

*Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma
and Memory* by Nurith Gertz and George
Khleifi

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I ought to begin by making a confession: I know very little about cinema. If you are reading this review in the hopes that it will reveal something about the unique way in which the authors approach film, I am afraid you will find yourself sorely disappointed. I do, however, know quite a bit about the issues raised in the subtitle of this volume, ‘Landscape, Trauma and Memory’, and that is the basis of the review which follows.

The authors offer Palestinian cinema as a window through which one may view not just Palestinian history, but ‘the place of history in the Palestinian narrative’ (p.190). That narrative, they claim, is far less consistent than it appears on the surface, and the relatively recent emergence of cinema that reflects varied individual experiences seems to attest to that. However, their readings of the films included in the volume seem to be directed back towards the production of a unified Palestinian experience and identity. This no doubt arises from Gertz and Khleifi’s view of the origin of Palestinian cinema, which they trace back to state-sponsored documentary films of the 1930’s and 40’s. It is a fascinating story, with moments of high drama, as cinematic endeavours ebb and flow, often in tune with (though occasionally against) various waves of national fervour. The history is not without gaps – the first two historical periods identified by the authors, 1935–48 and 1948–67, are reconstructed from personal interviews and newspaper clippings, as the actual films are

no longer in existence. This reconstruction is necessarily a speculative task, which the authors occasionally appear to forget, sprinkling the text with words like ‘undoubtedly’, or else departing entirely from the realm of claims supported by evidence, such as in their description of the fate of a cache of First Period films: ‘The movies were possibly handed over to some anonymous clerk, who in turn passed them on to an archive, where they might still be lying, untouched, their whereabouts unknown’ (p.14).

Gertz and Khleifi are at their best when they are able to present actual, extant films in the context of the political and cultural milieu from which they sprang, such as their comparison between the later films of Michel Khleifi (not to be confused with the author, George Khleifi) and the fiction of Ghassan Kanafani and Anton Shammas (pp. 83–86). M. Khleifi’s work is central to the volume, the norm against which other filmmakers are compared. The chapter discussing his work is the third in the volume. It is preceded by the general survey of the entire history of Palestinian cinema, and a chapter titled *From Bleeding Memories to Fertile Memories*. That second chapter traces the development of Third Period cinema from the beginning of the militant movement in the early 1970’s, when films documenting and dramatising the historical patterns of exile began to be made, to M. Khleifi’s first film, *Fertile Memories*, which the authors credit with transferring the focus of Palestinian cinema ‘back to the land’ (p.70).

The title of the book makes clear that the authors consider landscape to be of paramount importance to the interpretation of Palestinian cinema, so we perhaps should not be surprised that the director, who is given credit for bringing landscape into focus in his films, is also given credit for ushering in the new era of cinema. There is, however, a circularity to the argument made here: the authors support their assertions about the importance of landscape by making

reference only to films in which landscape is important. Thus, one can be easily convinced of M. Khleifi's importance to the authors' argument – but his importance to Palestinian cinema outside of this book remains a grey area. Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that M. Khleifi's films are unimportant; to the contrary, even a brief glance at the (admittedly scant) other literature on Palestinian cinema is sufficient to convince one otherwise. The flaw in Gertz and Khleifi's presentation is that they do not make M. Khleifi's importance clear and permit it to become a point of support for their argument, but rather let the two issues of landscape's centrality and M. Khleifi's importance become intertwined – so that neither is able to offer clear support for the other.

This issue persists through the discussion of the other filmmakers to whose work the authors dedicate significant space: Rashid Masharawi, Ali Nassar, and Elia Suleiman. The chapter on Masharawi is particularly challenging in this regard; one is left with the impression that his films are nothing more than studies in ever-constricting landscapes, or else that the authors were so focused on the setting in which the action takes place that they failed to notice the plot entirely. While other portions of the book display a keen awareness of the tensions between individual and collective identity, as well as the complexities of history and politics – the authors' awareness of these complexities is especially notable in several discussions of the tense relationship between Palestinian cinema and Israeli funding – these issues are always subservient to the dominant theme of landscape.

In the end, this drive to tell a single, coherent story is both the greatest weakness and the greatest strength of this volume, which is trapped between reading as a highly specialised piece of scholarship and as a very competent introduction to its topic, entirely suitable for

use as a textbook in an upper level class. I would personally be tempted to use it as the latter – accompanied, of course, by a robust schedule of film screenings.

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