



Dabashi: Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema by *Reviewed by Haim Bresheeth*

Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema, edited by Hamid Dabashi. London and New York: Verso, 2006. x + 160 pages. Notes to p. 174. Contributors to p. 177. Filmography to p. 203. Bibliography to p. 209. 21 illustrations. No index. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewed by Haim Bresheeth

Dreams of a Nation combines nine authors and a lecture by Edward Said into the first anthology devoted to Palestinian cinema. As such, this is a most welcome publication on one of the world's smallest and (until recently) little-known national cinemas. That Palestinian cinema is without exception produced under conditions of brutal Israeli military occupation makes its significant achievements all the more impressive and certainly worth the volume at hand.

The anthology is the result of a cinematic exhibition of the same name, the brainchild of editor Hamid Dabashi, which debuted in 2003 and has brought Palestinian cinema to North American audiences since then. The exhibition itself has been an impressive effort during a period of a decline of official international political support for Palestinian liberation; the level of popular support for this project (and many others across the globe) seems to suggest that the political betrayal of Palestine and its people is not mirrored by a similar public betrayal but rather by a growing interest in Palestinian art, culture, and film.

The nine authors contributing to the volume come from a range of disciplines. Some are well-known film and cultural studies scholars: Dabashi, Hamid Naficy, Ella Shohat. Some are established scholars in political history (Joseph Massad) or new scholars of cultural history (Bashir Abu-Manneh); others are renowned filmmakers and artists: Michel Khleifi, Nizar Hassan, Omar al-Qattan, Annemarie Jacir. This rich spread enriches the sources, disciplines, and viewpoints that inform the writing.

The task of introducing the volume, starting with a lecture delivered by Said in 2003 and complemented by Dabashi's preface, is best performed by the two chapters by Jacir and Massad, which develop the trope of cultural resistance as part of the Palestinian struggle. Jacir describes the many brutal attacks on Palestinian culture and cultural institutions by the Israeli army, including the many assassinations of Palestinian cultural figures; Massad lays out before us a vista of Palestinian film, from its inception to the present—a masterful presentation of the power of cultural struggle as part of the liberation struggle against Zionist occupation, oppression, and injustice. By referencing the work of Amilcar Cabral, Palestinian cinema is understood as part of the anticolonial resistance movements spanning the 1950s, in which literature, poetry, cinema, theatre, and the arts played their part alongside armed struggle. While a history of Palestinian cinema is yet

to be published in English (but exists in Arabic and Hebrew), Massad's chapter serves well as the historical contextualization of the debates in this volume, ranging as it does across periods, countries, films, and filmmakers. The cultural liberation theme is taken up by filmmaker Khleifi, one of the leading directors since his debut with *Fertile Memory* (1980). His work, ranging across the genres of fiction and documentary, is in many ways iconic, leading us to the work of another famous director, Elia Suleiman, whose oeuvre also straddles genres. The refusal to settle on one side of the generic divide between fiction and documentary cinema is an important part of the argument developed by Naficy in his work on exilic and accented cinema and in his chapter in this volume; Naficy's arguments about the typifying characteristics of exilic/accented cinema are beautifully exemplified by Palestinian cinema, and Suleiman, Hassan, Khleifi, and Hany Abu-As`ad all arguably fall within his analytical model.

Arguably, the contributions by filmmakers to this volume are what clearly distinguish it. Khleifi's description of his working method, creative history, and the issues facing him as an artist is lucid and original and helps us to further appreciate this pioneering figure—the first Palestinian feature filmmaker to place women and their perspectives center stage. The chapter by al-Qattan clarifies both his own and Khleifi's development as filmmakers and is of great historical value. Hassan's entertaining short piece is a real gem and reads like one of Suleiman's scripts, ironically, placing identity politics in the context of the bizarre political realities of film festivals.

Shohat's chapter introduces a much-needed critique of nationalism in the third world, exposing its patriarchal nature as analyzed in feminist films from across the globe, by many female but also some male filmmakers, including important Palestinians. The final chapter is a complex mapping by Dabashi of the work of Suleiman and includes some limited textual analysis.

Overall, this first English-language volume devoted to Palestinian cinema fills a gap in the field, especially with the very detailed and informative filmography, but also with the more limited bibliography, which misses some articles published in English. It is regrettable that the scope of this volume could not include many other important works and filmmakers. The many illustrations help bring the book closer to its subject matter.

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