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**Filming the Memory that Remains**

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## **Filming the Memory that Remains**

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### **Abstract**

In 2009, Palestinian filmmaker Elie Suleiman released *The Time that Remains: Chronicle of a Present Absentee*, a semi-autobiographical continuation of the exploration of Palestinian identity and the Palestinian condition begun in his earlier films. The release coincided with the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Israel and the simultaneous Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe). Suleiman uses film to speak to a global audience that is ill informed about Palestinian identity, in large measure because the Israeli narrative has dominated the media's story of the Israeli-Palestinian contestation. Suleiman's films offer a wryly comic corrective; they are multi-layered, complex narratives explicating the essential Palestinian value—*sumud* or steadfastness. The thematic focus of this most recent film is loss, survival, memory, and the ironic intertwining of presence and absence. The film explores what may be the most repressed of Palestinian narratives—that of the “Israeli-Arabs,” the Palestinians who remained within Israel after 1948. As displaced Palestinians living in Israel, Suleiman and his family are officially identified as “present absentees”; that naming identifies them as people who both exist and do not exist. This paper examines how the film attempts to communicate a complex Palestinian story, constructing and deconstructing the social memory of a controversial time and place. Presence and absence are played against each other in the formation of a narrative of identity.

**Keywords:**

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In 2009, Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman released *The Time That Remains: Chronicle of a Present Absentee*. The film is a semi-autobiographical continuation of the exploration of Palestinian identity and the Palestinian condition that he began in his earlier films. While enjoying the ‘blackly comic’ wit of Suleiman’s film, one reviewer found Suleiman ‘unambiguous on only one point: his own feelings regarding Israeli presence in the land of his birth’ (Buckwalter, 2011). He remarks that Suleiman has spent three feature films ‘figuring out the complex and evolving identity of the Arabs who remain’ without reaching ‘many conclusions’ (Buckwalter, 2011). This paper explores the way Suleiman dissects such Western media naming (‘the Arabs who remain’) and how in so doing he leads his audience to a more nuanced understanding of Palestinian and Israeli Palestinian identity. As Khalidi (1997) observes, Palestinian identity must be understood in contrast with the other, and in the context of ‘competing loyalties’ (p.10); family, religion, surrounding nations, and the narratives of Israel all become part of the complex identity. Suleiman takes his audience through the narratives of his family’s experience, against the back drop of history: 1948 and the formation of Israel/Palestinian Nakba, the death of Nasser, the Land Day demonstrations, contemporary Ramallah and the separation/apartheid wall. International pop culture allusions embedded within the narrative intensify viewer understanding of the many influences on Palestinian identity.

Suleiman’s films are multi-layered, complex serious comedy explicating an essential Palestinian value, *sumud* or steadfastness, i.e. remaining in the land. In this most recent film, built on the experience of his family, the thematic focus is loss, survival, and the ironic intertwining of presence and absence as competing loyalties work in the formation of Palestinian identity. Constructing a memory of a controversial time and place, the film plays presence and absence against each other moving through time as it forms a narrative of identity examining the terministic screen of ‘present absentee’. As a term that grew out of the upheaval of the Nakba, the Palestinian designation of catastrophe for the loss of their land in the formation of the state of Israel, the term is laden with emotional, and very contested memory.

### **Terministic Screens and Perception**

Kenneth Burke (1966) explicates the concept of the terministic screen. In considering the way language and symbol sets direct our attention, Burke explains that the way we name something reflects and shapes what we see. (Rather than focusing on naming as a scientifically accurate or inaccurate label, such as calling a dog a cat, he considers how labels lead us to consider some attributes and ignore others, e.g. recognizing that some dog breeds, like cats, may be independent hunters with a strong preference for frequent naps in soft places. The naming ‘directs the attention’ to a set of relevant characteristics and away from other attributes. The terms become screens, filtering and shaping what we see, so that through the term we get not a whole ‘reflection of

reality’, but a ‘selection’ that deflects our attention away from other things (Burke, 1966, pp. 44-45).

Earlier Suleiman films dissect terms like absence and terrorist that are associated with Palestinian identity by Western media. This film continues the discussion of those terms while focusing on a term that defined the life of his family. He avoids a name that is commonly used, the hyphenated identity label: ‘Israeli-Arab.’ That label was quickly applied to their Palestinian residents by the Israeli state in an effort to reduce or eliminate the Palestinian identity of this minority (Masalha, 2012, p. 234). Suleiman focuses on a denser label from the same period, rich in implication, but controversial in its application; displaced Palestinians living in Israeli after 1948 are officially termed ‘present absentees,’ a naming that identifies them as people who both exist and do not exist. As Cook (2008) explains, this term was used for property confiscation:

*In the Absentee Property Law of 1950, the state defined one in four Palestinian citizens as a ‘present absentee’: an Orwellian classification that registered those internally displaced by war, however briefly, as officially ‘present’ in Israel but ‘absent’ from their property.... Like the refugees outside the country...they were denied all rights to their homes, land, and bank accounts, as were their descendants (p. 35).*

Both labels, ‘Israeli-Arab’ and ‘present absentee’, avoid the Palestinian name and so function to obscure or even dismiss the reality of that identity. While ‘Israeli-Arab’ simply ignores the possibility of one nationality in renaming the people by a different nationality juxtaposed with ethnicity, ‘present absentee’ simultaneously acknowledges and negates Palestinian existence. The Palestinians are not named as such; rather their group is subsumed into a group that exists without authority, without nationality. Present absentees may simply be an abstract concept without human feeling. They are an unacknowledged ‘other.’ The film explores the polarizing oxymoron of the term as it considers the ways in which one can be both present and absent.

### **The Refugee as Present Absentee**

In the 1948 segment of the film one wounded refugee recounts the classic story of the present absentee (cf. Ateek 1989, pp.7-13). Taken by Suleiman’s father into a home abandoned by Palestinians during the invasion of Nazareth, the injured man tells of the Haganah (Israeli) troops ordering the Palestinian residents of Beisan (Bethshean) to leave. Taken to the border and dumped by the soldiers, this man ran and hid in a nearby village, but everywhere he went, the Israelis were already there—including Nazareth. He does not know where to go. His story outlines the quintessential experience of the present absentee:

he is a displaced person in a country that was his (present), but he is not allowed to return home (and also absent).

The first portion of the film title evokes the memory of the present/absent towns these refugees were required to abandon. *The Time that Remains* recalls the title of Walid Khalidi's (2006) study of abandoned Palestinian villages, *All that Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. The film itself does not focus attention on the crumbling ruins of emptied homes; rather it catches the moments after the owners' flight. As the refugee of Beisan is brought into an emptied home in Nazareth to hide and tell his tale, the viewers are shown the remnants of a meal of the table, similar evidence of rapid departure is all around the home. Later we see Haganah soldiers casually looting a home, showing off the picture, the clock, the lace tablecloth that are their trophies of conquest. Abandonment and forced flight comes at high cost.

The difficulty of choosing to be a present absentee is explored through the interaction of Fuad Suleiman (Elia's father) and one of his friends, also within the 1948 segment. Fuad is the resister, the gunsmith, later the smuggler who uses night fishing to cover gunrunning; continuing an examination begun in earlier films, his character simultaneously invites consideration of both the terrorist screen and the present absentee screen. Here we see a friend conversing with Fuad in his shop while he works on a gun—a clear symbol of physical resistance. The woman Fuad loves has left with her family; for him to stay requires a painful and dangerous separation. Fuad's friend has made a different choice. He goes through one excuse after another as he seeks to justify his decision to leave:

*We're leaving for a couple of days until things become clearer. My mother's too old to stay here the way things are.... I'm not a young man anymore. My chances of marrying are getting slimmer. My family needs me. The country's lost. There's nothing left to fight for.... One has to accept one's destiny* (Suleiman, 2009).

From an implied temporary departure, to a parental need, to personal needs, returning to family responsibility, then to the futility of resistance, his friend rings the changes of justified abandonment of the nation. His friend chooses to be wholly absentee. He abandons the oxymoron.

Fuad, by contrast, will be present and continue to resist. He embodies the Palestinian value of *sumud*, steadfastness, and over the course of the film the nature of that resistance will change. The gunsmith of 1948 risks execution during interrogation rather than tell where guns were hidden. The fisherman/gun runner of later years is the same man who risks his own life to save an Israeli soldier caught in an overturned bus on a bridge; warned that the vehicle might explode and ordered to leave the bridge, Fuad nonetheless climbs into the truck to save the injured soldier. Fuad is not a cardboard stereotype. Scott (2011) explains Fuad's character as a study 'in how dignity and humanity can survive dispossession and defeat.' This is the endurance of *sumud*, the

requirement of presence is to be maintained in the context of a governmentally hyphenated existence and identity.

### **The Present Absentee Divorced from Power**

A third man chooses martyrdom during the 1948 segment. Going to the headquarters of the military commander of Nazareth, he enters, and sees fellow Palestinians confined in a corner of the courtyard. The subjugated condition is intensified by the placement and posture of the commander relaxed in a balcony above the courtyard, distanced from the immediate circumstances and in position of power, and the demeanor of the Haganah guards who show no concern that the Palestinian rushing in might be armed. The man reads a 'reworked verse from Abdelrahim Mahmud's 1927 poem *Shaheed*' (Johnson, 2011). Ending his statement with the assertion, 'I want no life if we're not respected in our land' (Suleiman, 2009); he then pulls a pistol out and shoots himself in the forehead. He will not give up resistance, but he cannot bear humiliation. Notably he does not choose a form of violence that will also kill others; his is an act of personal sacrifice. He chooses an ultimate absence, yet he seeks to remain present in his voiced and enacted resistance.

As the film develops, the concept of present absentee seems to extend to all those Palestinians of 1948, present within Israel and possibly still attached to their original homes, but separated from power, devalued, and diminished. Burke (1966) observes that terministic screens may work to pull things together and thus associate them, or to separate things (p. 49). Suleiman establishes the present absentee as separated from structural power. In one early scene the Palestinian mayor of Nazareth is required to go sign the document of surrender in an old hilltop building outside of the city. As his car speeds along the narrow winding road, white flag whipping in the wind and sometimes covering the windshield, the car is almost forced off the road by repeated buzzing by an Israeli plane. Moments earlier the same plane was seen leafletting Nazareth. The surrender terms are read in rapid, untranslated Hebrew. It seems not to matter whether the mayor can understand what he is agreeing to; he must agree. Following the signing he is forced into a staged photo with casually attired Israeli officials surrounding him while formally dressed Palestinian dignitaries look on from the other side of the room. When the photographer bends to take the picture, the camera flash seems to emerge not from the camera, but from his rear; the captured, frozen image is that of the shamed and powerless Palestinian dignitaries—the present absentees. The surrender terms have established that the Palestinian government has no authority. While it is stated that Palestinian officials will control civil affairs, the military has sole discretion over what is civil and what is military. The Palestinian people would be present, but only as puppets, separated, absent from real governmental power.

The theme is reiterated later when a paperboy wanders past three coffee drinkers on a Nazareth street. He is hawking two different newspapers: '*The*

*Nation* for one shekel! *All the Arabs* for free!’ (Suleiman, 2009) When the men ask to buy a copy of *The Nation*, the boy determines he has sold his last copy. He continues with blatant irony, ‘No more *Nation*. What’s left is *All the Arabs*. *All the Arabs* for free. *All the Arabs* for free. Papers’ (Suleiman, 2009). The land is there. The Arab people are there. The structures of self-determined authority are gone. The present absentees are powerless.

Ateek (1989) explains the personal costs of that condition:

*The wounds of that war were not only physical; the psychological agonies were at times greater. Borders were closed, and many families were divided on different sides of the armistice lines. People worried about their loved ones—a father or mother, brother or sister, aunt or uncle. Fear, uncertainty, anxiety, anger, bitterness—all these became part of the life of the humiliated and demoralized Palestinian community. (p. 11)*

These difficulties permeate the film. It begins in the 1948 segment with fears for relatives who could not flee with them, if they are forced to leave, and is then punctuated with letters from family members in Amman. Passage of time and changing personal and political conditions are revealed through the letters as well as the visually reported stories.

Suleiman’s eccentric childhood neighbors further exemplify the stresses of present absence. One neighbor regularly douses himself with kerosene and tries to set himself on fire, exclaiming, ‘Let me end it all. I’ve got nothing left. What kind of life is this? Live or die, it’s all the same’ (Suleiman, 2009). After boasting about his rather dissolute life, another neighbor says crassly and with intentional irony, ‘They’ve threatened us with prison.... You don’t threaten a whore with a dick’ (Suleiman, 2009). For these men the present absentee status borders on the unbearable: disempowered, confined, and humiliating.

### **Absence within Presence**

Suleiman explicates yet another disturbing form of present absentee status as the tokenism and cultural absorption that are part of 1948 Palestinian life. This is seen, with wry humor, in the story of the Palestinian man who fulfills his fantasy of having sex with a female Israeli soldier by having his wife, dressed as such a soldier, wait as a hitchhiker at a bus stop on the outskirts of Nazareth. Three young Palestinian men watch from a distance as one explains what is happening. The wife waves off one vehicle that stops for her, but the husband’s plan backfires when she enters another vehicle with three waiting men before her husband arrives in his car. Seduced by the appeal of a dangerous other, the husband has lost what he had.

Suleiman’s second example deals with more blatant cultural imposition and recalls the efforts of other conquering powers to weaken or eliminate the cultural identity of the conquered. The scene is the Palestinian elementary

school of Elia Suleiman's childhood. The event is the presentation of an award to the girl's choir of the school. They have won first prize in a local Hebrew singing competition. The room is decorated with streamers of Israeli flags. The dignitary announces

*I am proud and happy to award this marvelous choir first prize in the Hebrew singing competition. Awarding this prize to a school of the Arab minority is another proof of our willingness to pass on the values of democracy and equality to all our pupils (Suleiman, 2009).*

The girls sing two songs; the second is a celebration of Israeli Independence Day:

*On my national holiday...all the people sing in happiness and joy. How more joyful the song on the national day of Israel. Long live my country. Long live my country (Suleiman, 2009).*

The girls are singing in celebration of the event that marked the conquest of their culture and society. To appearances the younger generation has been seemingly absorbed, separated from their Palestinian cultural heritage and educated to what are presented as, for them, alien values. The event recounts an exercise in cultural negation that is still familiar within the Israeli educational system. In her study of recent Israeli schoolbooks (ten history, six geography, and one civics), Peled-Elhanan (2012, p. 22)) notes that Palestinian citizens of the state of Israel are typically referred to as 'Israel's Arabs' (p. 51). She contends

*The Palestinian citizens of Israel do not have their relative share or rather any share at all in any report that concerns them in the textbooks studied here; they are practically absent from the texts, except as a negative phenomena: a primitive lot which is a developmental burden or a security and demographic threat (Peled-Elhanan, 2012, p. 16).*

Such curricular content obviously discourages identification with a marginalized group. Palestinian culture and a Palestinian historical narrative are suppressed. The possibility of a resulting cultural absence within physical presence is a crucial message of Suleiman's filmic dissection of the terministic screen of the present absentee. The film undercuts an innocuous reading of the singing incident. While the girls begin their singing with smiling enthusiasm, we see them grow increasingly uncomfortable as they near the end of the second song, the celebration of Israeli independence. They voice the words, but lose the spirit. The credibility of the smiling Israeli dignitary is undercut from the moment of his arrival. The initial camera shot of him shows only his chest and belly; the view imposes a visual screen proclaiming that he is to be understood as unthinking and rapacious. His proclamation of governmental

generosity will not be trusted. The message of ongoing resistance to absorption by the present absentees is furthered in the scene of a silent young Elia standing before the school principal being asked, 'Who told you America is colonialist?' Moments later the same visual image recurs as Elia is asked, 'Who told you America is imperialist?' (Suleiman, 2009) The resistance clearly continues in the generation born to the 1948 Palestinians, no matter the song.

### **Elia Suleiman as Present Absentee within Memory and Imaginary**

Within the film, Elia Suleiman's character embodies the oxymoronic condition of the present absentee. As in his earlier films he is seen here as the wide-eyed, silent observer who cannot personally give voice to his own story, but who stays, watching. He is an observer metaphorically imprisoned by his surroundings and the camera. He is seen through windows, arches and doubled doorways, forced up long staircases, and confined further as he may be seen in one window through another window. He is present, although cribbed and confined in space, yet absent, lacking as a character the power of a voice. Nonetheless, he resists: as a child he (off-screen) asks uncomfortable questions at school; as a youth he is required to leave the country when he is accused of tearing an Israeli flag; as an adult, in an act of magical realism he vaults over the separation/apartheid wall.

The arrival and departure of Suleiman's character within the land bookends the film and evokes questions about presence, absence, and reality. The film opens with his luggage being placed in a limousine. In the background we see a 1947 travel poster for visiting Palestine, here altered to read in Hebrew, *Eretz Acheret* or 'a different country/place.' The viewer is signaled to question whom or what is present and absent. The opening continues as if this is a limo ride in the *Twilight Zone*. Suleiman sits silent and half seen in the back seat while the driver calls his dispatcher to announce a long trip: 'Disappearing until further notice. Don't try to find me.' They are caught in a heavy thunderstorm, and the driver can barely see. He doesn't recognize where they are and fears they 'took a wrong turn.' Suleiman doesn't respond when asked if he knows where they are. The driver asks, 'Where are the kibbutzim, the moshavim? They were everywhere. Did the earth swallow them up?' They seem no longer to be driving in the modern Israel the driver knows. They are in a ghost rain laden land of memory. The driver is lost, unable to reach his dispatcher Elie, and uncertain what to do: 'Elie, talk to me. We lost our way. What am I gonna do now? Where do I go now? How do I get home? Elie, Elie where are you?...Where? Where am I' (Suleiman, 2009)? At this point the title of the film appears asserting the issues of time, presence, and absence. The viewer has been taken into a different time, a different place, while Suleiman is apparently returning to his childhood home. The prologue would seem to ask the viewer, 'How did we as two peoples in a contested county get where we are, and indeed where are we.' The driver and the viewers

are led to experience with Suleiman and his family the disjuncture of uncertainty and displacement, the anxiety of not knowing how or when you can go home, or even why what once was home has changed so radically. Questions of presence and absence permeate the memory of the past and the recognition of the present.

As the film nears the end, viewers are brought back from the land of memory when Suleiman vaults over the separation/apartheid wall and find himself seated in again in the limousine in the storm while the driver sleeps away his frustrations and fears. Suleiman is returned to the hospital room in Nazareth where his mother chooses to die—pointedly removing her oxygen supply while she holds a photograph of his father. Her struggle has gone on long enough. She has been part of the life of steadfastness as a present absentee. She was the letter writer who kept the family metaphorically together, although people were divided by the borders and laws brought by 1948. She enacts a final piece of resistance related to the memory of 1948 when she refuses to watch the firework display over the Nazareth night sky. Israeli Independence Day is the primary occasion for fireworks in that Israel; as a present absentee that is not a day for her to celebrate, so she pointedly averts her head when her Asian caregiver urges her to watch the lavish display. After leaving her hospital room, Suleiman sits in the waiting area of emergency listening to people recounting a world turned upside down, where a doctor refers to a trivial question as if it marks an emergency, while another man boasts off-handedly of the violence he has unnecessarily suffered and inflicted on his fellows. There is a bleak wit in their ready acceptance of changed life conditions. A remix of ‘Staying Alive’ plays while the credits roll. His mother has chosen to die, aspects of culture may shift, but the heritage, the value of *sumud*, the concern for the survival of the land and the people remains.

Suleiman uses image composition, language play, and plot incident to dissect his focal term—present absentee. In that examination he establishes a narrative of a people humiliated, deprived, imprisoned metaphorically, but continuing to resist through presence. He uses film to give voice to the often voiceless present absentees. Through a filmic commemoration of the events surrounding his family’s life, Suleiman engages in ‘history-telling’ as his family narrative is merged ‘with historical events in a public performance’ (Khalili, 2007, p. 66) that explains the cost and the choices implicit in being a present absentee.

A focus on the screen of terrorism in earlier films showed how terministic screens confine our understanding of Palestinians and their relationship to violence. This film’s explication of a less familiar, but similarly loaded term shows how such terministic screens can be unpacked and exposed to reveal their irony. The unpacking enriches our understanding of the complex identity of the 1948 Palestinians, the Palestinians resident within the state of Israel behind the 1948 borders, the present absentees.

Suleiman dedicates his film to the memory of his mother and father, present absentees from the time of the Nakba. He has created in his history-telling a story that exposes the ripples of that event through Palestinian culture

while sharing memories of that event that are so made part of the collective. He has given a voice, through film, to the voiceless; he has given form and contextualized meaning to the experiences of his family. In 'the time that remains' to Palestinian survivors of the events of 1948, he has enabled a sharing of the memory that remains. Abu-Lughod and Sa'di (2007) contend 'the debilitating factor' hampering Palestinian story telling and memory sharing 'that the powerful nations have not wanted to listen' (p. 11). Suleiman's dissection of the present absentee condition provides a place for that memory work.

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