

Introduction

I believe that electric light was not invented for the purpose of illuminating the drawing-rooms of a few snobs, but rather for the purpose of throwing light on some of the dark problems of humanity.

—THEODOR HERZL, *The Jewish State*

The language of our darkness [. . .] makes no sense in the world of their light.

—FAWAZ TURKI, *Soul in Exile*

Somewhere in the skies over Gaza in early 1980, the ruthless General Ariel Sharon—then serving as Israel’s minister of agriculture—sat in a helicopter next to a military commander and surveyed the territory below. The commander was worried about defending Netzarim, a Jewish settlement founded in 1972 only a few miles southwest of Gaza City and surrounded by poverty and squalor. Guaranteeing the safety of this colonial outpost in the middle of the overcrowded Gaza Strip had proved to be a logistical nightmare, and the commander wanted to know whether there was any point in maintaining it. Sharon reportedly answered in the affirmative: “I want the Arabs to see Jewish lights every night 500 meters from them.”¹

For Sharon, the settlements served a clear purpose—not just to colonize Palestinian lands but also *to colonize Palestinian minds*. Indeed, some Palestinians had already recognized this insidious aspect of the colonizer’s infrastructure, and in 1970 the Israeli military authorities dismissed the mayor of Gaza City for opposing the connection of Gaza to Israel’s electricity grid.² By brightening the night sky, the Israelis wanted to diminish Palestinian hopes, and by turning on “Jewish lights,” Sharon wanted to turn off Palestinian dreams. Electrification would serve as lobotomization; illumination as strangulation. In this context, media were not meant to enlighten; they were meant to blind.³

Twenty-five years and two Intifadas later, the military commander’s concerns about the high cost of defending Netzarim and other settlements in

Gaza could no longer be ignored, and in his fifth and final year as prime minister, Sharon ordered the evacuation of all settlers from the Strip. In doing so, he effectively turned the occupation of Gaza into a siege and thereby inaugurated what Eyal Weizman calls “an era of colonialism without colonies.”⁴ The following year, Israeli warplanes attacked Gaza’s only electrical power plant, and over the next decade the rolling blackouts and frequent electricity shortages experienced in Gaza would culminate in an all-out electricity crisis, with residents of the Strip receiving fewer than four hours of power per day—a situation exacerbated by intra-Palestinian squabbles.⁵ If Gaza was not going to be illuminated by “Jewish lights,” it seems that there would not be any lights at all.

While Sharon had been forced to shift gears in Gaza, the project of installing “Jewish lights” in the West Bank only accelerated, and this process continues into the present. Today, the residents of towns and villages such as at-Tuwani, Bil’in, Nabi Saleh, Salfit, and Susya are watching their orchards and pastures gradually turn into a panorama of fluorescent lights, and new vistas of construction sites, high-rise apartments, segregated highways, and fortified security walls are steadily swallowing the agricultural landscapes all around them. For many Palestinians, the night sky has unfortunately become much brighter, and one day there may not be any darkness left.

Is there indeed a link between the colonization of Palestinian lands and the enclosing of Palestinian minds? Such a causal connection is suggested in a memorable scene from the director Elia Suleiman’s first full-length feature, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996). An Orthodox priest (Leonid Alexeenko) stands with the Sea of Galilee behind him and addresses the camera directly. Speaking Russian, he describes his surroundings and explains how the gradual dissipation of darkness has led to a crisis of conviction:

I’m encircled by giant buildings and kibbutzes. [. . .] Not long ago, those hills were deserted. At night when I gazed at the hills from the monastery, I contemplated a particular spot, the darkest one on the hills. Fear would grab me, a fear with a religious feeling—as if that black spot were the source of my faith. Then they settled on those hills and illuminated the whole place. That was the end for me. I began losing my faith. I feared nothing any longer. Now, my world is small. They’ve expanded their world, and mine has shrunk. There’s no longer a spot of darkness out there.

While the priest is still speaking, the audience is shown a series of images—luxury hotels, seaside apartments, and tourists riding jet skis through the waters upon which Jesus had once walked. According to the priest, Israel’s settlement of the land has not only altered the physical appearance of Pales-

tine; it has also eroded *the imagination*. The miraculous has been made mundane, and the sublime has been desublimated. For the priest, there is no more darkness, no space that has not been defaced. Everything has been occupied, and for this reason he suggests that there is also no more hope. The gradual loss of shadows has meant the loss of salvation itself.

This psychological dimension of Israel's colonization project, the dimming of Palestinian dreams with the installation of "Jewish lights," can be compared to what the late sociologist Baruch Kimmerling called *politicide*, the endeavor of successive Israeli regimes to *de-Palestinianize* the Palestinians—that is, to deny their existence as a legitimate collective body, to destroy any sense of Palestinian unity, and to erase the possibility of their self-determination.⁶ Politicide is meant to succeed where ethnic cleansing has failed. Theodor Herzl's old desire "to spirit the penniless population" of Palestine away has not been fully realized, and the Zionists' organized attempts at expulsion (e.g., the Nakba of 1947–1948 and more recent attempts to gentrify the Arab spaces of Acre and Jaffa and relocate the Bedouin communities of the Negev) or even extermination (e.g., the massacres at Deir Yassin and al-Dawayima in 1948, the massacre at Kafr Qasim in 1956, and the bloodbaths in Gaza in 2008–2009 and 2014) so far have fallen short.⁷ Despite such efforts, there are still Palestinians living in Palestine, including some 20 percent of Israel's own citizenry—a demographic reality that struck terror into the heart of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Election Day in March 2015 when he took to Facebook to warn his supporters that "Arab voters are heading to the polling stations in droves."⁸ Physical elimination, however, is not the only way to neutralize a population, and politicide therefore represents a different kind of death—not a physical death but a spiritual one. The intention is not to kill a people but *to kill a dream*. In this way, it is hoped that the notion of equality in Palestine—the prospect of the Palestinian Idea—will fade away and become irretrievably lost, hidden somewhere beyond the horizon of the Zionist present.

But before meekly accepting this rather hopeless scenario, it is important for us to ask, "Just how bright are those 'Jewish lights'?" Even if their radiant beams do somehow manage to penetrate the furthest reaches of the Palestinian landscape, does this mean that they can also illuminate the darkest depths of the Palestinian soul? Are there any dark spots left in Palestine, any mysterious shadows from which tomorrow's surprises are still waiting to erupt? Or is politicide complete? Has Palestine become a place where reality can no longer be refused and another world can no longer be imagined? To borrow Cedric Robinson's words, has Palestine become a place where the terms of order are the only terms at all?⁹

It is my wager that there are still dark spots left in Palestine. These cracks and crevices, however, are not to be found buried in some secret soil or dis-

covered on some distant hilltop. Rather, these zones of darkness lie *within*, and the penetrating power of Israel's colonizing lights cannot fully illuminate the inner depths and darkest dimensions of *the radical imagination*. Despite Israel's best efforts, the power of emancipatory thinking has not been completely stamped out. The Palestinians still retain the ability to *dream*—that is, to think beyond those colonizing lights, to transcend the suffocating universe of Zionism, and to challenge the coordinates of reality itself.

Significantly, film and media can act as key sites in which these zones of darkness are detected in the visible world around us. That is, film and media can act as a place in which the ideal can be made material, the impossible possible. We should therefore refrain from reducing media to a simple list of empirical features. Media are more than just the sum of their parts, and we should not think of them only as the finite domain of electric lights, digital signals, and celluloid sheets. While media can sometimes serve as a source of brightness, they can also be *a source of darkness*. Just as media can illuminate, they can also desecrate. On the one hand, film and media can work to perpetuate existing constellations of power (i.e., Zionist settler-colonialism), but on the other hand, they can expose power's hidden fissures and reveal unoccupied spaces.¹⁰ For this reason, Ariel Sharon was only half right. Media do not only shine lights; in the right hands, they can also *cast shadows*. Media possess a radical, emancipatory potential, and they have the capacity to act as a portal into another world—a world that already exists, hidden within the cracks and crevices of the present.

How we view media—a term that I interpret broadly to include film, television, radio, the Internet, social media, staged news spectacles, print media, maps, video games, recorded sound and music, surveillance technologies, and mobile phone applications—is profoundly linked to a deep-seated epistemological division that haunts many of our scholarly paradigms. Like the classic Platonic separation of society into distinct parts, a clean-cut line is imagined to neatly segregate the masculine from the feminine, technology from the humanities, and communications from the arts. The study of media is not immune from this gendered binary, and if certain scholarly works (those dealing with media effects or political economy, for instance) often fall into the former camp, other areas of the field (the literature on, say, fan cultures or psychoanalytic film theory) generally belong to the latter.

A similar epistemological separation also divides the spheres of politics and culture, and traditionally politics has been very narrowly conceived as a field restricted to places like the voting booth and the factory floor or to the activities of lawmakers and various congressional bodies. In recent decades, this masculinist conception of politics has come under increasing scrutiny.

By conceiving of politics as inhabiting a pure space that exists separately from the domain of culture, one effectively fails to appreciate the importance of an array of phenomena—everything from housework, family relations, and domestic space to cultural objects such as film, radio, and television. This objection to the traditional view of politics is perhaps best embodied by that famous feminist slogan “The Personal Is Political.”¹¹ Articulated by members of the U.S. left in the rebellious 1960s and 1970s, this adage was intended not only as an attack on the ruling patriarchal order but also as a subversive barb aimed at the male-chauvinist tendencies within the counter-culture movement itself.

As necessary as this intervention may have been at that precise historical juncture, such a radical opening up of the political sphere does not come without its own set of problems. To say that everything is political is ultimately to dilute the meaning of the term. “If everything is political,” as Jacques Rancière correctly notes, “then nothing is.”¹² Thus, while writers who adhere to a more traditional conception of politics tend to miss the rich potential of culture, those who instead subsume politics to culture risk dulling their political teeth. Whereas the former might crudely reduce poetry to an algorithm, the latter can fall into the equally problematic trap of insipidity, glamorizing cultural objects without critically reflecting on the political and economic processes that enable and drive their production.¹³

But recognizing this drawback to the culturalist position does not mean that we should cowardly retreat back into some exclusionary, white boys’ country club notion of politics. There is another option. Unsatisfied with both the traditional division of these fields and the complete collapsing of them into each other, Rancière—a thinker whose work will turn out to be quite significant for the rest of this book—offers a potential path forward. In a series of three remarkable interventions—*On the Shores of Politics*, *Disagreement*, and *Hatred of Democracy*—he redefines politics so that it refers not to existing forms of governing and administering but, rather, to their disruption.¹⁴ That is, Rancière identifies politics not according to the field in which it takes place but according to the function that it serves. Nothing is inherently political—not even the mere presence of power, as the Foucauldians like to contend. For Rancière, something is political only insofar as it disrupts inegalitarian hierarchies and practices. Something is political only insofar as it challenges the framework within which we experience reality itself. Politics is not an order but an event; it is not a field of knowledge but a hole in that field; it is not a *structure* but a *rupture*.

Consequently, all of those places and practices that are traditionally associated with politics—the ballot box, the opinion poll, the negotiation table—are, for Rancière, rarely political at all. In fact, they are usually the exact opposite of politics; they are *antipolitical* (or, in Rancière’s parlance,

they conform to the logic of “the police”).¹⁵ Whereas politics disturbs the smooth functioning of the existing order, these antipolitical practices and procedures perpetuate it; whereas the former punctures holes in established ways of thinking and being, the latter cover up these holes or deny that they even exist.

Where, then, does one look for politics? For Rancière, politics is always performed; it is always *mediated*. “For political activity to be visible,” Rancière argues, “there must be a political stage on which it is able to play out.”¹⁶ Politics can therefore not be limited to Election Day votes or stump speeches. Politics can take place *anywhere*. Hence, culture is not a field that exists separately from politics proper; rather, culture is the very field in which politics occasionally erupts. Indeed, emancipatory visions of a different world do not usually arise out of elections or legislation; they arise out of culture, out of art, songs, and poetry.¹⁷ We might therefore suggest a rather provocative thesis and say that culture can sometimes be *more political than politics itself*. Or, to draw an unexpected parallel with Black liberation theology that I develop more fully in Chapter 6, “culture,” as the late James Cone put it, “is the medium through which the human person encounters the divine.”¹⁸

Following Rancière, I would like to suggest that we view film and media in this same fashion. Film and media should not be considered always already political objects. Indeed, they rarely are, and we might even say that media usually serve an antipolitical (or “police”) function. Like Sharon’s colonizing lights, even the most basic of electric media forms, the simple light bulb, can act to perpetuate existing forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation—an argument that we can extend to the various “likes” and memes that circulate through social media.¹⁹

But while media are not inherently political, they can nevertheless be *made* political. The political nature of media is not their ability to *reflect* reality but to *shatter* it—or, even more precisely, to discover *other realities* hiding in its cracks, to find unoccupied spaces lurking in the darkness in which the rules governing the existing order are negated and alternative ways of thinking and being can be imagined and explored. This is precisely how we should approach film and media in the context of Palestine, and I argue that the political potential of these objects resides neither in their geographic location nor in the identity of their makers but in their capacity to break the Israeli stranglehold on reality and open a window into another world.

This utopian potential is demonstrated in *Ticket to Jerusalem* (dir. Rashid Masharawi, 2002), a fictional feature in which a Palestinian projectionist named Jabir (Ghassan Abbas) encounters numerous difficulties in his quest to take movie reels and cartoons to audiences of children throughout the West Bank. Set against the backdrop of the Second Intifada, *Ticket to Jerusalem* follows Jabir from obstacle to obstacle. His scheduled screenings are con-

stantly interrupted by violence, turmoil, electricity cuts, checkpoints, equipment malfunctions, and terrible road conditions. But ultimately, the most formidable challenge that Jabir faces is not something directly imposed by the Israeli authorities; rather, it is his fellow Palestinians' lack of imagination.²⁰

Throughout *Ticket to Jerusalem*, Jabir comes across people who question the wisdom of his chosen profession, sometimes even angrily. When a stranger on the road realizes that Jabir is taking his mobile film unit to the Dheisheh refugee camp, he becomes visibly hostile: "The people at the camp are looking for work, for food, and you want to show them films?" As Jabir drives away, the stranger scoffs, "What an idea! Who cares about movies?" But strangers are not the only ones who try to discourage Jabir. He also encounters strong resistance from friends and family members, including his father and wife. Jabir never directly confronts his inquisitors, perhaps recognizing that any answer he provides will not be accepted. Instead, he just goes about his seemingly Sisyphean task, struggling against both physical and ideological barriers to bring his reels of film to Palestinian children.

It is only at the end of the film that the political dimension of Jabir's labor erupts into plain sight. Jabir becomes friends with a Palestinian schoolteacher who lives alone with her elderly mother in Jerusalem's Old City. A group of Jewish settlers is in the process of occupying their house, taking it over one room at a time. The mother recounts an incident in which a male settler once even removed his clothes and strutted around the courtyard, naked and in full view—a rather vulgar and sexually threatening way to mark his territory. Although the teacher has hired an attorney to try to regain control of her family's property, she harbors serious doubts regarding the fairness of the Israeli legal system.

After intervening in a heated confrontation between the schoolteacher and the settlers, Jabir becomes even more resolute in his obsessive determination to show films to Palestinians, and he decides to smuggle his equipment into Jerusalem to project a film onto the outside wall of his friend's occupied building. After navigating numerous hurdles, the screening turns out to be a tremendous success. When Palestinian neighbors, friends, and relatives gather together in the courtyard to watch the film, the settlers are helpless to prevent the space that they had stolen from momentarily being stolen back. In this way, Jabir's projector—that instrument that so many people had maligned as an unnecessary extravagance—ends up accomplishing something that the politicians and lawyers have consistently failed to achieve: it dissolves the Zionist stranglehold on reality and brings the Palestinian community together in collective unity as they effectively perform a radical act of decolonization, temporarily disrupting the logic of the status quo and reoccupying a Palestinian space located in the heart of the Old City. Once again, culture turns out to be more political than politics itself.

Incidentally, Jabir's fictional quest to project films onto an occupied building has real-life counterparts. Organizers at al-Rowwad Cultural Center in the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem, for instance, regularly put together outdoor screenings in which they use Israel's Apartheid Wall as a projection screen. Similarly, Gil Hochberg's book *Visual Occupations* opens with the tale of a Palestinian art collective that transformed an Israeli water tower on a deserted military base into an open-air cinema.²¹

With *Ticket to Jerusalem*, Rashid Masharawi, a filmmaker who grew up in Gaza's Shati refugee camp, seems to be communicating a truth that still escapes many observers, and while the corpus of literature on Palestine is immense, a large part of this work nevertheless adheres to that same sullied distinction between politics and culture.²² Rebecca Stein and Ted Swedenberg tackle this tendency head-on in the introduction to their important anthology on Palestinian culture, and they write that "most radical scholarship on Palestine and Israel has ignored questions of popular culture, or, at best, consigned popular culture forms and processes to the margins of scholarly debate and investigation."²³ While this situation has somewhat improved in recent years with the appearance of several new and important scholarly books, the field of Palestinian cultural studies is still a relatively small one.²⁴ Like the stranger that Jabir encounters on the road in *Ticket to Jerusalem*, many seem eager to write off culture in advance as being unimportant or somehow secondary to the urgent questions of Israeli oppression, and the possibility that culture might have something significant to say about Palestinian liberation often gets overlooked. As one of the Palestinian women interlocutors tells the director Azza el-Hassan in her documentary *Kings and Extras* (2004), "Now is not the time to be thinking about cinema."

The Palestinian Idea is my attempt to answer this commonplace objection. To put my central contention in the simplest and most succinct terms possible, *film and media have a utopian dimension*, and it is precisely through film and media that hope can occasionally emerge amidst hopelessness, emancipation amidst oppression, freedom amidst apartheid. Indeed, in an inegalitarian world, this utopian dimension is nothing less than equality itself. As I argue, this is even true—or even especially true—in a context as urgent and violent as that of contemporary Palestine.

Chapter 1, "The Palestinian Idea," opens with a demonstration in occupied Hebron in 2013 in which Palestinian activists donned masks of Martin Luther King Jr. and carried portraits of Rosa Parks as they staged a Freedom March and effectively desegregated a segregated street. Examining the media spectacle generated by this protest, I bring together the work of Edward W. Said, Jacques Rancière, and Cedric J. Robinson to locate Palestinian utopia

in the heart of the Zionist present. This notion, which I call “the Palestinian Idea,” serves as the theoretical linchpin for the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2 begins with a misleadingly simple question: Can a Palestinian cinema even be said to exist? From there, it goes on to investigate the emergence and formation of Palestinian identity. Specifically, I use Catherine Malabou’s notion of plasticity to trace out three major ways that Palestinian identity can be conceived: as a response to national trauma (the receiving of form, or Nakba), as a collectively forged spirit of resistance (the giving of form, or Intifada), and as a disruptive negation (the annihilation of form, or disidentity). Here, my goal is to formulate an *anti-identitarian* position without being *anti-identity*. This discussion continues in the following chapter, which turns directly to media and examines Palestinian plasticity in two of Annemarie Jacir’s feature films, *Salt of This Sea* (2008) and *When I Saw You* (2012).

Whereas Chapters 2 and 3, “Plastic Palestine: Part One” and “Plastic Palestine: Part Two,” concentrate on fiction, Chapter 4, “Hollow Time,” turns to documentary. Documentary has long been central to Palestinian filmmaking efforts. The impetus driving the production of such films has often been to contest Zionist narratives at the empirical level by bringing fresh attention to the counterfactuals and counterhistories that make up the Palestinian experience—stories and memories that have otherwise been obscured or denied. While such endeavors have their place, they also have their blind spots, and insofar as Palestinian documentary restricts itself to the level of facts, it risks ignoring a perhaps even more important battlefield. This is even true with respect to the dimension of time, and I argue that Zionism has endeavored to colonize not only Palestinian space but also Palestinian time. Drawing from C. L. R. James and Ernst Bloch, I argue that a temporal dimension remains that resists colonization: the future, or Palestine Time. I then turn specifically to Mais Darwazah’s documentary *My Love Awaits Me by the Sea* (2013) and argue that documentary can point us to this utopian view of time. The future is already here, Darwazah’s film suggests, and traces of this Palestine Time can already be found even in the settler-colonialist present.

Chapter 5, “Equality under Surveillance,” takes up the question of Palestinian visibility. Whereas some people have argued that the Palestinians are invisible in the global media landscape, others suggest that they are hyper-visible. But whatever position one takes, I argue that visibility itself is not the fundamental issue. Looking at issues of surveillance and spectacle, I claim that our notion of visibility is often tied to cyclical theories of power and resistance—most notably, the work of Michel Foucault. To break out of this cycle, I argue that we must replace the axis of power and resistance with an axis of equality and inequality. I conclude by considering Palestinian visibility and resistance in Hany Abu-Assad’s *Paradise Now* (2005).

Chapter 6, “Palestine in Black and White,” attempts to make sense of how the Palestinian Idea functions in relation to transnational solidarity. Starting with two social media campaigns that took place in the summer of 2014, I trace the development of two very different “global racial imaginaries”—one linking the white settler-colonialist projects of the United States and Israel; the other bringing together two of the oppressed communities living under those regimes: the Black and Palestinian populations. Examining social media, staged news spectacles, and hip hop music, I argue that we should think of Palestine as a kind of Black Power movement and Black radicalism as a Palestinian struggle. This move, I suggest, will allow us to deepen our critique of oppressive practices in both countries and transform our notion of solidarity itself.

It has been almost four decades since Ariel Sharon crassly remarked that he wanted to install “Jewish lights” in the Gaza Strip to constantly remind the Palestinians of Israel’s presence. As I have argued, Sharon intended to colonize not only Palestinian lands but also Palestinian minds. He wanted to create a world in which Zionism has no cracks, a mono-realist world without any shadows. But despite all the blood that has been spilled, all the property that has been stolen, and all the lives that have been lost, Sharon’s goal still has not been achieved. Zionism is a failure. As bright as Israel’s colonizing lights may appear, they have not managed to penetrate the darkest depths of the Palestinian radical imagination.