

In "The Time That Remains" Elia Suleiman tells a story of Palestine through memories of his own family. Burlesque, tender, ironic, and moving; the view he provides of this tragic story is that of an artist, and not an ideologist. Keaton and Tati have found a new brother in film.

Interview by Pascal Mérieau

An interview with
the Palestinian Director
ELIA SULEIMAN,
UNIVERSAL FILM MAKER

Le Nouvel Observateur - Do you feel frustration at being presented not as a film maker, but as a Palestinian film maker?

Elia Suleiman – I feel this is changing, that I am gradually reaching the rank of director to whom one asks questions that put their new film into relation with their previous films. Journalists, to me, seem less convinced by their own questions on Palestine, because they feel obliged to ask them, and I don't have any personal answers to give them: my work is to show. The idea would never occur to anyone to ask these questions of a French film maker; that would be completely daft. I think this attitude appears to be linked to colonialism and post-colonialism, it's like a residue, and the media are still hooked to these after-effects.

I don't want to spout truisms, but to a certain extent liberalism decides the position of the media, which expect the film maker to deliver information. My films are the complete opposite; even a negation of this. Nobody has an expectation of me to know the events of 1948; the 1948 I show in the film is only "my" 1948. The sequence lasts 20 minutes and is situated in Nazareth, a town where practically nothing happened. Ben Gourion has given the order to the army to by-pass Nazareth, which was invaded by refugees. You can read the history of this in books; you don't need my film for that. I think that film makers such as Kiarostami or Kusturica encountered the same problem, but it is no longer an issue for them. Let's say I'm getting closer to them. My cinema, by its style and its aesthetic, goes against that.

N.O. – "The Time That Remains" may seem like the third part in a trilogy begun by "Chronicle of a Disappearance" and continued with "Divine Intervention". Was this your plan?

E. Suleiman – As a spectator and critic of my own films, I am conscious that the three films form an ensemble, but that was never my plan. It's true that at the end of "Chronicle of a Disappearance", you almost expect to see "To be continued... ", but even today, I really don't know. This film might be a conclusion, in fact. My mother died last January. I wanted her to be in a scene and I knew that she wasn't well, so I decided to start the filming with her. But the 1948 sequence was the most demanding in many ways and by delaying filming it, I ran the risk of not having enough money to finance it. The producer advised me to spend the money for this sequence, because we didn't know if we would still have it later. Of course, he was right.

N.O. – Why seven years between "Divine Intervention" and "The Time That Remains"?

E. Suleiman – Promoting "Divine Intervention" took a long time and I didn't really start work on this film until 2005. In fact, I was working on two different scenarios at the time which, in the end, have both become sort of joined together. And then, the project changed quite considerably: originally, several sequences were set in New York and Paris. Having filmed and roughly edited the 1948 sequence, which was going to be followed by a sequence in New York, I thought long and hard, I had many sleepless nights, I gradually moved away from the "horizontal" format of the film and moved towards a "vertical" construction, therefore abandoning the idea of setting some scenes in Paris and New York.

I feel very fragile when I write, the first screenplays always have an aspect of "look, it's a great screenplay!", but when it comes time to film, often the "great" moments have become strangely less great. I had wanted to allocate more filming time to these moments, and so I decided to change direction. The only person I talked to was the co-producer, Hani Farsi, who told me, "forget the money; do what you want to do." The project became somewhat "decommercialised".

N.O. – How have you dealt with the “historical reconstruction” side of the film?

E. Suleiman – It was very hard. The film has 105 characters, there are so many extras, and it was a huge production for me, although I have never experienced anything that could be called an epic film. Every day, I would arrive on set only to discover that we couldn't have such and such a prop that we needed, that we didn't have enough funds. I worked with a constant feeling of loss, of something missing. The perfect take probably doesn't even exist, yet I couldn't even dream of it, I didn't have the time to perfect, I had to move on to the next shot. To keep myself going I had to experience an exercise in humility, and this is an interesting paradox: this led me to what I had really wanted, without actually realising it, which was to find a way to strip the film of its slightly pompous side. The feeling of missing something gave me a real sense of bitterness, and it isn't easy to accept that, of the fifteen elements planned the day before, you'll only get three. But that had to do and this constraint has woken within me a creativity I didn't know I had. The sparse set suddenly seemed more brilliant; the actors seemed to give me more. It was a bit like when you're in the kitchen, and you're making a dish with very few ingredients: you have to become even more creative. In saying that, I think of young people who are preparing to make films. They have to realise straight away that a huge capacity for resilience will be required of them to maintain their work to a certain level of quality. I don't want to preach this to them, I want to show them: when you enter into this almost monastic conception of work, it becomes an immense pleasure.

N.O. – In your film you relate events which happened before you were born. Did your father take on the role of scriptwriter?

E. Suleiman – For everything I experience, even partially, I use the strongest moments of my own memory, the soldiers who came to arrest my father, the neighbours in tears after something I didn't understand. The film takes on its own style, and it is doubtless the least epic of sagas! The 1948 sequence is, however, very narrative and to conceive it I listened to my father a lot, I watched him a lot. When he became ill, he started to write. Two hours a day. The screenplay is the result of notes that he left me. Throughout filming, I always stayed very close to the actor who plays my father at an age when I didn't know him, of course: Saleh Bakri is not from Nazareth, he asked people who knew him, what my father was like, how he conducted himself in such and such a circumstance. My father was not a giant, but he was extremely strong. When a problem presented itself in the neighbourhood, people would come and ask for his help. He loved the cinema and knew all the Hollywood films of his time, as well as the great Egyptian productions, which I didn't know anything about. Our relationship was never like a traditional father – son relationship, but it's true that I left when I was very young. At 17, I was accused of being part of a gang and also of being a communist sympathiser, but in fact my relationships were mainly dominated by my sexual impulses! I wasn't even remotely politically militant nor criminal, but within 24 hours I had to make the decision to leave and I found myself in London, where I knew practically no-one. I washed dishes in a Lebanese restaurant, I was an illegal immigrant and people hated me as, at that time, they hated all Palestinians. I remember another pot-washer, an Egyptian, who persecuted me. But then, for someone who had nothing but Led Zeppelin on the brain, it wasn't so bad living in London. In Nazareth, I was the drummer in a hard rock group, with *heavy metal* tendencies...

N.O. – Then you lived in New York?

E. Suleiman – I spent twelve years there, when I was 21 to 33. It was in New York that I started my self-taught training. I would see three or four films a day. I used to go to a rehearsal room, I'd buy Chinese food and I discovered Bresson, Hou Hsiao Hsien... I remember that the old people in the film "A Summer at Grandpa's" seemed to strangely resemble the old people in Nazareth. As do those in the Ozu's films, too.

N.O. – Was it also in New York that you discovered Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati, with whom you're often compared?

E. Suleiman – On set for "Chronicle of a Disappearance", Jean-Paul Mugel, the sound engineer, kept telling me that this scene reminded him of Tati, or that shot reminded him of Keaton, but I had never seen their films, I didn't know anything about them. And I stopped myself from watching them before finishing my film. Afterwards, it was a revelation, and of course I saw everything that my films have in common with theirs. Buster Keaton's films are incredibly vibrant, it's a shame to confine them to museums; it's as if their hung on a wall in the gallery. In effect, Buster Keaton died twice: first was when he lost everything and had to give up making his own films, then again when we made his work into a museum piece. How many defeats and humiliations, did Tati suffer? How long did they hold him back? And all that so that now the world celebrates him. Why do people do that to themselves? I'm thinking of young people again, personally I have the great privilege of not being bitter, but there's no doubt that the politics of producing must be completely revised, so that the utmost trust is given to the creator.

N.O. – Do you handle the scenes in which you appear as an actor differently to those where you do not?

E. Suleiman – The scenes I act in do have a different tone. It's a question of ambiance. I'm like a false note in music. Or a refrain in a song, which gives the film a different rhythm. But there's no particular difficulty, only that I sweat more, because of the make-up, and the costume. It is tiring, but it's also a pleasure, akin to the pleasure of experiencing something for the first time, in that I don't have a prior vision of *how it will go* and that everything you see on screen comes essentially from intuition. And remember; I'm only an actor every seven years! When I act, I only give the *auteur* in me a limited amount of freedom! I generally use very few professional actors, in this film it was about 5% of the cast. Actors from a theatre background tend to over-act; I prefer a more neutral

expressiveness, so that the spectator can decide the exact nature of the expression for themselves. Similarly, although I don't follow a strict strategy, I tend to cut rather than add. This is another way to let the audience decide.

N.O. – *Do you think of the spectator when you're writing or filming?*

E. Suleiman – Actually, I try to do what I would want to see, hoping the spectator will also like it. Claiming to know in advance what they'll like is an unbearable form of arrogance, which comes across as contempt for the audience. Also, working on a film is work that you do on yourself, you have to find the impetus from within you and bring out what you have inside. If not, you'll never reach an emotional level; you'll limit yourself to an intellectual level. You lay yourself bare, you are absolutely defenceless, and you are transparent. On the one hand, you may get cold, but on the other, you know that the film is fully dependent on you, and the people who support you, who incidentally become rarer and rarer. Very few people in this profession truly trust the director. People tell me "Divine Intervention" was not as good as "Chronicle of a Disappearance"; and these are the same people who said at the time that they didn't like that first film. There are so many barriers today separating spectators from films.

N.O. – *How would you describe your personal relationship with Palestine?*

E. Suleiman – I do not have any exclusive right to the question of absent homeland. I don't even know what a homeland is. Neither can I say that it is a dream. If I ever had a land, it would have become a kibbutz, it would be covered in barbed wire and criss-crossed with concrete walls. I have no more right to everything that affects the Diaspora. Anyway, my personal situation has meant I've been exposed to huge cultural diversity. I read haphazardly, in every sense. It is distance that has allowed me to make my own culture. Most people think that never being the centre of the event is regrettable, but for me it was almost lucky. Dying on Palestinian soil is no sacred mission to my eyes. And I definitely don't want to be buried in Nazareth: the cemetery is so dreadful! The Palestine that I show in my films is everybody's Palestine. The house is everybody's house. The mother is everybody's mother. Do I feel any real nostalgia for a land that exists? I don't really know. But compassion for people suffering, absolutely! Israel is in permanent denial. I do not relate the Palestinian situation to the tragedy of the Holocaust, I'm not comparing the two at all, but is there a difference between the denial of the Holocaust by Ahmadinejad and the denial of the Palestinians by Israel? It's barbarity. People must feel as ashamed by this denial as they do by the other. And when Netanyahu says that he will give Palestinians a land of their own! What does he intend to do? Put people on lorries, like in 1948? He should be ashamed! The world's hypocrisy in this regard is insane, unbelievable. Only Obama has started to talk sensibly, even if it's far from enough.

N.O. – *Where do you live now?*

E. Suleiman – I don't really know where I live! I moved to Paris after "Divine Intervention". I don't speak French, but I just about understand it. I write in Paris. And do my cooking in Paris. Sometimes I get an idea and forget to write it down, because I want to find an ingredient for a dish. Cooking is actually my main activity. When you cook, you can concentrate on a knife, on the sound that it makes on the board or the vegetables. And, like cinema, cooking is about assembling and creating a balance between different elements. I am crazy about sushi knives!

Born on the 28th July 1960 in Nazareth, Elia Suleiman, after leaving Palestine aged 17, went on to live in London and then New York, before moving to Jerusalem in 1994, and Paris, where he has lived since 2002. His films include: "Introduction to the End of an Argument" (doc., 45 mn, 1991), "Homage by Assassination" (28 mn., 1992), "Chronicle of a Disappearance" (1996), "War and Peace in Vesoul" (Co-produced with Amos Gitai, doc., 1997), "Arab Dream" (30 mn., 1998), "Cyber Palestine" (16 mn., 2000), "Divine Intervention" (2005), "Irtebak" (segment from the film "To Each His Own Cinema", 2007), and "The Time That Remains", (2009)

A SHORT HISTORY OF PALESTINIAN CINEMA

Recently, the TV channel Arte showed a remarkable documentary by Raphaël Nadjari (creator of such magnificent films as, "The Shade", "I'm Josh Polonski's Brother" and "Avanim") on the history of Israeli film. The first film identified is "Oded hanoded" ("Oded the Wanderer"), made in 1933 – the year Hitler came to power. A propaganda film, which illustrated the dream of national Jewish liberation, incarnated by the Zionist movement: the dream of one day having a representative national homeland in Palestine, under British rule. The increasing power of Jewish immigration animated by this Zionist ideal would automatically give rise to, as an equal and opposite reaction, to Palestinian national consciousness that cinema would soon reflect: in fact, the birth of Palestinian cinema can be pinpointed to 1935, with the brief silent documentary that **Ibrahim Hassan Sirhan** made during a visit to the Holy Land by King Saoud.

In 1945, Sirhan and **Ahmad Hilmi al-Kilani** would found the Arab Film Company. They produced two films, lost in the bombing of Jaffa during the Israeli-Arab War in 1948. This was also the year – a black year for Palestinians – of the Naqba (the Catastrophe), marking the beginning of exile for hundreds of thousands of them and the creation of the State of Israel, which another Palestinian film maker, **Salah Baderkhan**, would film, before escaping as a refugee to Jordan, "The Dream of One Night". This is considered the first Palestinian fiction film.

Next came a long silence of more than fifteen years. Palestinian cinema would not come out of this silence until 1964, with the formation of the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), and then other resistance organisations based in Jordan and Syria, set up mainly to produce works heralding the glory of the Resistance and *fedayeen*. From 1968 to 1982, more than 60 films, mostly documentaries, were subsequently made. A militant period which would end with the expulsion of Palestinian organisations from Lebanon (in 1982) and the disappearance of the PLO film archives at Beirut (their whereabouts are still unknown). Amongst them was just one fiction, "Return to Haifa", by **Kasem Hawal**, a film maker originally from Iraq.

During these tumultuous years, there were films about Palestine, but they were made elsewhere in the Arab world, such as "The Dupes", by Egyptian **Tawfik Saleh** (1972), or "Kafr Kassem", by Lebanese **Bohrane Alaouie** (1976). But it was film maker **Michel Khleifi** who, with "Fertile Memory", a documentary made in 1980, and especially "Wedding in Galilee", a fiction film selected for the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes in 1987 (the year that the First Intifada began, famous for the media coverage of stones being thrown at tanks) which would bring Palestinian cinema to its true political apex, and open the pathway to the type of *Auteur Cinema* of which **Elia Suleiman** is now the most shining example.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE: A TRUE STORY

RAMLA HOUSE

In 1948, Dalia and her family left Bulgaria for Israel, where they moved into the house of an Arab family who had been forced to move by the war. In 1967, Bashir knocked on the door: he wanted to revisit his childhood bedroom... René Backmann, a friend of Dalia and Bashir, tells their story of friendship and their shared dream for peace.

Within the life of every Palestinian, there is exile. Exile experienced. Exile inherited through family memories. Exile carried within the heart of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, the stories of Elias Sanbar, Mourid Barghouti, Raja Shehadeh, and in Edward Saïd's essays. Whether it carries its victims off from Jaffa to Ramallah, from Saint-Jean d'Acre to Santiago, from Chili or Jerusalem to Beirut, exile is inseparable from the personal histories and collective experience of Palestinians. For one simple reason. Of the 1.5 million men and women who lived between the Mediterranean and the River Jordan before 1948, 850,000 found themselves, after the formation of the State of Israel, chased from their villages and concentrated in seventy-one refugee camps, 425,000 stayed in the West Bank of Jordan or in the Gaza Strip, and 112,000 became "Arab-Israelis", in other words, Palestinian holders of Israeli passports.

More than 60 years later, of the 10 million Palestinians on the census at the Central Bureau of Statistics in Ramallah, almost half are dispersed throughout the world, from Australia to Canada, 3,600,000 live in the West Bank and Gaza, 1,500,000 in Israel. At least 1.3 million still live in the refugee camps in UN Occupied Territory, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Chased from their homes first by Haganah fighters in 1947 and 1948, some of them had to flee again in 1967, during The Six-Day War, ahead of the invasion of the West Bank of Jordan and Gaza by the Israeli army, which created 200,000 new refugees.

Do Israelis know this? Yes, when they accept knowing it. Thanks to the work of their historians and testimony from some of the main people involved, they all have the means. Itzhak Rabin himself has told in his Memoirs how the expulsion of Palestinians from Lod and Ramla, to the east of Tel Aviv, was *"one of the hardest missions of [his] career"*. *"The population of Lod,"* he writes, *"did not leave of their own free will but had no choice. How can you make a population walk more than 20 kilometres without using force? The residents of Ramla understood: They evacuated the town without hesitation."*

At the request of the government, Rabin had to withdraw this testimony from the first version of his memoirs: it was added back in to later versions. In the mean time, the version of the forced evacuation of these two towns given by Rabin was confirmed by the work of researchers sifting through the archives of the Israeli War of Independence when they became available, in 1978. *"In Ramla,"* Tom Segev notes for example, *"the Arab houses were in good condition.. The electricity had been cut but there was running water. Thirty-six immigrant Jewish families from Bulgaria took possession of the first houses made available by the military government. The Palestinians had lost everything. The surviving Jews from Europe found in [the Arabs'] abandoned houses everything they needed to start again: tables, chairs, wardrobes, kitchenware, tableware, clothes, radio sets. And even family photos and pets."*

In 1988, just after the outbreak of the "War of the Stones", I met one of the Bulgarian immigrants from Ramla, Dalia Landau. The story she told me then summed up all the complex relationships which get so entwined between Israelis and Palestinians around the question of land, home, and exile. Dalia Ashkenazi was one year old when her parents left Bulgaria, in 1948, to settle in Israel. She does not remember seeing any family photos or pets but she has a precise memory of her childhood in the Ramla house, allocated to her family by the "property of absentees" authorities. *"We didn't know anything about the house,"* she told me, *"except that it had been lived in once by an Arab family who*

had run away. I liked it straight away. I grew up there with no qualms. Ramla was populated by Jews. The streets had Jewish names. I was a young carefree Israeli. I was nineteen when one morning in 1967, after The Six-Days War, a young dark man came to the front door. He said in faltering English, 'My name is Bashir al-Kheiry. Until 1948, this house was my family home. I would like to see it again. May I come in?' He was nice, calm, smiling. I let him in. We drank tea and talked for a long time. He was twenty-six. It was the first time I had met a Palestinian. It was the first time he'd spoken to an Israeli. He invited me to come and visit his family in Ramallah. My parents agreed I could go and a few days later, I went. He had one brother and nine sisters. Once again, we talked for a long time. Our ideas about the political situation of the time were very different. He was a nationalist, Marxist. He dreamt of replacing Israel with a non-religious state. He didn't seem to understand that, for me, the existence of a Jewish State which allowed me to live according to my culture, my convictions, my ethics, was fundamental. We were both, in fact, looking at the world through the suffering of our own people. And what happened was terrible. I discovered that the house I had grown up in and loved, had been the home to another family, where other children had grown up before being chased out. The main thing I learned was that we had been lied to. I had always believed that the Arabs had fled the Israeli soldiers in 1948 and that they had abandoned their homes like cowards.

This was such a convenient thing to believe. It washed our hands, as the new occupants, of any guilt, or remorse: we hadn't taken over houses emptied by force. We were living in 'vacant accommodation', as they said at the time.

To hear the other side of the story, I went to Ramallah to find the al-Kheiry family. Bashir, a lawyer, and member of the FPLP held by the Israeli security services as one of the organisers of the Intifada, had just been expelled again. An Israeli army helicopter had dropped him off, a few days earlier, with three other nationalists, somewhere in Southern Lebanon. With a word of warning: *"Don't try to come back"*. But his mother and wife, Shéhérazade, offered me tea and coffee, told me their family's story: chased from Ramla in 1948, refugees in Gaza, then chased from Gaza in 1967, and settled in Ramallah. Yes, that was exactly how it happened.

"If there were more Jews like Dalia and her husband Yehezkel, we wouldn't even have been there", the old lady said. "But the story is far from over," continued Shéhérazade. "When Dalia inherited the family house when her parents died, she and her husband decided to turn the keys over to us. Unfortunately, there was something she didn't realise: it is forbidden for an Israeli citizen to give Palestinians any land or property which belonged to them before 1948. So she decided that the house should become a play group for the last Arab families left in Ramla and Lod. But there was a fresh spanner in the works. Israeli Arabs cannot become owners, by private transaction, of property declared vacant in 1948. She is looking for an acceptable legal framework, but one thing is certain: she will never live in that house again. And neither will we. "

Dalia Landau and her husband, in the mean time, have found the solution. Since 1991, the foundation "Open House", supported by donations, houses a play group and a meeting place for Jews and Arabs. In Ramallah, Bashir El-Kheiry and his family approve of this choice, but they have not been able to see the house again, nor will they be able to do so in the foreseeable future: it's on the other side of the separating wall. Because the peace process, which should allow two neighbouring people to one day live side by side, has been substituted by a strategy of separation. This confines the Palestinians in a sort of reserve or homeland, under close surveillance.

And sixty years after El-Kheiry was expelled along with 850,000 other Palestinians, the question of refugees and their "right to return" is always, like the issues of borders, colonies, Jerusalem and water, at the heart of failed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Contrary to what Israeli officials would have us believe, none of the current Palestinian leaders dream of seeing the return of the old Palestinian territory to those exiled in the past and their descendants. What they expect, what they seemed to be on the cusp of obtaining from the Taba negotiations, in January 2001, is a position of principle. They ask that Israel recognises what has happened, admits that the initial expulsion did in fact take place and that a "fundamental wrong" has been done to them. *"The right to return is an inalienable human right. It is therefore non negotiable,"* repeat the Palestinian negotiators. *"But its application and practise are, until this right is recognised."* But the Israelis who have recently brought to power the most far right government in their history may be unlikely to hear this argument...

R.B.

Focus

PALESTINE: A CENTURY-OLD QUESTION... FROM THE BALFOUR DECLARATION TO OBAMA'S SPEECH

2nd November 1917

The British Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lord Balfour addresses a letter to Lord Rothschild, representative of British Jews, announcing that their government "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people".

24th July 1922

The Society of Nations gives its mandate on **Palestine** to the United Kingdom.

23rd-29th August 1929

Riots in Jerusalem and demonstrations all over Palestine against Jewish emigration.

29th November 1947

The UN General Assembly adopts the partition resolution dividing Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State and places Jerusalem and the Holy Lands "Special International Regime". The troubles worsen.

4th April 1948

Haganah, the paramilitary organisation of the Jewish colonies, launches Plan Dalet which foresees action against the Arabs.

14th May 1948

Proclamation by David Ben Gourion of the birth of the State of Israel. The Arab League declares war on the new State.

29th May 1964

Formation in Jerusalem of Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

5th-10th June 1967

The Six-Day War. The Israeli army occupies Sinai, the Golan plateau, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank of Jordan and east Jerusalem, which had been opened to colonisation.

1st February 1969

Yasser Arafat becomes President of the PLO.

5th-6th September 1972

In Munich, a Palestinian commando takes Israeli athletes participating in the Olympic Games hostage. 11 athletes and 5 terrorists are killed.

6th-24th October 1973

October War (or Kippour War) is declared by Egypt and Syria.

6th June 1982

The invasion of Lebanon by the Israeli army and the siege of Beirut.

16th-18th September 1982

Massacre of Palestinians by Phalangist Christians in the camps of Sabra and Chatila, in Beirut, under the eyes of the Israeli army.

9th December 1987

Outbreak in the Gaza Strip then in the West Bank of Jordan of the First Intifada ("The Stone Revolt")

13th September 1993

Yasser Arafat and Itzhak Rabin sign the "Declaration of Principles" at the White House.

1st July 1994

Return of Yasser Arafat to Gaza.

4th November 1995

Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated in Tel Aviv by a religious nationalist extremist, Yigal Amir. Shimon Peres succeeds him.

20th January 1996

Yasser Arafat is voted President of the Palestinian Authority.

February-March 1996

Hamas attacks kill over 100 in several Israeli towns.

28th September 2000

Ariel Sharon's visit to Temple Mount, in Jerusalem, provokes violent confrontation. Beginning of the "Second Intifada".

29th March 2002

In reprisal to several Islamist attacks, Ariel Sharon launches Operation "Rampart" in the West Bank. Yasser Arafat is besieged by Israeli tanks in the "Mukataa".

11th November 2004

Death of Yasser Arafat. Mahmoud Abbas succeeds him.

25th January 2006

Hamas wins the Palestinian legislative elections

27th December 2008

After rocket attacks by Hamas on southern Israel, the Israeli government launches Gaza Strip Operation "Cast Lead". This causes 1,400 Palestinian deaths and Israeli 13 deaths.

31st March 2009

Benjamin Netanyahu becomes Prime Minister. He declares himself in favour of colonisation and hostile to the creation of a Palestinian State.

4th June 2009

In a speech to the Muslim world made at Cairo University, Barack Obama states that colonisation is not "legitimate" and that there is "no other solution than two States".

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FILMED AUTO-FICTION

ME, ME, ME: MAKING MOVING MOVIES

Whether because of economic pressures, overt narcissism or more profound aesthetic requirements: from Méliès to Elia Suleiman, via Hitchcock and Cassavetes, the film maker who acts in his own films, it as old as cinema itself.

François Forestier

The director is essentially curious. Armed with a 16mm Beaulieu handheld camera in snakewood (*Brosimum guianense*), he observes honeypot ants, clouds in South America, even actors. Sometimes, the eye is glued instead to an Arriflex 35 mm camera invented by August Arnold and Robert Richte, it's main interest here is complex love stories, a fall in an elevator shaft, submarines in distress, young girls with pear-shaped breasts and tapering thighs, crooked policemen or liners on course to hit an iceberg. It has even been known for the director to see straight away a bigger picture, in a Todd-Ao 70mm, and film sunsets in the Wadi Roum desert, where the sand is fine and the plumbing faulty. In other words, the director is like a writer, a birdwatcher, an ant farmer or my recently divorced neighbour Lili. He opens his eyes to the world, which is actually a round-about way of talking about oneself. It is a foible that is quite widespread. Except – I have to say – with journalists who practice admirable altruism, apart from the odd note of retort here and there.

Elia Suleiman decided to be the subject of his own film. He was right to do so: saving the need for an actor who, it must be said, would only misrepresent his intentions, he has produced a film in which he is the main character. After all, why deny it? Everyone likes to talk about themselves. If this were not the case, psychoanalysts, priests, concierges and barmen would be bankrupt. I'm purposefully omitting certain public figures who make bling a cardinal virtue, and secrecy a republican obligation. That said, it has been a long time since film makers have had a rush on this particular goldmine: the autofiction film.

Like **Méliès**, a cinematographic magician, **André Antoine**, the ex gas clerk and founder of Théâtre Antoine, loved to act in their own films, which were silent movies at that time. Thus he appears in "Workers of the Sea" in 1917, "Mademoiselle de La Seiglière" in 1920, and, if no-one had stopped him, would have willingly played Romeo and Juliet in his adaptation of Shakespeare. Only his towering size really prevented it: imagine Juliet in braces! A more svelte **Charlie Chaplin** was not held back by such constraints of realism: very early on, he decided to be in front of, behind and next to the camera. Annoyed by producers who stole his ideas and lined their pockets, Chaplin became the very subject of his films, which meant he could get married four times and be thrown out of America accused of Communism. It's a pity: I really liked Paulette Goddard.

The reasons pushing a director to become an actor in front of his own camera are various: vanity (**Jean-Luc Godard**, exasperated in "JLG/ JLG"), the lack of funds (**Jules Dassin** in "Rififi"), detached irony (**François Truffaut** in "The American Night"), vanity (**Mel Brooks** in all its films), the need to test ones limits (as is the case for **Burt Reynolds** in "Gator", his limits were quickly found - beautiful country music, all the same), bond with the spectator (**Hitchcock**), vanity once more (**Marlon Brando** in "One-Eyed Jacks"). There are however some wild directors, artists who go further and further, sometimes even to the corner of rue de Sèvres and rue de Babylone. It was, apparently, that **Orson Welles**, left bar du Lutétia, had the idea for "Citizen Kane", had the superb reflex to make it in America, far away from the insalubrious residents who moved in to the Lutétia as soon as Welles had turned his back. Deep down, one could say that Citizen Kane was the double of Randolph Hearst, the media magnate, but it is actually obvious that the film was a self-portrait. Entered into the pantheon of masterpieces in the blink of an eye, Welles spent the rest of his life trying to maintain this level, and to claim the top spot once again. He never made it. By filming himself, he wore himself out chasing his own tail. Orson never caught up with Welles.

Other film makers regard themselves with irony, with disdain, even with distance. The whole exercise is very difficult, and brushes on the schizophrenic, a disease invented by Mecklenburger Emil Kraepelin in 1889. He would have done better to stay in Java where, apparently, he was interested in the ways and customs of young girls with pear-shaped breasts and tapering thighs. So, **Woody Allen** continued, in film after film, to split himself in two: behind the camera, he is shy and kind. In front of it, he becomes a Jewish egotist whom no-one can stand, persuaded to have case of conscience the day someone offers him a half-price side of pork. He is not alone in this trend to appear as the headliner in his own work: **Michael Moore** seemingly cannot make a film without being in every shot (he's right though; he is funny), **Clint Eastwood** prefers to trust himself rather than a third party (we've never been more spoiled...) and **Nanni Moretti** has a likeable but stubborn way of sharing emotions, illnesses and anxieties. Then there is the most surprising auto-film maker of the last century, that I mention out of pure admiration: **John Cassavetes**. Affectionate, tortured, funny, addictive, and magnificent, he is the Rock of American cinema. For him, filming, "is learning to die" in 24 frames per second.

I almost forgot the most improbable, the most unexpected, and the brightest director of them all: **Jonathan Cahouette**, who made "Tarnation", a film which cost 218,32 dollars and which is a collage of all the pictures, photos, videos, recordings, and drawings ever made about him. There is such a need running throughout the film, that, apart from having made the film, the auteur is also preserved in it. He needed; had an overwhelming, total need, to talk about himself. "Tarnation" is to the artist what the cocked hat is to an academic: vital. Thinking about it though, this obsession with talking about oneself is quite annoying. I don't criticize anyone for having some self-admiration, no, but, we all realise in secondary school, that actually oneself is quite appalling. I realised this whilst chatting to my neighbour Lili, mentioned at the beginning of this article. She wouldn't stop talking about herself, and wouldn't let me get a word in edgeways.

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