite fast. Over the last 13 years (since Oslo) there is a straight-line movement down.

Movement 2: Documentary film-makers who deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are on the rise. Since about 15 years (slightly before Oslo) some of them make impressive carriers and good money. A movement up.

Movement 3: Festivals, cinemas, and solidarity groups show documentaries on the conflict, on the horrors of the situation, or on the wall (which by now is shown from every possible angle). More or less the same group of movie-goers comes to watch. Like in a ritual they reconfirm their views on the hopelessness of the situation. A movement of constant circulation, an open loop.

Movement 4: The reality documented and the popularity of the documentaries rotate in opposite directions. This I say against the assumption that mobilizing films ideally should support the creation of awareness if not a struggle for liberation. They should take the same direction.

What makes films on this specific conflict so attractive? What is their image?

What are the images we are presented? What is their purpose and what do they reflect? Do they mobilize or document still stand?

It seems that over the last 40 years no other conflict was displayed as much as the Israeli-Palestinian one. It was filmed for TV, reflected in films and recorded in still photography. Most of the images we know – or have access to - are shot in the territory of the conflict itself, a territory which is not accessible for the vast majority of Arabs. A conflict documented by foreigners who are usually not speaking the respective language and are illiterate to the codes of the societies and place (including Israelis filming Palestine), or explained by those who are caught it.

Today the dominant subjects of films that deal with the conflict are powerless victims when it comes to the representation of Palestinians and victims of Zionist militarism when it comes to the representation of Israelis.

The majority of films, no matter where the director comes from, have Palestinian protagonists though. Mainly they are simple people, often nameless, representing a collective. The more desperate they are, the more they are exposed to direct Israeli violence - like house demolitions or soldiers at checkpoints - the more real the documentary seems to be. For the audiences the verity of the image seems to generate from imminent danger or violence of the situation shown on screen, whereas films that deal with structural violence are perceived as harmless.

An Example: Two documentaries about the day-to-day-life in Jerusalem just around the beginning of the second Intifada demonstrate this. Alia Arasoughly's *Hay mish Eishi/This Is Not a Living* and Tawfik Abu-Wael's *Natreen Sallah el-Din/Waiting for Sallah el-Din*; both produced in Palestine in 2001. Coincidentally the introductory parts of both films were shot at the same street in East-Jerusalem, one in August 2000, just before the Intifada, and one in October 2000, just after the outbreak of the Intifada. Both portray then four people in their daily routines. *This Is Not a Living* opens with scenes of East-Jerusalem which are quite familiar to those who watch the news somewhat regularly. The streets are crowded with people on their way to prayer (most probably the scene was shot on a Friday); there are lots of armed police, partly on horses, people are screaming and there are incidents of Israeli police hunting down or beating up Palestinians. The music underlines the threat, here and there people who are rushing give a short interview and let their anger out.

*Waiting for Sallah El-Din* opens with a short text introducing Sallah el-Din. The first image is of the moon followed by a close-up of the ear and cheek of a sleeping man. A place-seller who is soon getting up for his shift in front of the Israeli Home Office, which is situated in East Jerusalem. The Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem have to apply for everything at the Home Office: identity-cards, travel-permits, birth-certificates, marriage-licenses, death-certificates, etc. The queues are long and those who can afford to buy a place. The camera is with these cool, small-time criminals and an old man who came in the middle of the night to ensure himself a place in line. He does not understand why there should be thirty people in front of him, he sees only three youngsters. These scenes happen every night during the week. From off-screen a voice reads a Palestinian poem about waiting as a Palestinian, waiting for everything, being trapped in a state of immobility.

In Arasourly's film the population is nothing but a victim, which does not really enable the viewer to identify. The Palestinian case seems hopeless if not lost. This tends to inspire a feeling of pity for the "other" and in this way confirms certain Western as well as Arab views. Abu Wael's approach is not related to a specific time or event but rather looking at long-term issues. Yet – or hence - *This Is Not a Living* was screened at many festivals around the world and one could say it was quite a success. *Waiting for Sallah el-Din* was hardly ever selected. As distributor of the latter, I had many conversations with festival and TV programmers about their decision. Most people could not get connected to the film, the pace was too slow and the subject seemed irrelevant. The day-to-day images were too foreign to them.

*Their* Palestine/Israel carries different images. Their Palestine/Israel is an imagined place. It is mainly the foreigners to this conflict that finance the films, make decisions about the stories that are told, and the images that are shown. They decide about the pace of the films. TV-viewers, according to commissioning editors, have to understand within the first three minutes what a film talks about. Editing has to be fast, no matter if that speed is related to the pace of the reality and the place that is shown. The images of shootings, burning barricades, and house demolitions are dynamic and fit general rules of TV-programming. Hence they became our image of the conflict. They are part of a reality, yet a small one. The reduction of the conflict to these dynamic images denies an analysis of their origin as well as the question about the consequences. The isolation of dynamic images from their context and their repetitive use conveys deadlock or open loops.

Any kind of possible mobilization through documentaries is thwarted by the subordination of the films and their makers to general rules of the film industry. The movement of the films that get exhibition is high speed in limited space. The films that are shown in niches tend to have a slow pace and expand to vast mental territories. They force the viewer to reflect and create movement in the mind.

The dynamics of the film industry and the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do not correlate. Coming back to the four movements that I introduced in the beginning it is very much the conditions of production and the market dominance of war-action or news-images that create certain stagnation. The images stagnate or circulate in an open loop while the real situation is changing constantly, as mentioned before, in a straight-line down.

In addition due to the de facto lack of any solution for the conflict there are no mobilizing parties that create dynamic. Yet there is mobilizing potential in the films we can watch. Films like Tawfik Abu Wael's independent *Waiting for Sallah El-Din* (Palestine 2001), Mohamed Soueids independent *Nightfall* (Lebanon 2000) about his time in the Lebanese student squat in Fatah, or Sandra Madi's *Perforated Memories* (Jordan 2008, O3-Production for al-Arabyia) that meditates about veteran PLO-fighters in Jordan which are not paid their pensions, call for reflection. They are films that open the mind, they are demanding, they take the conflict back to – or keep it inside - the Arab region and show its destructive presence today. They are Arab productions that rarely make it to the European festivals and that live in a region with an absence of exhibition space. These films create meetings between the protagonists and the viewers and when we leave the cinema we take their stories and their warmth with us. They are moving images.

- Keep in mind as other sample for discussion -

Another approach to telling the conflict is through personal stories. They allow to identify and to empathize and suggest a development that has a direction. Yet despite the more recent development in Arab documentary filmmaking that calls for individualism and rather personal stories - like Azza El Hassan's films or *Private Investigation* by Ula Tabari – the protagonists are not remembered as individuals but as Palestinians.

In contrast to that everybody – at least in the West – tries to remember Ari Folman's name. In his *Waltz with Bashir* he is dealing with his memories and traumas as Israeli veteran of the Lebanon war in the 1980s. It is a story that singles him out of the Zionist war making collective. The one against the many is more dynamic than the one out of many. Folman's story in which he blames his national collective suggests a new and challenging view and implies certain courage. As film this setting is interesting and dynamic. It does not matter if I agree or not that the film offers any novelty or a critical view, it works because of its obvious motion.

In her *Private Investigation* Tabari investigates on the absurd and violent phenomenon that Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, have to celebrate Israeli Independence Day in public schools (which are segregated from the Jewish schools) at the day that is their Naqba Day, the day of the catastrophe of expulsion. She is one out of many, her singling out of the collective is less dynamic than Folman's. She is turning against the Israeli occupation and in that (reduced) sense does not promise a new gaze. The vast majority of spectators of these films is situated in the West, namely in Europe. Because of their illiteracy to the social codes the provocation in the title *Private Investigation* is not understood. The images of a rather bourgeoisie Palestinian family inside Israel, in a Palestinian city decorated with Israeli flags is not read as anything special, dramatic or scary by these audiences. People would not even consider that there might be anything challenging in it. The motion of this picture does not take place on the screen but rather in the mind of the viewer. This kind of films demands an openness to watch and listen carefully, the readiness to bare uncertainty and to leave the cinema with open questions.