

# On love and pain

## Divine Intervention, a film by Elia Suleiman

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Palestinian director Elia Suleiman's new film *Divine Intervention*, also known as *Chronicle of Love and Pain*, is an extraordinary effort using the concrete, surreal and abstract to expose the humiliations suffered by Palestinians living in Israel and their emotional consequences. Disgracefully, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences discouraged the producer of Suleiman's film from submitting it for a best foreign language film award on the grounds that Palestine was not a recognized country!

Suleiman was born in Nazareth in 1960, lived in New York City between 1981 and 1993 and returned home in 1994 when the European Commission allowed him the opportunity to develop a Film and Media Department in Bir Zeit University.

The opening segment of the film takes place in a middle-class Palestinian neighborhood in Nazareth. A series of vignettes reveal that in a relatively affluent community seemingly distant from the *intifada*, anger, seething frustration and resentment form the basis of all interpersonal relationships.

A man driving a car smilingly acknowledges acquaintances on the street, while muttering obscenities under his breath about each one. An elderly man deflates a young boy's soccer ball every time it lands on his roof and, as a consequence, repeatedly suffers beatings by the boy's family. Another man ritualistically throws his garbage into his neighbor's garden, then berates her with a false moralizing when she angrily throws it back. A group of boys beat and then shoot, with manic gusto, an unfortunate creature that has invaded their turf. The invader turns out to be nothing more than a snake. These portrayals subvert expectations, and reveal a community that has great difficulty achieving any kind of solidarity.

We see the effects, more or less, before we see the causes. The reality of an oppressed people, imprisoned on its own territory, begins to emerge, sometimes tragi-comically. A foreign tourist asks an Israeli policeman the way to the Holy Sepulcher. Unable to help her, the cop pulls a handcuffed and blindfolded Palestinian from the back of the van to

provide the information.

Ever-present cigarettes create the disturbing impression that the film's characters are possessed by a collective death wish. A chilling hospital scene depicts zombified patients walking up and down a small corridor in rhythmic despair, pushing their IV stands and furiously puffing away on their oral fixatives.

These tableaux have a cumulative weight as the film examines the psychological and emotional traumas of a population that has been subjected for decades to inhuman levels of military and police repression, and is increasingly the object of deadly ethnic cleansing. The film's characters convey a level of tension that could only be the product of a near-insane existence. *Divine Intervention's* first sequence shows a man dressed in a Santa Claus outfit, toting a bag of presents and running for his life from a group of rock-throwing youth. The scene is baffling unless viewed as an indicator of an environment that has become brutal and irrational.

The film eventually introduces ES, the filmmaker (played by Suleiman), who has come from abroad to tend to his ailing father. ES's father is a well-drawn character. One of the most disgruntled personalities in the movie, he is small businessman—a recognizable social type—who has been financially ruined and stripped of the objects of his life's efforts (his welding shop has been closed down and his home furnishings repossessed). The external unraveling produces an internal collapse as he falls over from heart trouble next to a pile of unpaid bills.

At this point, *Divine Intervention* unfolds as the creation of ES, with the segments noted down on Post-Its methodically arranged on his apartment wall. ES negotiates the world with a stony, Buster Keatonesque stare, permanently etched with pathos. His face is as powerful an expression of the Palestinian human nightmare as any combination of elements in the film.

Silence now “animates” the film and fantasy emerges as the tool of re-imagining the Palestinian plight. This is a world where ES can casually throw an apricot pit at an

Israeli tank and blow it up. It's a world where a beautiful woman, "dressed to kill," can sashay past a military checkpoint and collapse the lookout tower simply through the strength of her aura. The musical theme for this segment is a Palestinian version of Screamin' Jay Hawkins' song, "I Put a Spell on You."

Then there is the matter of the checkpoints, the focal point of repression and demeanment. ES loves the beautiful girl (he tells her that on a Post-it). He is from Jerusalem and she from Ramallah. Their romance takes place at the no-man's land area of the Al-Ram checkpoint, which separates the two cities. Holding hands in a parked car is the only available form of courtship. The charms of this bleak setting include having to witness the brutalities meted out by the Israeli military to the crossing motorists.

In one particularly grotesque scene, a sadistic Israeli guard forces people out of their vehicles, takes their possessions, bullies and abuses them, then mixes and matches in various vehicles the distraught travelers, all the while mocking them with an insipid, demeaning song. Ironically, this episode brings to mind a similar moment in Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, in which German soldiers force Jewish ghetto residents to dance at a Warsaw checkpoint.

ES's outward countenance is paralyzed. Existence has been too overwhelming. He loves the girl, yet cannot speak. She loves him, yet there are too many injustices to indulge in love. In an effort to break the impasse, ES inflates a balloon with a big, grinning imprint of Yasser Arafat. The bobbing Arafat so disturbs the checkpoint guards, that the lovers can drive off together unnoticed to Ramallah. The balloon finally settles over the al-Aksa mosque on the Temple Mount.

After the disappearance of his girlfriend (she never returns to their checkpoint love-nest), ES and an Israeli citizen have a stare-down in their respective cars under a billboard advertising a firing range whose target is the picture of a female, kaffiyeh-shrouded, Palestinian warrior (ES's lost love?). A super-stylized fantasy scene ensues at the range when Israeli shooters start firing at the Palestinian poster-targets. With pyrotechnic mastery, the fighter-target comes alive and magically downs the enemy marksmen. The blow-out finale shows a Palestinian flag embedded into the soil. The film ends with Suleiman and his screen mother watching a pressure cooker reaching maximum heat. His mother says: "That's enough now!"

*Divine Intervention* exhibits a high degree of intelligence and imagination in constructing a picture of anxiety, tension and rage and then providing some sense of why it exists. Distinct images are worked out with an unusual degree of clarity and insight.

The initial disjointed sequences show a relatively privileged Palestinian social layer engaged in hostile

behavior towards one another. This jarring reality is clarified as the film evolves. During this process, some scenes are more successful than others, but all moments exhibit a depth of thought, feeling and humanity. In some ways the focus on this supposedly privileged layer creates an even more devastating work.

It would perhaps be instructive to take a brief look at the situation facing the more than one million Palestinians living in Israel.

Countless organizations—international, Palestinian and Israeli human rights organizations, even the US State Department—have published reports citing Israel's consistent human rights violations as defined by the Fourth Geneva Convention, which the Zionist state itself signed. In April 2002 the United Nations Human Rights Commission condemned Israel for the mass killing of Palestinians, citing "gross violations" of humanitarian law and affirmed the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to resist the Israeli occupation.

In addition to its overt physical repression, there is the matter of Israeli economic persecution. In response to the second *intifada* that erupted in September 2000, the Zionist regime has taken measures, particularly through severe travel restrictions, to disrupt Palestinian life. Unemployment has risen to 65 percent of the population, with some 80,000 Palestinian jobs lost within Israel and another 60,000 in the Occupied Territories. Nearly half of Palestinian households attempt to survive on 50 percent of what their income was before the *intifada*. Direct and indirect losses for the entire Palestinian economy have been estimated at between \$3.5 and \$10 billion, with most of the Israeli-Palestinian cooperative businesses shut down since September 2000. Average per capita real income is currently 30 percent below what it was in 1994.

Elias Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* digs deeply into the reality behind these statistics. Does the film have an air of resignation about it, suggesting that only a miracle can save the Palestinians? No, to show that things are desperate is not an act of pessimism, merely honest. Any work that illuminates life in this fashion helps to change the world.



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