

THE GAY PALESTINIAN IN ISRAELI CINEMA: DESIRE, POWER AND THE COLONIAL GAZE*

LORETO ARES
SUSANA DÍAZ

0. GAZES, DESIRE AND POWER RELATIONS

This article applies a decolonial and queer perspective to the analysis of the (re)production of Palestinian non-normative sexuality in mainstream Israeli films exported to international LG-BTQ festivals.

The epistemological framework that informs this analysis pivots on three main focal points:

1. The postmodern rupture that makes us aware of the power relations interwoven in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and that at the same time invites us to produce situated knowledges (Haraway, 1995).
2. The articulation of a decolonial perspective that inhabits the borders of the hegemonic Euro-and hetero-centric framework which, although inevitably touched by that framework, also contaminates it with *other perspectives and other logics* (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel, 2007).
3. The performative and subversive capacity of discourse, as the only instrument for making sense of reality.

The theoretical framework for this analysis is underpinned by:

1. Intersectional feminisms that arise from Black feminist thought and activism (Crenshaw, 1989) and that explain how all identity variables intersecting in individuals are structurally interdependent and mutually productive.
2. The queer perspective, which applies the performative theories of discourse to gender, and which resists binaries and essentialism in gender and sexuality (Butler, 2010).
3. Critical theories related to Orientalism (Said, 2008) and homonationalism (Puar, 2007).

As for the approach to cinema, the filmic fact is conceived as a cinematographic act and as a discursive device, that is, as a (gender) technology. The analysis presented in this article is therefore

an operation of meaning production, the transformation of the textual space (the film-object) into text, with the aim of breaking down the naturalising mechanisms of discourse: how *truth* is manufactured by concealing, on the one hand, the constructed nature of the image as a representation of reality and, on the other, power relations of colonialism, race, gender, ability, class, etc. The aim, in short, is to unpack the mechanisms that naturalise a certain relationship between the nation-state, sexuality and race in the dominant Israeli LGBTQ (mainly gay) cinema.

The study sample consists of four Israeli films: the Israeli production *The Bubble* (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006); the Israeli-Dutch co-production *The Invisible Men* (Yariv Mozer, 2012); *Undressing Israel: Gay Men in the Promised Land* (Michael Mayer and Yariv Mozer, 2012); and the Israeli-US co-production *Out in the Dark* (Michael Mayer, 2012). The criteria for their selection and definition as dominant narratives were: 1) international distribution with the labels “Israeli” and “gay-themed”, given the specific standard reading that this assigns to them; (2) state-supported production or distribution; 3) promotion at international festivals; and (4) non-normative Palestinian sexuality as a central theme.

The article will focus firstly on the eroticising of violence and domination in *The Bubble*, as well as the documentaries *The Invisible Men* and *Undressing Israel*. Secondly, it will explore the representation of sexual practices in the two fiction films: *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*. These four films naturalise and neutralise the existing power relations, which is evident in both the act of representation itself and the one-way gaze constructed between the Israeli and Palestinian populations. It is this gaze, a vehicle of desire and power that positions the Palestinian as an object, that is analysed here. The article will conclude with an exploration of the mechanisms of a specific type of discourse that constructs and normalises Palestinian sexuality from an Israeli perspective.

I. EROTICISING COLONIAL DOMINATION

The Bubble is a film by Israeli filmmaker Eytan Fox, produced by the Israeli Film Fund in collaboration with the company Uchovsky-Fox and three other Israeli production companies (Metro Communications, Ronen Ben-Tal Films and Feingold Productions). Three other Israeli distributors also contributed to the financing (Keshet, Hot and United King Films). *The Bubble* became one of the most widely distributed Israeli films among international LGBTQ audiences and won the GLAAD Media Award, the Glitter Award for Best Picture, and awards at the Dublin, Miami, Torino and Toronto film festivals.¹

The film tells a story of love between Noam, an Israeli living in Tel Aviv, and a young Palestinian named Ashraf. They first meet at a checkpoint where Noam is working as a reservist and where he drops his passport. Ashraf finds it and goes to Noam's house, where he lives with Lulu and Yali, to return it to him. At that moment, they begin a relationship. Noam, Lulu and Yali, the three Israelis, introduce Ashraf to the Tel Aviv gay scene after giving him a new identity, with the name Shimi, to hide his status as a Palestinian with no legal documentation. Lulu's ex-boyfriend, Sharon, discovers the lie and Ashraf, frightened, returns to Nablus, where he talks about his relationship with Noam to his sister, who does not take it well. Noam and Lulu go looking for him, posing as journalists, and Jihad, Ashraf's brother-in-law, walks in and catches him kissing Noam. A short time later, Ashraf, still in Nablus, discovers that Jihad is going to carry out an attack in Tel Aviv, in which Yali will be wounded. As a consequence of this, the Israeli army retaliates with an attack on Nablus and Ashraf's sister is killed. In desperation, Ashraf volunteers to avenge her death and travels to Tel Aviv with an explosive belt, which he activates just as Noam hugs him in the last scene.

As will be shown below, *The Bubble* sexualises both the checkpoint and Palestinian terrorism,

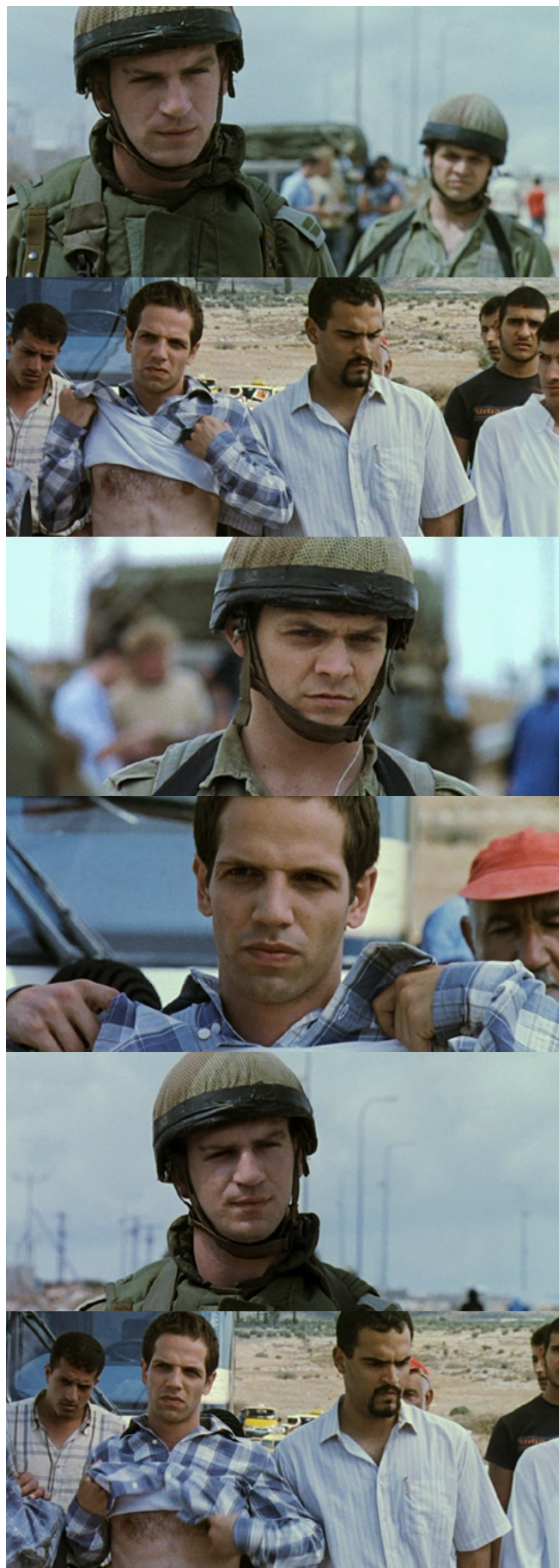
developed in conjunction with the pride/shame binary as described by Jack Halberstam (2005), which is also present in *The Invisible Men*.

In the case of *The Bubble*, the checkpoint is a recurring, visible and violent representation of the colonial power relationship. It separates those who have to ask for permission from those who grant it. The Israeli army justifies the need to undress the Palestinian population as an exceptional measure on grounds of national security. In this way, this practice construes Palestinian bodies both as a threat of imminent danger (terrorists) and as a subjugated object with no agency (objects of the occupation) (Hochberg, 2010: 577-578).

The opening scene of *The Bubble* takes place in this highly charged context of power and violence. In this scene, the order to undress is given only to men, confirming Kotef and Amir's theory (2007) connecting this terrorist/occupied person binary with gender dynamics: the masculinisation of the terrorist and the feminisation of the subjugated figure. A brief medium shot of the senior officer, with Noam out of focus in the background (stillframe 1) is followed by a reverse shot of Ashraf slowly lifting up his shirt (stillframe 2). Next, a close-up of Noam shows him taking off his headphones, watching attentively (stillframe 3), followed by another close-up of Ashraf (stillframe 4). Finally, the camera returns to the senior officer in a medium shot (stillframe 5), after which Ashraf lowers his shirt (stillframe 6).

This succession of shots shows the first time that Noam's and Ashraf's eyes meet. On this occasion, it is not an exercise in omission of the power relations, since these are so explicit that, even the superior officer, a symbol of arbitrary power in the film, is present in the succession of shots and reverse shots. Instead, it is an eroticising exercise: "Stripped of any cultural meaning, the enemy it-

From top to bottom. Stillframes 1-6.
The Bubble (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006)



self could not be appealing as a target. To become a target, it must be *sexualized*" (Kaplan, 2002: 193).

The presence of the senior officer, who serves as Noam's opposite in the good Israeli/bad Israeli binary, allows Noam to emerge unscathed from this scene, homoeroticising the tension while giving the other soldier the representation of hierarchical violence. It is the relationship between that soldier and Ashraf that is violent and colonial; Noam only appears in the scene to introduce desire. Later in the scene, their eyes will meet again, after Ashraf searches for him, with understanding and concern, as they try to help a woman whose water has broken and will soon lose her baby.

In 2005, Halberstam published the essay "Shame and White Gay Masculinity" in which he explores the narrative of homosexual identity structured in a shame/pride binary and how it is racialised and gendered to fit a white male experience. This narrative temporarily places shame before pride and is reclaimed and repositioned by a queer adult with the tools and language to transform their past experiences. In both its academic and activist incarnations, gay shame tends to become a totalising narrative that balances the consumer's focus on gay pride with gay, chic, white, faux-radical shame. Because of their binary structure, shame and pride seem to have covered the entire gay experience. This narrative effectively universalises the (white male) subject who overcomes an experience in which certain privileges have been denied him. For women and for non-white people, shame plays a different role, with different modes of subjugation and political strategies: shame for women is fought politically through feminism, and for non-white people through queer of colour critique (Ferguson, 2003; Halberstam, 2005: 223-224). The key also lies in what you can do with shame when you feel it. Michael Warner (1999: 3) and Halberstam (2005: 224) point to the same answer: project it on to *others* (others who are also racialised and gendered).

THE HOMOEROTICISING OF THE CHECKPOINT, THEN, CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS A PROCESS OF PROJECTION OF SHAME ON TO THIS OTHER, RACIALISED SUBJECT

The homoeroticising of the checkpoint, then, can be understood as a process of projection of shame on to this other, racialised subject.

In *The Bubble*, Ashraf does not move in the same sexual shame/pride binary that Noam does. The process of being detained and observed at the checkpoint is for Ashraf, as Raya Morag suggests, "a physical experience of shame involving feminization and castration, which (in contrast to Noam's experience) undergoes racialization and is not transformed into pride" (Morag, 2010: 946). There is gay shame and there is racial humiliation, and this cannot be reabsorbed into the white narrative of pride.

As Halberstam and Morag both suggest, the projection of gay shame on to the non-white man is offered as a solution, through different types of mimicry: Noam's mimicry when he crosses the checkpoint, a game in which he gains access to vulnerability without humiliating himself; and Ashraf's mimicry in his process of gay-isation, displacing and denying racial humiliation with gay pride.

In another scene from *The Bubble*, when Ashraf has already been named Shimi and has completed the process of transforming gay shame into pride, he finds himself at the checkpoint again. This time he is not subjected to the eroticised gaze of the coloniser, since he is waiting in Nablus for his sister's wedding guests, who the ones being checked. Feeling empowered, he approaches the soldiers to try to get them to speed up the process. However, they respond to him negatively. He is a victim of and a witness to racial humiliation, which no sexual pride can overcome.

This analysis of *The Bubble* will be concluded with one final example of the eroticising of violence, in this case related to terrorism. At the beginning of the film, Noam has just been reunited with Lulu and Yali after returning from his period of military service. In their animated conversation Yali asks him: "And the guys on your reserve duty? No sexy suicide bombers?" Noam reproaches him: "Don't start." This comment, which sexualises both the checkpoint and the *enemy* construed as Palestinian and terrorist, is still a red flag that will be confirmed at the end of the film. It also alludes to the relationship between sex and terrorism in the pun on the word *explosive* and in the fade-out transitions after the sex scenes and after the final bomb.

The sexualisation of terrorism is linked to Islamophobia, as Huda Jadallah explains from her own experience: "Growing up, I was always keenly aware of being marked as dangerous, 'a terrorist.' I never understood as a child that this label was not simply a result of racial marking or being identified as Palestinian, but was also in part owing to being marked as genderqueer.² My gender non-conformity manifested itself in being stereotyped as violent and dangerous as opposed to submissive and oppressed, as Arab women who conform to gender roles are often perceived" (Jadallah, 2011: 276). Thea Gold also describes Islamophobic rhetoric about suicide terrorism as homophobic: "The 'scariness' of the figure of the terrorist lies not only in the threat of explosion but in the queerness of the suicide bomber's body itself. Like the 'degenerate' body of the homosexual and the 'sickly' body of the Jew, the suicide bomber's hybrid body (half human, half weapon) is queer" (Gold, 2010: 629-630). In *The Bubble*, Ashraf's suicide is not motivated by obviously political considerations, but by the fact that he has no way out of his lived experience of homosexuality.

The filmmaker and producer Yariv Mozer directed both of the documentaries selected for this study, *The Invisible Men* and *Undressing Israel*, in

THE SEXUALISATION OF TERRORISM IS LINKED TO ISLAMOPHOBIA

the same year (2012). The first is an Israeli-Dutch co-production, financed by two Israeli non-governmental organisations (The New Fund for Cinema and TV, and The Other Israel Film Fund) and a Dutch government agency (Netherlands Film Fund). Other financiers included the Israeli production company Mozer Films (founded by the director), the Dutch producer LEV Pictures and the distributors Ikon (Netherlands) and Yes Docu (Israel). The documentary follows the story of three Palestinians, Louie, Abdu and Faris, who escape from their hometowns to hide in Israel, where they try to resolve their legal status.

Undressing Israel was co-directed and co-produced by Yariv Mozer together with the Russian-Israeli-American Michael Lucas. For this film, Lucas travelled to Tel Aviv from New York to discover the Israeli gay community, including a young Palestinian.

The Invisible Men evokes the same shame/pride binary discussed above. In one sequence, Abdu takes part in the Jerusalem LGBTQ Pride Parade. Happy to be there, he begins talking about shame: "What would happen to me if my photo appeared in the newspapers tomorrow?" This shame is racially marked, as Palestinian identity is a national and cultural identity, but also a racial one (Saliha, 2011): "A gay Palestinian participates in the Pride Parade!" However, it quickly turns to pride: "I was getting goosebumps all night, thinking about whether I wanted to come or not. But today I have decided I'm no longer afraid. That's my decision. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid anymore." This conversation takes place in the context of an LGBTQ demonstration, with the rainbow flags and identifiable icons all around. His story ignores the power asymmetry and also romanticises the homonormative community: "[Gays] don't care if



From left to right. Stillframes 7 and 8. *Undressing Israel: Gay Men in the Promised Land* (Michael Mayer and Yariv Mozer, 2012)

you're Muslim or Christian or Jewish or Palestinian or Israeli or American." In addition, it is contradicted by the conclusion to the film: Abdu and Louie have to leave the country as political exiles (and in the process, they will again be constantly detained and harassed by Israeli soldiers).

In *Undressing Israel*, on the other hand, the sexualisation of the army and of military activity eroticises colonial domination. An animated infographic on the legalisation of homosexuality in the military precedes a sequence that begins with Michael Lucas entering a gym. This is followed by various eroticised shots of the muscular Eliad Cohen (stillframe 7), who is introduced as a personal trainer and ex-combatant, despite the fact that in the gay world he is known mainly as an actor and model. Lucas trains with him for a while before starting the interview (stillframes 7 and 8).

- Were you out of the closet in the army?
- Yes.
- Was that a problem?

IN UNDRRESSING ISRAEL, ON THE OTHER HAND, THE SEXUALISATION OF THE ARMY AND OF MILITARY ACTIVITY EROTICISES COLONIAL DOMINATION

– Not really, because, you know, my friends and I were like family there, and they accept you as you are. If you're gay, it doesn't matter.

– So, there's no "don't ask, don't tell."³ Can you be in the army as an openly gay man?

– Almost always, yes. I'm sure there are people who still don't say it, but I know other friends of mine who were in other units as fighters and who said it; it's okay.

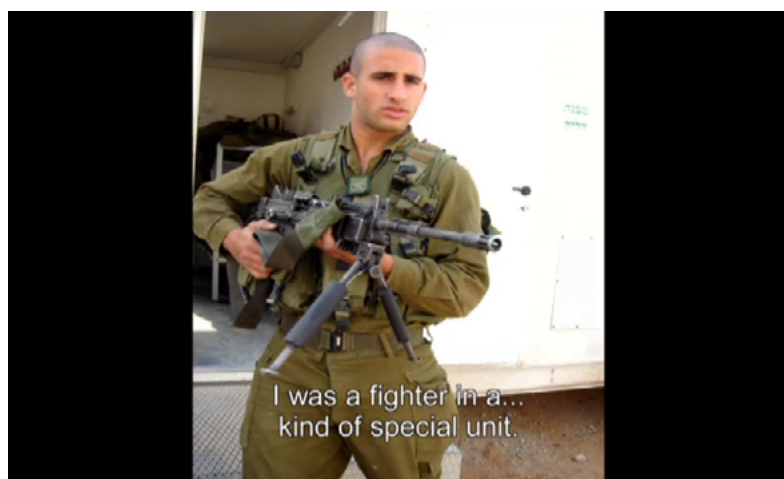
– Everyone has to do military service, no matter if they're gay or hetero, right?

– Yes.

– Did you have a boyfriend while you were in the army?

– My first ex-boyfriend was in military service. He was the commander of another unit. It was a mind-blowing story, like *Yossi & Jagger* (Eytan Fox, 2002), the film. It was in the same place, in the Hermon, almost the same story as well.

While they talk about his experience in the army, emphasising the openness, the footage of the interview in the gym with the two tattooed and muscular bodies (stillframe 9) is alternated with photographs of Eliad as a soldier, in uniform and armed (still 10). The eroticising and romanticising of the army is reinforced in the next scene, when a group of gay men who speak to the camera repeatedly during the documentary offer testimonies about the Israeli military. Apart from stressing its ideological openness in terms of sup-



From top to bottom. Stillframes 9 and 8. *Undressing Israel: Gay Men in the Promised Land* (Michael Mayer and Yariv Mozer, 2012)

port for LGBTQ people, they also make comments that underscore the sexualisation of the army, like “there is the element of danger, and the uniforms...” and “it is a great fantasy, the Israeli army.”

In short, it is thus evident that the eroticising of violence and of power relations is central to both the fiction film *The Bubble* and the two documentaries selected for analysis.

2. SEX AND POWER

This section deals with the depiction of sexual practices in the two fiction films, *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*, analysing one scene from the first film and two from the second, which serve specifi-

cally to reflect on how the power relations operating between the characters are naturalised.

The central theme of *Out in the Dark*, the first feature film by Los Angeles-based Israeli filmmaker Michael Mayer, is another impossible love story between an Israeli boy, Roy, and a Palestinian, Nimr. It was financed by the public Israeli Film Fund, the Israeli production company Periscope, and the Israeli distribution platform Nana10, and the American company M7200 Productions. It won awards at numerous international LGBTQ festivals, including San Diego, Sydney, Amsterdam, Grenoble, Turin, Miami, Philadelphia, Guadalajara (Mexico), Toronto, Montreal, Los Angeles, Long Island, Melbourne, New York, Rochester, San Francisco and Tampa.

The two main characters in *Out in the Dark*, Nimr (Palestinian) and Roy (Israeli), meet in a gay bar in Tel Aviv, where Nimr’s friend Mustafa works. Nimr, who lives in Ramallah, is granted a permit to study psychology in Tel Aviv. Mustafa, who it turns out has been collaborating with the Israeli secret service, is deported

back to Ramallah, and after Nimr witnesses his brother Nabil murder Mustafa for betraying Palestine, he moves to Tel Aviv to live with Roy. It is then that the Israeli secret service offer him the possibility of being allowed to stay in Tel Aviv in exchange for information about his brother Nabil. Nimr returns to Ramallah, where his family eventually discovers his homosexuality. Nabil’s companions expect him to murder his brother but instead Nabil allows him to escape back to Israel under threat that he must not return. Nimr and Roy unsuccessfully try to obtain refugee status for him. In the end, Roy manages to arrange to have Nimr smuggled to France, but Roy himself is arrested as a collaborator.

The scene selected for analysis takes place in a swimming pool. It is night-time, and Nimr and Roy have sneaked in for a swim. The diegetic time does not correspond to that of the story, as the disordered shots show Nimr and Roy naked and then dressed and then naked again, increasing the sexual tension and, through a conversation about sex and coming out, delaying the moment of the climax: the kiss.

One of their exchanges is paradigmatic for what follows. Nimr speaks and Roy responds:

— When I started going out in Tel Aviv, I thought they wouldn't accept me because I come from the other side. It soon became clear to me that it doesn't really matter.

— A cock is a cock [laughs].

First, they establish a (hierarchical) opposition—Palestine/Israel—accompanied by serious expressions when Nimr utters the line “from the other side.” This dichotomy is emphasised in the conversation in which they continue comparing their respective experiences of coming out. Second, they identify sex as a vehicle for equality: “a cock is a cock.” This suggests that sexual relations between Israelis and Palestinians are not only divorced from power relations, but they can even be a tool for fighting the power and achieving peace. Is this possible?

Other studies have explored how the queer fantasy of reconciliation and peace through ro-

mantic love fails in the films selected for this analysis. In addition, power relations are always present in any interaction: to ignore it is merely to render it invisible. Roy's remark, “a cock is a cock,” brings to mind an observation made by Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa in the introduction to their essay *Por el culo: políticas anales*: “The arse seems very democratic; everybody has one. But as will be shown here, not everyone can do what they want with their arse” (Sáez and Carrascosa, 2011: 14). Their essay deals with the anus and with anal sex, but in this case it could also be applied to the penises discussed by Nimr and Roy. Neither the body nor sexual practices are neutral; they are discursive devices marked by gender, race, ability, and many other variables that charge them with asymmetrical power relations. The fact that one is Palestinian and the other is Israeli in these interactions is significant. For Raz Yosef (2004: 118-119), interracial relationships pose a threat to Israeli purity and dominance in Zionist rhetoric, destabilising the subject/object binary of colonisation. While for the Israeli it is an engagement with the colonial ambiguity described by Homi K. Bhabha (2002) between the fear of hybridisation and the latent, Orientalist fascination with the Arab, for the Palestinian it is an exercise in *passing*⁵ and mimicry: sleeping with an Israeli is in a way like becoming an Israeli.

The most common interracial interactions in Israeli cinema, and the terror they arouse in Zionist rhetoric, are marked by heteronormativity. Homosexuality poses a lesser threat because it is not thought of as reproductive. However, there was a point at which hybridity and homosexuality coincided to become identified with each other as forms of degeneration (Young, 1995: 26). But Yosef's work goes beyond stale, essentialist conceptions of heterosexuality and homosexuality and tries to examine how homoerotic desire and regimes of (ab)normality are present in all interracial relationships, both homosexual and heterosexual. The use of privilege and power in sexual

SEXUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ISRAELIS AND PALESTINIANS ARE NOT ONLY DIVORCED FROM POWER RELATIONS, BUT THEY CAN EVEN BE A TOOL FOR FIGHTING THE POWER AND ACHIEVING PEACE. IS THIS POSSIBLE? POWER RELATIONS ARE ALWAYS PRESENT IN ANY INTERACTION: TO IGNORE IT IS MERELY TO RENDER IT INVISIBLE



From top to bottom. Stillframes II-15. *The Bubble* (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006)

practices between Israelis and Palestinians is reflected in this real testimony documented in the work both of Sofer and Schmitt (1995) and of Yosef (2004): “Amar fucked me three times in two hours. He [...] told me that I had to pay him [...], which I refused. [...] When I answered that [...] he could forget about it, he became angry and threatened me. There was nobody around, and I felt a bit insecure. However, I walked in the direction of the Jaffa Gate. He started being louder. I told him that he should not forget that he is an Arab, that under Israeli rule he had no case against a Jew, and that he’d better leave me alone. I never would have dared go to the police, but it worked. I also knew that he was deeply insulted, as he realized that the fuckee [the passive one] is not powerless, as he assumed” (Sofer and Schmitt, 1995: 114).

These words expose both the violent use of power and privilege and the paradox of the gay Israeli; while fighting a hegemonic masculinity and nationalism that oppress him, he uses those same categories to exercise his authority over Palestinian men (Yosef, 2004: 139). It also reveals the importance of the positions of penetrator and penetrated, which are all the more significant as they form part of nationalist narratives that compare colonisation to the act of penetrating a feminised territory.

In their work, Sáez and Carrascosa reflect on these roles in anal sex. “In these expressions we see the enormous imbalance that exists in the social perception of anal sexuality: giving and taking (up the arse). Being active or passive is historically associated with a binary power relationship: dominator-dominated, master-slave, winner-loser, strong-weak, powerful-submissive, owner-property, subject-object, penetrator-penetrated, all in based on an underlying gender scheme: male-female, man-woman. The male is construed according to these values as the first term of the pair. ‘The woman’ in the sense described by Wittig, of

a category created by the heterosexual regime, is construed as being associated with the second term of this binary pair” (Sáez and Carrascosa, 2011: 19-20).

In the film *The Bubble*, Noam and Ashraf go to bed together twice. The first time is on the explosive night they share in Tel Aviv. The scene combines images of the couple with Lulu, Noam’s housemate, and Sharon, her boyfriend. It begins with Sharon kissing Lulu (stillframe 11); Sharon goes down to perform oral sex on her (stillframe 12), the camera returns to a close-up of Lulu (stillframe 13) and then cuts to the head, now of Ashraf, who rises to kiss Noam (stillframes 14 and 15). Ashraf thus replaces Sharon in the image, as an icon of hegemonic masculinity, and Noam occupies the feminised position. The following image shows Ashraf penetrating Noam.

The second time the two go to bed together in the film, Noam is the penetrator, a fact which the couple will accord importance and ceremony. Before he starts, Ashraf slows him down and Noam reminds him that they don’t have to do it. “I want to,” he replies. Before he starts, Ashraf asks Noam his mother’s name (shortly before this, Noam had shared her story). “Sarah, her name was Sarah,” Noam replies, smiling. Then they begin to kiss. This scene reproduces the script of a sexuality marked by race, religion and asymmetrical power relations that would make it more difficult for Ashraf to be penetrated than for Noam. This difficulty, in a narrative that conceals these dynamics and how they historically affect anal sex, has less to do with the colonial relationship than with the image of an inherently homophobic Palestine, thus construed through dialogues, plot-lines, and point of view. In the scene where Noam and Ashraf watch the play *Bent* together, they both project their desire and impossible love on to those of the play’s characters. In the play, two men have sex without touching each other, just by imagining and talking, in a Nazi concentration camp. One of the prisoners has the yellow Jewish

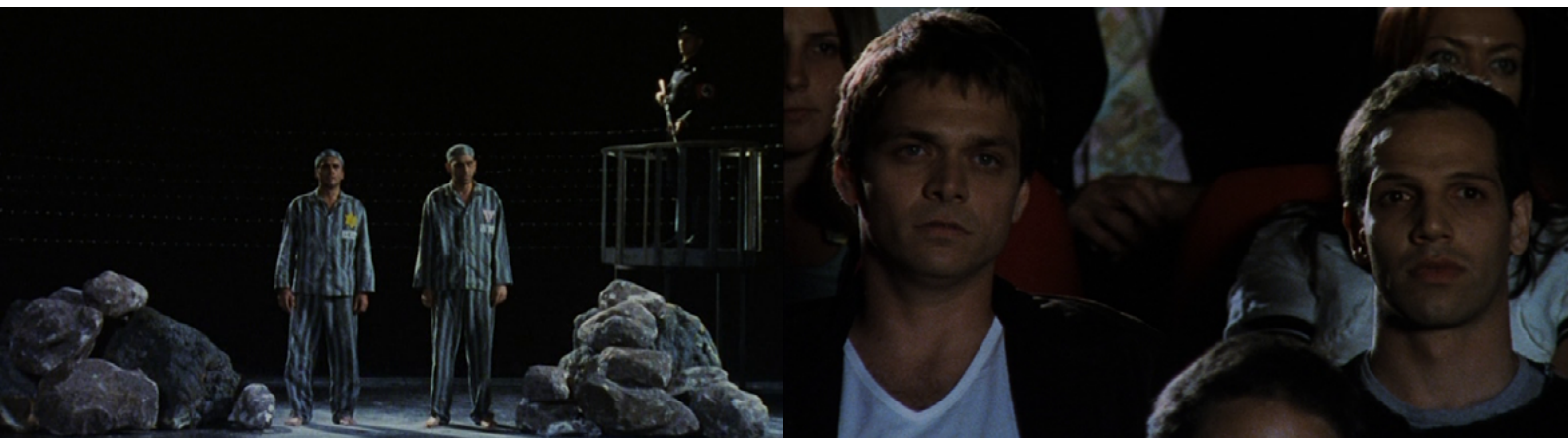
star; the other, an inverted pink triangle, a symbol used to identify gay men. There follows a succession of shots and reverse shots between the two actors on the stage and Ashraf and Noam, who touch each other’s hands excitedly (stillframes 16 and 17). “We did it. How about that? Fucking guards, fucking camp, we did it. It was real. We made love. They’re not going to kill us,” says one of the actors. This projection once again renders the power relations between Noam and Ashraf invisible. In stillframe 16, the two prisoners in the concentration camp are watched by an armed guard, an image that alludes to the checkpoint, where it is only Ashraf who is being watched, not Noam. The actor’s last sentence, moreover, identifies making love with defeating authority and the guards: “They’re not going to kill us.” However, the end of the film reveals that this queer fantasy of reconciliation ends badly: death and fade to white.

3. CODA

There are four main ideas raised in the Israeli discourses analysed in this article:

1) The process of producing a historically determined *truth* is naturalised, while concealing the power relations arising from the very practice of film representation. The effect of reality and the referential character of the images are used as naturalising mechanisms of the filmic fact. The referential elements are not limited to recognisable characters, events, and spaces, but also include those that allude to the act of recording itself. Cinema as a (re)production of reality is thus transformed into representation, turning the images shown on the screen into the only (totalising and *objective*) *truth*.

The documentaries analysed here have specific mechanisms; in both, the very process of revealing that *truth* (and, therefore, its construction) is more explicit, but so is the reference to an extratextual historical world, and thus the effect of reality has extraordinary force. The power relations estab-



From left to right. Stillframes 16-17. *The Bubble* (Ha-Buah, Eytan Fox, 2006)

lished between the point of view (the editing process that organises and orders the film-object) and the social agents that participate in the documentaries are also invisible and, therefore, naturalised and depoliticised. This rendering invisible, naturalising and depoliticising is also practiced with the power derived from control in the representation. This control is inferred from the fact that, in both the fiction films and the documentaries, Palestine and its population are intelligible only through the Israeli gaze (explicitly observed in the types of shots and mise-en-scène chosen for the presentation of Palestinian settings and characters).

2) Simplistic, hierarchical, mutually exclusive dichotomies are constructed that create insurmountable differences between the imagined spaces of Israel and Palestine, which are depicted as opposite and hierarchical spaces. While Israel occupies the space of civilisation, where tolerance and diversity reign, Palestine signifies homophobia, oppression, and cultural backwardness (constantly linked to Islam and terrorism). This map conceals the interdependent nature of all dichotomies, the fact that Israel's imagined space needs that other imagined space of Palestine. This mutually exclusive binary produces another: homosexual/Palestinian. In other words, in Palestine you cannot be homosexual; in Israel you cannot be Palestinian.

Added to these dichotomies are two others, one within each territory: the *good Palestinian* and the *bad Palestinian*; the *good Israeli* and the *bad Israeli*. The relatively depoliticised *good Palestinians* ascribe their desires and sexual practices to gay identity and want to live in Tel Aviv, while *bad Palestinians* are politicised and aware of the occupation, religious, characterised by homophobia and identified as terrorists. Meanwhile, *good Israelis* are Westernised, depoliticised, and have no intention of engaging in the power relations inherent in the bonds they build with *good Palestinians*. Their actions, when they flout Israeli laws, have less to do with politics than with the ideal of romantic love. The presence of *bad Israelis* (icons symbolising unjust and arbitrary state power) make it easy to interpret the toothless criticism of the *good Israelis* as a real, radically critical and subversive political position.

3) In the films analysed, it seems that the only option that a Palestinian subject has in order to be *good* is to stop being Palestinian. Thus, these characters (*good Palestinians*, like Nimr or Ashraf) try to pass off as Israelis by constructing a gay identity that is depicted as neutral but marked by race. The *good Israeli* (Noam or Roy) is the mediator between that *good Palestinian* and the (gay) Israeli community. This process of mimicry is doomed to failure from the beginning because, as Bhab-

ha suggests, the *other* colonial subject being mimicked “is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 2002: 112). When they fail in their attempt, the difference between settler and colonised remains intact, and the threat posed by destabilising the violent hierarchy between the two figures is thus avoided. In sequences other than those analysed, it is the Israeli characters who try to pass themselves off with other identities. Although these are generally non-racialised processes of mimicry, in which some positions of privilege are exchanged for others, it also represents a failure that has dire consequences when this involves destabilising the power relations between settlers and colonised. The queer and colonial fantasy of mimicry and equality as a solution to the conflict is depicted as impossible.

4) The other queer and colonial fantasy that attempts to resolve the conflict is that of romantic love and sex-affective relationships between Israelis and Palestinians, but it is a fantasy that is continually shown to be inadequate, as it is in *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*. One of the main reasons why it does not work is, once again, the fact that the power relations between the two groups are rendered invisible. The one-way Israeli gaze that constructs the Islamophobic trope of the young gay Muslim is a vehicle of desire, but also of power. Its violence is (homo)eroticised both in the device of the checkpoint and of the army and terrorism. The existing hierarchy between the characters is not only naturalised but simultaneously exploited to reinforce the eroticism of the relationship. In this way, the queer fantasy of reconciliation through love and desire fails, with the blame falling on the politicised (terrorist) nature of the Palestinian population.

NOTES

- * This article is an adaptation of a chapter from the thesis *La sexualidad no normativa palestina en el cine: discursos hegemonics y discursos de resistencia*, defend-

ed by Loreto Ares under the direction of Susana Díaz Pérez and Elena Galán Fajardo at Universidad Carlos III in June 2017.

- 1 The information on production, distribution, and awards for all the films discussed in the article comes from the films' own credits, compared against the information in the IMDb database.
- 2 Genderqueer is a non-binary gender identity category.
- 3 “Don't ask, don't tell” was the popular name for US policy regarding homosexuality in the military from 1993 to 2010. Gay people could enter the military as long as they did not make their sexuality visible, and the military would not ask questions. The fact that Lucas compares Israeli policy with American policy without explanation reinforces two things: that the target audience is American, and that Israel is once again positioned as an even more civilised place than the US.
- 4 “Passing” is a term used in social identity theory to refer to a person's ability to be read as part of an identity category (racial, ethnic, class, gender, etc.) other than their own. It can be a deliberate and strategic practice.

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THE GAY PALESTINIAN IN ISRAELI CINEMA: DESIRE, POWER AND THE COLONIAL GAZE

Abstract

This paper analyses the (re)production of Palestinian gay identities in Israeli cinema from a queer and decolonial point of view. It focuses specifically on Israeli mainstream films that are exported to international LGBTQ film festivals. The main objective is the analysis of filmic mechanisms that represent Palestinian sexuality as an Other. This research is scientifically, politically and ethically relevant in view of the recent increase in racism and Islamophobia, which exploit queer experiences and discourses, and given the scarcity in the academic literature of studies exploring the filmic mechanisms holding, operationalising, naturalising, and resisting the colonial construction of Palestinian non-normative sexuality.

Key words

Israeli Cinema; Homonationalism; Pinkwashing; Palestine; Queer; Gay Cinema.

Author

Loreto Ares is an independent researcher and activist with a Ph.D. in Film Studies. Her work focuses on the analysis of racist and homonationalist discourses from the perspective of queer feminisms. Contact: loreto.ares@gmail.com.

Susana Díaz is a Professor at Università degli Studi di Firenze (Florence, Italy). Her work focuses on the analysis of discourse in audiovisual media and the construction of social imaginaries in the era of global capitalism. Contact: susana.diazperez@unifi.it.

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EL GAY PALESTINO EN EL CINE ISRAELÍ: DESEO, PODER Y MIRADA COLONIAL

Resumen

Este trabajo analiza, con perspectiva decolonial y cuir, la (re)producción de la identidad gay palestina en el cine israelí *mainstream* que se exporta a festivales LGBTQ internacionales. El objetivo de este texto es el análisis de los mecanismos fílmicos que producen la sexualidad palestina como *otra*. La pertinencia y la relevancia ética, política y científica de esta investigación están justificadas por el contexto de creciente violencia racista e islamófoba, que instrumentaliza las experiencias y los discursos de las personas disidentes del género y de la sexualidad; así como por la escasez de un corpus bibliográfico que registre y explore los mecanismos fílmicos que sostienen, vehiculan, naturalizan y se resisten a la construcción colonial de la sexualidad palestina no normativa.

Palabras clave

Cine israelí; homonacionalismo; *pinkwashing*; Palestina; *queer*; cine gay.

Autor/a

Loreto Ares (Madrid, 1987) es investigadora independiente y activista. Doctora en comunicación audiovisual, su trabajo se sitúa en los feminismos cuir/queer, desde donde analiza marcos racistas y homonacionalistas. Contacto: loreto.ares@gmail.com.

Susana Díaz (Madrid, 1968) es Profesora de la Università degli Studi di Firenze (Florence, Italia). Su trabajo se centra en el análisis del discurso en los medios audiovisuales y la construcción de los imaginarios sociales en la era del capitalismo global. Contacto: susana.diazperez@unifi.it.

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