Representation and emancipation: Cinema of the oppressed

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Abstract
Palestinian cinematic productions have historically attempted to alter biased perceptions of their identity, experience of dispossession, and struggle for liberation, using films to communicate the harsh realities of Israeli occupation. While preserving a pluralistic and hybrid character, and blending different genres from Third and Second films (experimental, neorealist, and transnational), Palestinian cinema – as examined through a close reading of Tawfik Saleh’s 1972 film The Dupes, Hany Abu-Assad’s Rana’s Wedding from 2002, and Najwa Najjar’s 2014 Eyes of a Thief – contests monolithic tropes and representations of Palestinians as either victims or terrorists in Western media and films. Drawing on Edward Said’s analysis of representation and its ties to occupation, the goal of this article is to engage with the idea of film narratives as a form of intervention that demystifies racial bias against colonized people, transforms viewers’ political consciousness, and devises strategies to keep resistance legitimate and ongoing.

Keywords
anti-Muslim racism, colonization, Palestinian cinema, representation, stereotypes

In his essay, ‘Permission to narrate’, Edward Said recounts the events of Israel’s war on Lebanon in 1982, the cruelty of targeting Palestinian refugee camps, and the framing of Palestinians as violent warmongers and terrorists. While discussing the inability of the colonized and voiceless to respond, Said explains how the meaning of terrorism has been articulated through a system of representation consisting of an ‘us versus them’ binary
logic, a specific nomenclature, convenient analogies dictated by the political interests of
the powerful and their cultural pathologies to designate enemies and eliminate them:

Terrorism signifies first, in relation to ‘us,’ the alien and gratuitously hostile force. It is
destructive, systematic and controlled. It is a web, a network, a conspiracy run from Moscow,
via Bulgaria, Beirut, Libya, Teheran and Cuba. It is capable of anything. One fervent anti-
Communist Israeli has written a book revealing the Sabra and Shatila to be a plot engineered by
Moscow and the PLO to kill Palestinians (using Germans) in order to frame democratic Israel.
Most of all, terrorism has come to signify ‘our’ view of everything in the world that seems
inimical to our interests, army, policy or values. (Said, 1984: 36)

Looking beyond the racialized crafting of Palestinian resistance as a form of terrorism,
in this essay, Said fact-checks claims from different media samples, news reports, books,
commentary, and eyewitness accounts of the atrocities committed against Palestinians
and reminds readers of basic historic facts that have been erased from modern memory
about Palestinians’ belonging in the occupied territories long before the arrival of the
Zionist forces of occupation. With careful attention to meaning, Said, as a Palestinian,
dares not ask for ‘a right’ to narrate in the sense of having a voice that can make a differ-
ence and not ‘simply a linguistic act; [but rather] a metaphor for the fundamental human
interest in freedom itself, the right to be heard – to be recognized and represented’
(Bhabha, 2014). In his analysis of the events and their media coverage, he deconstructs
cherry-picked details of the war, their simplistic interpretations and politically motivated
alterations to construct inaccurate tales about crazed or invisible Palestinians and further
suspend both their right to speak and their credibility.

In *The Question of Palestine*, Said describes another form of forced silence in the fol-
lowing terms: ‘Zionism always undertakes to speak for Palestine and the Palestinians;
this has always meant a blocking operation, by which the Palestinian cannot be heard
from (or represent himself) directly on the world stage’ (Said, 1980: 39). Claims of media
discourse are often confirmed by moving images, making cinema another powerful plat-
form where Palestinian vilification is produced, renewed, and sustained. For example,
without any references to occupation, the film *Bethlehem* (2013) by director Yuval
Adler tells a decontextualized story of deadly conflicts between Palestinian resistance
fighters and Israeli intelligence operatives. Set in the West Bank city of Bethlehem and
Jerusalem, the thriller narrative glorifies the accomplishments of Israeli intelligence
officers and their ability to capitalize on Palestinian children’s vulnerabilities and turn
them into informants or ‘assets’ as they are called in the film. In short, the overall mes-
 sage viewers get is about legitimizing Israelis’ aggression against ‘violent, power-hungry
intifada fighters, motivated by greed, and in conflict with one another; cynical, corrupt’
(Levy, 2013), and eventually must all be killed. There is no mention of military oppres-
sion, dispossession, displacement, ethnic cleansing practices against Palestinians, and
the continued annexation of their land.

What is also important to learn from ‘Permission to narrate’ (Said, 1984) is how rep-
resentation and the emancipation of oppressed communities are inextricably linked. For
Palestinians, facing the absence of a powerful visual narrative of their own, the limited
deployment of scenes showing life in Gaza without running water and electricity which
get turned on and off by Israel to punish Palestinians collectively for resisting occupation, the humiliation of checkpoints and roadblocks, the destruction of houses with bulldozers, and the unsympathetic media coverage are all different parts of what Said (2000: 184) calls ‘the greatest battle Palestinians have waged as a people; [a battle] over the right to a remembered presence and, with that presence, the right to possess and reclaim a collective historical reality’.

To claim a voice in political discourse and have it be heard and acknowledged remain unattainable goals; therefore, many Palestinian filmmakers have turned to cinematic productions as a venue to break through this forced silence, strengthen their sense of commitment to the homeland, and contest biased framing of their resistance. In juxtaposing the interstitial layers between dominant representations of their struggle, their film narratives lay bare degrading images that racialize their communities in global media and the film industry in particular, with a consistent flow of cinematic productions; films like Amos Gitai’s *Promised Land* (2004), *Munich* (2005) directed by Steven Spielberg, *West Bank Story* (2005) by director Ari Sandel, Dennis Dogan’s *You Don’t Mess with the Zohan* (2008), and *David and Fatima* (2008) directed by Alain Zaloum, to list a few, show how this unchallenged process of racialization inflicts violence on Palestinians in real life and continues to trap them as silenced subjects. Pointedly, Said insists that representation as a system is ‘intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the “truth”’ (Said, 1978: 272). And because this system disempowers the subject of representation, Palestinian films might ‘provide a visual alternative, a visual articulation, a visible incarnation of Palestinian existence in the years since 1948’ (Said, 2006: 3) that can change the Western world’s reception and perception of their struggle, and transform this condition of forced silence. To this end, many Palestinian filmmakers experiment with new and unconventional modes of production. Director Elia Suleiman, for example, has made creative attempts to address the absence of a Palestinian voice. More precisely, it is through silence that silence is contested in his films *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) and *Divine Intervention* (2002), where he shatters the linearity of conventional film narratives of telling Palestinian stories and blends the aesthetical with the political to reflect on the fragmented lives of Palestinians under occupation. In both films, the dialogue is deliberately limited to make silence deliver the films’ messages. Playing a character named E.S., Suleiman remains speechless to express what he describes as ‘a breakdown of communication’ (Erickson, 2003). His act of not speaking is meant to provoke viewers’ thoughts and entice them to do the talking inside their heads on his behalf. Suleiman’s instrumentalization of silence and use of long shots without dialogue command reflection on the part of the audience while visualizing what he calls a ‘psychological occupation [which] is more difficult to represent – it is an occupation that has seeped into the mind and body and cannot be captured with the same immediacy as in an image of a checkpoint’ (Abu-Remaileh, 2008).

This article draws on similar innovative artistic efforts to examine the way Palestinian cinematic narratives cross film genre boundaries and experiment with new thematic interests, narrativization styles, and editing choices that aim to dismantle long-standing and reductive stereotypes. Centring on a variety of evolving techniques and themes concerned with the continuity of Palestinian resistance and self-representation, this article presents a critical reading of *The Dupes* (1972), directed by Tawfik Saleh, *Rana’s
Wedding (2002), directed by Hany Abu-Assad, and Eyes of a Thief (2014) by director Najwa Najjar as different cinematic attempts that offer sober images of a dispossessed, disempowered, and misunderstood community. Other than addressing questions of representation, the article further argues that the narratives of Palestinian filmmakers try hard, against overwhelming odds, to engage in self-criticism, sustain political consciousness among Palestinians, humanize them to a global audience, and challenge the negative framing and limited demarcation of Hollywood’s bigoted images and casting of their entire occupied community as suspect and violent.

On a more complex interpretive level that is grounded in Third Cinema theory, its contested manifestos, and openness to a variety of film practices, the article uncovers the stories’ critical substance and identifies different film techniques used to redraw less distorted images of Palestinians and their resistance/sumud against a brutal colonization by visualizing tragic events of the past and bringing them into the present. This visualization defies dominant Western discourses by breaking away from the narrow and fossilized representational tropes of Palestinians as either victims or villains and poses a new set of questions about Palestinians as individuals with strengths and weaknesses trying to survive the occupation and balance self-interests, altruism, and collective responsibility.

Thinking of Third Cinema in the context of its multiple dizzying positionalities as a fiercely contested category with broad and disputed positions on the range of films it could encompass, the analysis emphasizes Palestinian filmmakers’ adaptations of their styles in conjunction with shifting theoretical conceptualizations and the vanishing distinctions between Third and Second Cinemas. The first part of the article introduces the theoretical framework of Third Cinema and discusses the debate over the possibilities of expanding the contours of this category to include other alternative types of films and filmmaking practices. The second part examines recurrent thematic foci that these selected films share and the cinematic techniques they experiment with. Unconventional, fragmented, auteur, neorealist, transnational, and at times self-reflexive, these films incorporate different motifs of commercial and non-commercial productions to problematize their ideological claims about the homeland, human behaviour, and Palestinian sumud. These calculated production decisions make the films political and, to a certain extent, conceptually very similar to what many Third Cinema theorists define as ‘guerilla cinema’ (Gabriel, 1982: 7), a genre which ‘seeks to awaken a politicised consciousness in the spectator’ (Wayne, 2001: 16). The third and last part examines the Palestinian discourse of intervention, a discourse that relies on self-criticism and aims to develop a more positive characterization of a dispossessed people under occupation by urging viewers to rethink their own assumptions about Palestinians. The next section presents the theoretical foundation of Third Cinema and establishes its applicability to these Palestinian films and their concerns over representation and the visibility of their own community in more humanizing productions.

Third Cinema in theory

Theorists and practitioners of Third Cinema charted the details of this genre based on a number of binary oppositions. Their definitions set up the hegemonic Hollywood model
of film or First Film with its commodified function as a spectacle made and circulated often for the purposes of entertainment, consumption, and profit versus the revolutionary and more politically engaged Third Cinema. This kind of cinema is an independent genre that cannot be interpellated or manipulated by the existing ruling system for its own propagandist purposes. Renewing again Etienne Jules Marey’s metaphor describing the camera as ‘une sorte de fusil photographique’ (a sort of photographic rifle) (Burton, 1978: 49), Third Cinema is considered a militant, autonomous, and socially committed vehicle of cultural revolution. Since the time of its inception, Third Cinema has been understood as ‘an ideological project [. . . and] a body of film, adhering to a certain political and aesthetic program’ (Stam and Shohat, 1994: 24). Its theoretical foundation draws on the work of Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who were the first theorists to experiment with the category by producing their documentary La hora de los hornos (1968) (The Hour of the Furnaces), and the insightful criticism of postcolonial conditions developed by Frantz Fanon (1968) and further elaborated by Tashome Gabriel (1982). All four agree that Third Cinema conceptualizes film as a politically and socially motivated form of intervention that aims to politicize audiences (the masses). Further distancing films from commercial profit and entertainment, this new genre takes on issues of inequality, ongoing colonization, racial politics, mythologies of postcolonialism, and many more contemporary problems of representation. This theorization emerges from the filmmakers’ own intellectual spaces, cultural locations (Third World), and sense of commitment to decolonization and revolutionary consciousness as Solanas and Getino imagined it. Initially, the late 1960s conceptualization drew a rigid distinction between:

big-budget commercial films (First Cinema), independent, auteur films (Second Cinema), and films made by militant collectives (Third Cinema) [which] led to various misinterpretations such as the automatic assumption that First Cinema was necessarily a cinema of entertainment, the Second one of intellect and interiority, and the Third one of political radicalism. (Dissanayake and Guneratne, 2003: 10)

This narrow and essentializing definition was later expanded. Michael Chanan (1997: 378) points out that Solanas and Getino modified their earlier position on all three categories and agreed that ‘Second Cinema could be taken to include certain attempts at an alternative type of cinema which from a more comprehensive perspective are more correctly seen as alternate models of Third Cinema’ (Chanan, 1997: 377). This theoretical expansion enabled more possibilities to utilize different filming components and allowed for experimentation with and acceptance of a hybrid production which answers to no pressure or hegemony and ‘is no longer interested in quality or technique. It can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a guerrilla camp in the middle of the jungle’, argues Julio García Espinosa (1979: 24). His theoretical insights added a much broader understanding to what he names an ‘imperfect cinema’, a hybrid and transnational genre that ‘can make use of the documentary or the fictional mode, or both. It can use whatever genre, or all genres. It can use cinema as a pluralistic art form or as a specialized form of expression’ (Espinosa, 1979: 24). In his opinion, imperfect cinema is a genre in itself that is concerned not with the form but the
message, the level of consciousness it brings to the spectators, and the extent to which it gets them to be critically involved in the revolutionary substance of its content. This is precisely the kind of relationship that many Arab and Palestinian directors like Elia Suleiman, Mai Masri, and Tawfik Saleh seek to build with their audiences.

Since the late 1960s, Palestinian documentary films have been thematically, stylistically, and ideologically aligned with Third Cinema. In her recent book *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution*, Nadia Yaqub (2018) gives a detailed history of earlier documentaries that were produced about the Palestinian armed struggle for independence, including *The Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War* (1971) by Japanese filmmakers and activists Masao Adachi and Koji Wakamatsu and *Here and Elsewhere* (1976) by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, made around the same time as *The Dupes*. During the same period, Mustafa Abu Ali completed his short film *They Do Not Exist* (1974), exposing for the first time the devastating conditions of the Nabatieh refugee camp in southern Lebanon after the Israeli air force bombed it in 1974. These different experimentations with Third Cinema are films that do not abide by any production rules, technical or stylistic limitations, setting, or budget constraints that could alter their message or impact the filmmakers’ political commitments. In prioritizing meaning/message over form, the three selected narratives examined in this article are more like ‘imperfect cinema’ in the way they defy established structures and deploy layers of criticism to address the damage of occupation on the lives, psyches, and behaviour of Palestinians; each one of them, in the words of Yaqub, ‘would be an imperfect, emergent, and open text’ (2018: 50) for audiences to watch. The imperfections (hybrid combination of film components) are a response to new realities that emerged from transnational flows of productions, the financial difficulties of distribution, access to global market (prestigious film festivals), and the expectations of transnational viewers making Palestinian directors shift their production strategies to find a middle ground between auteurism or Second Cinema of the auteurs and emancipatory aesthetics.

As a politically engaged film, *The Dupes*’ story centres on different forms of persecution. Produced with a low-budget and non-commercial objective, the film adopts radical stylistic and editing choices that build strictly on the work of guerrilla-style documentary filmmaking. On the other hand, *Rana’s Wedding* and *Eyes of a Thief* do not subscribe to the same forms of production, use foreign funding, depend on global distribution circuits, and deliver their decolonial messages by provoking audiences into thinking about injustice, oppression, and concealed structures of power. With less subversion of commercial cinematic codes and more incorporation of neorealist conventions, these two scripts combine different filmmaking techniques, deliver powerful political messages, and blur the hermetic divisions between Third and Second Cinemas. In the next section, the article discusses their shared themes of *sumud*, surrender, and survivability as part of their commitment to a politically engaged cinema.

**The logic of selection: shared thematic foci**

Covering roughly a period of fifty years, together, the films bring complexity to commonly held positions on the conditions of Palestinians and consciously provide transnational audiences detailed eyewitness-like accounts of everyday life in refugee camps and
the cities of Occupied Palestine. Historically, *The Dupes* (1972) belongs to the ‘Palestinian cinema of the third period, created in the 1970s in exile . . . [Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon] constructing the Palestinian national narrative as part of an international revolutionary struggle’ (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 59). Produced with financial support from the Syrian National Film Organization, *The Dupes* showcases the plight of Palestinian refugees across many generations. The film begins by introducing the stories of three desperate refugees. Each one of them is burdened by poverty and family obligations. Abu Qais (Mohamed Kheir-Halouani), Assad (Bassam Lotfi Abu-Ghazala), and Marwan (Saleh Kholoki) make a deal with Abu Khaizuran (Abderrahman Alrahhy), another Palestinian who, for a small fee, promises to help them cross the Iraq-Kuwait border to seek employment in the lucrative and booming oil economy of the rich Gulf nation-state. The plan is to hide them in his truck’s empty water tanker and smuggle them across the border into Kuwait. At customs, Abu Khaizuran gets delayed longer than usual, and by the time he returns to the truck, all three have suffocated to death while waiting inside the tanker; he dumps their bodies on a pile of trash, empties their pockets, and drives away.

Occupation impacts Rana’s circumstances in *Rana’s Wedding* differently. Her story happens during the early months of the second Intifada around 2002. Rana (played by Clara Khoury) is a 17-year-old girl who lost her mother as a child and lives with her father in East Jerusalem in a middle-class neighbourhood. Rana is in love with Khalil (played by Khalifa Natour), a theatre director and struggling artist from Ramallah. Under pressure from her father, who is moving to Egypt in a matter of hours, she is given two choices: either she can pick a husband from a list of eligible suitors he provides, which includes engineers, doctors, and a lawyer, or she moves to Egypt with him. But Rana has no intention to relocate or consider anyone from the list. Without hesitation, she dismisses her father’s directives, decides to marry the man she wants, and leaves the house at sunrise to find Khalil. Frantically, she goes from house to house asking acquaintances for his whereabouts. The hardships imposed by the occupation on Palestinians’ everyday life—the presence of Israeli soldiers, surveillance cameras, checkpoints, and roadblocks separating Jerusalem from the West Bank and restricting their movements – are all visible in the film but rarely discussed. The focus, however, is placed on Rana’s undeterred determination to cross every impasse for her goal and she finally locates Khalil. He had to spend the night at the theatre because of an explosion the night before that made it too dangerous for him to leave. She arrives at the theatre, gets a confirmation that he is there, and asks to use the bathroom. Majestically, she gets ready as she intends to propose to Khalil and she does. Knowing Rana’s strength and stubbornness, he accepts her proposal. Thus far, *Rana’s Wedding* ‘is about triumphs’ (Boedicker, 2004), as Rana moves through one triumph at a time, yet the hurdles seem endless when Khalil’s friend Ramzy (Ismael Dabbag) informs the couple of a legal issue. Since Rana is under 21 years of age, no registrar can marry them without her father’s consent. Khalil proposes to take the registrar to her father, and their trip back to East Jerusalem begins. Again, because of unexpected Israeli road closures and new roadblocks erected in their way, they are forced to take a longer detour, only to run into a funeral procession for a young Palestinian boy.

Overall, the film’s message develops around Rana’s decision not to abandon the homeland; choosing not to leave becomes an expression of survivability under occupation. Defiantly, she clings to the Palestinian soil and shows that women are as capable as
men in effecting change and devising their own methods of *sumud*. Her refusal to surrender, unlike the characters of *The Dupes*, is embedded in her firm position and ability to overcome the suspended mobility of Palestinians in general and women in particular. With her actions, her independent and decisive personality, she asserts her agency over the colonial situation.

This same theme of *sumud* and how it plays out in the life of an ordinary selfless individual, husband, and father is central in *Eyes of a Thief* (2014) by director Najwa Najjar. As in many other Palestinian films invested in self-criticism and representation, and which ‘point to a disintegration of the male hero’ (Abu-Remaileh, 2014: 196) that is common in neorealist productions, Tareq, the lead character (played by Egyptian actor Khaled Abol Naga), sacrifices everything to defend the homeland. His backstory lurks in the past, keeping viewers focused on his efforts to find his daughter, and move forward. Details about his past are introduced through a series of flashbacks to the 2002 second Intifada during which Tareq is injured and arrested by Israeli soldiers. Tareq is contrasted with Adel (Suhail Haddad), a corrupt self-declared entrepreneur and collaborator who betrays his community. Secretly, Adel is profiting from selling a big share of the town’s limited water supply to an Israeli settlement nearby. Shot in the West Bank town of Nablus, the film exposes viewers to scenes of contemporary everyday life experiences of Palestinian struggles and survival without electricity, running water, secure jobs, or economic stability. As the characters interact and sometimes collide, Najjar unveils the subtle effects of occupation on the behaviour and psyches of Palestinians, as well as on the decisions they make.

Beyond their focus on the themes of *sumud*, surrender, and survivability, the films present crafted snippets of the Palestinian (hi)story of resistance and record different oppressive forms of containing space, people, and ‘the shared experiences of siege, curfew, and exile [that] make each of the individual stories an allegory of the collective experience’ (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 103). The stories convey the perspectives of hard-working and ambitious individuals who are also burdened by social and political expectations and all sorts of impasses imposed by the occupation. More often than not, these individuals suspend their dreams and die fighting the occupation, as Salim the teacher does in *The Dupes*, manage to find strength and hope in resistance like Rana, or suspend everything altogether as is the case of Tareq. By acknowledging the differences between all these experiences, the films create humanizing representational frames that break away from the linearity of heroic Palestinian figures and dissolve the notions of a Palestinian homogeneity which positions their lead characters as markers of subjectivity. Using different forms of narrativization (e.g. first-person narration, second-person point of view, non-linear narrative), they demythologize Palestinians beyond the confined presence in ‘the realm of news, in which the Palestinians are codified into numbers of deaths, disenfranchised victims or casualties or mythicized into guerrilla fighters and later martyrs’ (Nashef, 2016). With such political engagement and the stylistic and aesthetic choices these filmmakers have made, all three narratives build on Third and Second Cinemas techniques in terms of themes and form. Accordingly, what follows discusses these three narratives as part of a Palestinian discourse of intervention that dismantles Palestinian stereotyping, energizes resistance, and responds to shifting and new global audiences’ sensibilities and expectations.
The discourse of intervention

Saleh’s adaptation of Kanafani’s novella reflects a meticulous understanding of the intertwined relationship between representation and emancipation. By foregrounding his characters’ stories in self-criticism, he intends to alter dehumanizing images of Palestinians and motivate viewers to rethink their perceptions of Palestinian personhood beyond the victim/terrorist duality. For this reason, he crafts a tale of solidarity, accountability, and fatal struggle against colonial repression that could be shocking to viewers who share the belief in universal values of freedom and human rights. By carefully accentuating the generational differences between Kanafani’s characters their backgrounds, ideological orientations, diasporic experiences, and different aspirations, Saleh’s narrative presents Palestinians as individuals with flaws, weaknesses, internal dilemmas, selfish inclinations, and self-destructive behaviour – things that make them/us human. Furthermore, Saleh endorses Kanafani’s warning about the dangers of internal conflicts, betrayal, and defeatism among many Palestinians, and the risk of abandoning the fight against occupation. Making the narrative speak directly to both Palestinians and a global audience including Arabs through Abu Khaizuran, the smuggler and former resistance fighter who lost his manhood in the war, the Egyptian director Saleh and the Palestinian writer Kanafani team up to deliver a powerful message about the impotence of Arab leadership. Abu Khaizuran, who not only surrenders and abandons the fight for liberation but also aids others to do the same thing, symbolically embodies the bankruptcy of Arab politics and leadership. Because of such bold criticism, The Dupes was blacklisted and continues to be banned in many Arab countries.5

Produced in black and white and shot in the Syrian and Iraqi deserts, The Dupes incorporates many cinematic characteristics from both Third and Second Cinemas’ stylistic components. Saleh structures his narrative around the futile circumstances that lead the main characters to their tragic deaths, crosses genre boundaries, casts trained actors and non-professionals, and blends docudrama, flashbacks, monologue, real news footage, and fiction with a montage style that resembles the Soviet practice as conceptualized by Sergei Eisenstein’s method of arranging shot/scene sequences to manipulate audiences’ emotions and heighten the anticipation of events. The neorealist influence is reflected in the stylistic choices that Saleh made; for example, the use of long shots, wide takes, and real settings, especially in the scenes of the desert. These characteristics are very similar to those used in Vittorio De Sica’s films Shoeshine (Sciuscià, 1946) and Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette, 1948).

Saleh’s narrative may seem like a straightforward political commentary on the reality of the Arab collective failure to free Palestine and the horrific impact on Palestinians in its aftermath. However, when considering Kanafani’s unforgiving position with regard to those who are willing to abandon resistance and are driven only by personal gain, it becomes clear that his intention was not only to create a political allegory that captures scenes of the suffering Palestinian diaspora in the Nabatieh refugee camp but also to convey a clear message against living willingly with the occupation or fantasizing about striking roots elsewhere. For this reason, Kanafani’s characters suffocate in the tanker without making a sound. Saleh, on the other hand, makes them knock on the tanker’s walls but to no avail. His decision to change the ending, as he explained in several
interviews, shows that revolution against tyranny and resistance continue (Aljarida.com, 2008).

In another scenario of resistance, director Hany Abu-Assad integrates fragments of personal dilemmas with collective struggles in *Rana’s Wedding* to tell the fictional story of the stubborn lead character Rana. The events unfold in real locations between the city of Ramallah and East Jerusalem and show the complexities of Palestinian mobility within a very fragmented and heavily surveilled space. In the same manner that *The Dupes* gives a visual sense of what it means to be an exiled Palestinian in the 1970s – by shifting the focus between the deadly desert and private spaces like the empty and decaying single-room home where Marwan lives with his divorced mother and young siblings – *Rana’s Wedding* takes viewers on a virtual tour of Occupied Palestine as they watch Rana walk across overwhelmingly dividing roadblocks and checkpoints and experience living in territories under siege. But, despite this controlled mobility, Rana manages to move around and reinstates Palestinian women’s participation in the resistance (constrained by both patriarchy and occupation). Viewers see her cross back and forth between Jerusalem and Ramallah and force her way through Israeli checkpoints. In one scene, she physically pushes her way through the bodies of Israeli soldiers as they try to stop her from crossing a roadblock into Jerusalem confirming ‘the integral participation of women in all aspects of the struggle for decolonization and liberation, including their participation in actual armed struggle’ (Gabriel, 1982: 18). Even though she does not carry a weapon, Rana does not relinquish her participation in fighting the occupation. In one of the scenes of confrontation between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian youth throwing rocks at them, she picks up a rock, lobs it at the soldiers, and walks away.

Reading her actions through this Third Cinema perspective on gender politics, Rana’s story is about a Palestinian woman’s strong will, agency, and relentless defiance of all sorts of restrictions, both cultural and institutional. This is no ordinary wedding: as one critic observes, ‘this wedding film is no stale confection, it dares to introduce (if not thoroughly explore) substantive contemporary issues including religious persecution, economic disenfranchisement, and women’s rights’ (Page, 2004). Rana’s father, the patriarch in the film, is seen very briefly, with no character development and mostly made irrelevant for his failure to stay in Palestine. Viewers do not get any meaningful insight into the reasoning behind his ultimatum or his decision to relocate, his directives serve only to set the film’s action in motion and clear the stage for his independent young daughter to choose her own partner. In fact, Rana’s proposal to Khalil happens on the stage of a theatre like a performance witnessed by Khalil’s theatre crew and actors, and symbolically becomes a celebration of her maturity.

The strength of the message lies in Rana’s creativity, her resourcefulness, her determination to pursue what she wants, and her resolve to find hope in the most desperate circumstances – against a background of daily life under occupation and the spectre of death that haunts Palestinians who are trying to have a normal life. Without showing any signs of weakness, Rana represents a self-reliant individual who cannot be deterred by the violence of colonization or by bulldozers demolishing houses. On her wedding day, as she sits in Mary’s room, looking through the window, she watches a house demolition. She tells her friend Mary: ‘They are demolishing a home on the day I am trying to build one.’
A few scenes earlier, when Rana runs into a funeral procession of a young Palestinian boy, she stands against the current, against the flow of people carrying the body of the *shaheed* child, in the opposite direction from death. She stands out as people stream past her on both sides. As the crowd moves ahead of her and it becomes clear that she does not intend to join the march to the cemetery, a few of them turn around and stare at her. Rana stands her ground. She goes back to the car and screams over and over, pouring out her emotions and frustration with the endless violence of occupation and the loss of life. But as she raises her head to take a breath, she imagines a child staring at her through the car window. Rana sees her own children, the hope of a future for Palestine. This scene moves the gender constructions beyond women’s role in procreation to the undeterred political decision making of moving the nation forward by keeping hope alive despite being surrounded by death.

Shifting between the focus on individualized subjectivity and the community as whole, the film addresses the biased representation of Palestinian society as monolithic by emphasizing its pluralist fabric and showing the symbols of Christianity in different scenes. In one of the first scenes in the film, as Rana is running around looking for Khalil, she goes to the residence of one of his friends, possibly a Palestinian Christian, whose house seems to have been taken over by an Israeli settler. The house shows the cross designs on both sides of the front door. Viewers see again another large cross painted on one of the houses in the background as Rana comes across a group of Israeli soldiers. Rana’s best friend is Mary, who is instrumental in the wedding and helps Rana by acquiring her wedding dress and shoes. The presence of this religious symbol and the Christian-Muslim friendship reflect the integration of Palestinians from different faiths who live side by side in the same neighbourhoods. Reflecting on similar scenes from her own film *Eyes of a Thief*, Najwa Najjar explains how she ‘transports [global audiences to] see human images and try to give [them] another sense of a country beyond the stereotypes – that there is a people! There are Christians, Muslims, atheists – that this is worth fighting for’ (Boston Palestine Film Festival, 2015). *Rana’s Wedding* also criss-crosses between genres and brings together a mixture of documentary, romantic drama, comedy, fiction, and elements of transnational stylistic practices, as shown in the scene with Rana, Khalil, and his friend listening and singing along to a popular Tunisian song as they drive back to meet Rana’s father.

As is the case of *The Dupes* and *Rana’s Wedding*, *Eyes of a Thief* tells a captivating story partly based on true events that occurred in 2002; the location is ‘Wadi al-Haramieh’ or Valley of the Thieves, an area located between Ramallah and Nablus. The real story concerns Thaer Hamad, a dissatisfied 22-year-old Palestinian man who, fed up with his life under occupation, buys a rifle, trains on his own in the fields to become a sniper, picks the location for his mission with military precision, and shoots occupying soldiers at a checkpoint, creating serious panic in the ranks of the Israeli army until his arrest two years later. For those who knew this background story, when the film premiered in Ramallah, the opening scene was confusing and made the narrative hard to follow. Without touching on any of the details above, Najjar’s version of the story begins with a fictional incident that takes place in a church basement where nuns and a priest are bandaging and sheltering Tareq – supposedly a substitute for Thaer. The actual Thaer
Ben Labidi (literally, ‘rebel’ in Arabic) is a Muslim from Silwad, a little village on the edge of Ramallah. In the film, Tareq is a Christian from Sebastia.

Tareq is a resistance fighter whose confrontation with occupation happened a decade before. He already took up weapons and fought violence with violence. After a 10-year prison sentence, he comes out and immediately notices lots of changes: the erection of the wall, more checkpoints, increased presence of Israeli soldiers, and decaying homes shelled with bullets. He travels back to his hometown searching for his missing wife and daughter, only to be informed that his wife has died, and his daughter was sent from Sebastia to an orphanage in Nablus. Tareq goes to Nablus to look for her. There, he starts working for a local businessman, Adel (Suhail Haddad), repairing water pipes and doing other small maintenance projects. Adel also offers Tareq a room to stay, across from a seamstress shop where Adel’s fiancée Leila, played by Algerian singer Souad Massi, is employed with several other women. Tareq notices Leila’s adoptive daughter, Malak (Malak Ermileh), a young girl from Balata refugee camp who seems about the same age his daughter Noor would be. His search for his daughter drives other developments in the film, until he discovers Adel’s betrayal. Meanwhile, Adel, suspicious of the newcomer, travels to his hometown, uncovers his history, and gets access to Tareq’s old photos and concealed identity.

In spite of being anchored in a true story, *Eyes of a Thief* tells a completely altered fictional tale, and uses components from Third and Second Cinemas and other transnational motifs. A non-studio production, the film was shot on location, in the West Bank town of Nablus, presenting real scenes of a charming old city with Mediterranean architecture, a stunning and diverse natural habitat, fields rich with vegetation, pasture, and trees despite being surrounded by the deadly and confining presence of the occupying Israeli army.

The narrative brings together the collaboration of a Palestinian woman director, an Egyptian star, an Algerian singer who had never acted before, and a Palestinian refugee child. All work together to reverse stereotypical representations from the very first scenes by showing that the protagonist of this new story is a Palestinian Christian Arab who is neither a Muslim terrorist nor a jihadi on a suicide mission. As the events continue to unfold, Tareq and other characters rarely discuss the occupation but show how they live with it. In many scenes, as Tareq travels between job sites in Nablus, Israeli soldiers are seen arresting Palestinian young men, making them kneel and pointing guns at their heads. With several indications that Malak is Tareq’s daughter, Najjar develops the plot to explore a range of themes including corruption, exploitation, collaboration with the occupation, gender segregation, and class division. Most importantly, the narrative shows the Palestinian community in more humanizing frames. Despite the fragmentation of life and frequent interruptions of normalcy suggested by electric outages or water theft, Palestinians are represented as regular people who socialize in cafés, discuss politics, comment on social problems, and enjoy social activities together like watching soccer matches.

While Palestinian audiences expected a completely different and more conventional and heroic presentation of Thaer’s true story, Najjar intentionally escapes the traditional one-dimensional characterization of Palestinians. In defiance of this narrative tradition, Tareq, the film’s hero is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions to throw off all
sorts of Palestinian stereotypes and have viewers reflect on the human experience and the mechanisms of survival under occupation. Similarly, in *The Dupes*, there is no particular lead character who drives the plot’s events forward. Instead there are only broken individuals whose poor decisions get them caught up in events that will predictably lead to their downfall; the characters abandon the idea of return and, by default, *sumud*. In *Rana’s Wedding*, there is no celebration of heroism either as the film exposes the constant interruption of all aspects of Palestinian life precisely because of Palestinians’ blocked mobility. The film blends romance with black comedy and shows how the occupation inhibits what anthropologists call ‘the construction of selves’, a process with many steps for individuals to join a community, strengthen their sense of belonging, and extend their familial ties. Rana makes it clear that she intends to take all these steps and dismisses the idea of ‘abandoning’ Palestine physically or emotionally.

Building family ties is as important in *Eyes of a Thief*. After his release from prison, Tareq begins a search for his familial members, a wife and daughter, until he meets Leila. A romance begins to develop between the two but does not come to fruition and leaves open possibilities for a relationship. In all three stories, the occupation is never focalized but looms in the background and appears through the limitations constraining Palestinians’ livelihood internally and beyond. These limitations manifest themselves in different shapes: the borders that the refugees try to cross and where they eventually die, the checkpoints that prevent Rana from reuniting with her future husband, and the daunting criminal history that hampers the movement and search for normalcy that Tareq wants to accomplish. Self-criticism emerges again in the characters’ position vis-à-vis resistance to Israeli occupation. While the refugees of *The Dupes* decide to move farther south and abandon the idea of return, Rana and Khalil defy all obstacles, and in a moment of triumph conduct their wedding at a checkpoint, symbolically making the wedding stand for the continuity of the Palestinian community’s existence despite Israeli colonization. Tareq, on the other hand, troubled by Adel’s act of betrayal, interrupts his wedding ceremony and denounces him publicly as a collaborator with the occupation, thereby reclaiming the purity of the Palestinian family.

**Conclusion**

The article argues that *The Dupes, Rana’s Wedding*, and *Eyes of a Thief* can be categorized as Third and Second Cinemas based on their thematic interest in different aspects of colonization and the hybridity of their stylistic components, which bring together motifs from a variety of film genres. All three narratives engage with the flaws of Palestinian stereotypical representations and their impact on the emancipation of a colonized community. The article also showcases different examples of Palestinian cinematic productions concerned with self-criticism and the danger of surrender in the struggle for liberation. Hence, the reading of these films as hybrid cinematic productions is very useful to the discussion of the links between representation and the emancipatory commitment of Palestinian cinema in two ways: first, they provide cultural material that represents their plight under colonization and forms of coping, and possibilities to change their positionality by offering alternative images and more humanizing characterizations of Palestinians as individuals using all filmic instruments available; second, they
introduce new images and different visualizations to transnational viewers that make them reflect on both the situation of Palestinians as a colonized community and their own assumptions about communities that live under the oppression of colonization. Building on these hybrid narrative choices, each film devises its own political message against the cruelty of occupation, strategies to survive it, cope with its oppressive and silencing rules, and fight for liberation and a Palestinian voice.

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**Notes**

1. Films referred to in the text are listed alphabetically by their titles in the Filmography that follows the References section.

2. *Sumud* is a term ‘which the Baghdad conference in 1978 coined in regard to the million and a half Palestinians who live under Israeli occupation’ (Shehada, 1982: 9). As Gertz and Khleifi (2008: 77) further clarified, ‘the term denotes steadfastness and the realization of one’s connection with one’s location, even if it no longer exists and even if one has become a stranger in it’.

3. These documentaries were made with footage from refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan to discuss the manufacturing of reality, deceptive trickery of editing, disinformation, and propaganda about the Palestinian struggle. For a more detailed history of these productions, the founding of the Palestinian Film Unit (PFU), and its role and transformation later into the Palestinian Cinema Institute (PCI), see Yaqub (2018: ch. 2, ‘Toward a Palestinian Third Cinema’).

4. An earlier film titled *Sands of Sorrow* (1950), produced by the Council for Relief of Palestinian Arab Refugees, also showed the appalling conditions of refugees in the Gaza Strip. The film had little impact on American audiences, however, and was used mainly to encourage donations.

5. Yaqub (2011: 118) states that despite its critical success: ‘*The Dupes* was heavily censored; it was screened for just two weeks in Damascus and was not shown at all in Egypt or Iraq.’

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