Queering Terror: Trauma, Race, and Nationalism in Palestinian and Israeli Gay Cinema during the Second Intifada

Raya Morag

Abstract: An analysis of films depicting the relationship between the Occupation and terror in Israeli and in Palestinian queer cinema produced during – and after – the second Intifada (2000-2008) reveals a complex picture. Both corpora deal with the post-traumatic queering of race and nationality. However, while the Israeli films (The Bubble by Eytan Fox and Gevald by Netalie Braun) focus on the Western urban gay and lesbian scene infiltrated by terror, the Palestinian film (Diary of a Male Whore by Tawfik Abu Wael) focuses on the post-traumatic memory of expulsion and loss of home. These constructs – together with socio-religious differences between the two cultures and their film industries – have ramifications on how queer sexualities are represented. A close textual analysis of these three examples offers a rethinking of cultural concepts (e.g., gay-ization, the permeable body, masturbation, gay shame-pride-humiliation, gaze and scopic economics, kinging), as well as of memory; trauma; and post-trauma, as a way to reflect on queering the terror.

An analysis of Israeli and Palestinian second Intifada films depicting the relation between race, gender, and gay and lesbian sexuality (2001-2008) reveals the complexity of the epistemology of queering interwoven with the post-trauma of occupation and terror. Gay and (to a lesser degree) lesbian cinema has existed for decades in Israel and
since the 1980s has also dealt with interracial sex between men.\(^1\) Palestinian cinema, on the other hand, caught in the paradox of being both national and stateless, is still struggling with issues of self-definition, national identity, and space.\(^2\) It would seem that in its attempts to re-articulate the Palestinian blocked space as part of laying down the foundation for a national narrative, Palestinian cinema has not yet begun to deal with the body in the context of sexual identity and interracial sex, whether homo- or heterosexual. Tawfik Abu-Wael’s prize winning short film about interracial male-male relations, *Diary of a Male Whore* [Arabic] (2001),\(^3\) can be considered a breakthrough. His venture into this social taboo is striking not only against the backdrop of the present state of Palestinian cinema, but also against developments in contemporary world and Islamic pan-Arab cinema.\(^4\)

This chapter will compare Abu-Wael’s film with two Israeli films: *The Bubble* [Hebrew] (2006) by Eytan Fox, a leading gay director, and *Gevald* [Hebrew] (2009), an acclaimed queer-lesbian short film by the female director Netalie Braun, and will discuss the complex ways these films illuminate the relationship between queer epistemology based on Israeli Occupation’s body-space tensions and suicide terror. In *Diary*, while

---


\(^3\) The original title is *Yawmiyat Ahir*. The term *ahir* appears here in its masculine form, which is not standard Arabic. It usually takes the feminine form.

\(^4\) The circumstances surrounding the production of *Diary* illustrate, among other things, the director’s complicated situation. During a discussion I had with Abu-Wael in September 2008, he explained that after many reversals he finally financed the film himself. Many Israelis volunteered their services for the production.
servicing an Israeli client, a Palestinian street hustler recalls his violent childhood – culminating with the memory his mother’s rape by an Israeli soldier. *Bubble* presents a love affair between two young men, an Israeli and a Palestinian, which ends tragically when the Palestinian becomes a suicide terrorist and detonates himself together with his lover. *Gevald* depicts a reunion between two Israeli lesbians in a gay bar where a drag-king show between a terrorist and his lover is being performed by Palestinian lesbians prior to an explosion in the bar. That is, while Palestinian cinema places interracial sex within the reality of the post-traumatic memory of expulsion and loss of home, Israeli cinema places it within the Western urban reality of a gay and lesbian community caught up in terrorism.

I contend that whereas *Diary* assumes responsibility over the traumatic past by examining violence within Palestinian society as well as that inflicted by Israel, tragically reenacting the devastating consequences of the Occupation, *Bubble* assumes no such responsibility. Its attempt to “embrace” the Palestinian gay other involves ongoing denial of the Occupation and projection of its own violence onto the other’s subjectivity. *Gevald*, like *Diary*, presents both Jewish and Moslem violence. Its recognition, however, of the extreme otherness of the Palestinian other, the terrorist, is ambiguous: present only through a performance, its declared openness is finally shattered by the explosion.

The marked contrast between the Israeli and the Palestinian films immediately brings to light the central issues that will be discussed here: How do the films represent the connection between sexual and ethnic repression and the traumatic histories of occupation and terror? What are the historical-political linkages between the Israeli occupation, based on subjugation and surveillance, and the pathologizing of sexuality?
Do interracial relationships, founded on multiple border crossings, reproduce the social pathology of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle? Can the post-traumatic fantasy that characterizes these films serve as a force behind at least a cinematic reconciliation? This chapter offers a close textual analysis as the preferred way to delve into these intimate post-traumatic queer epistemologies.

**Diary of a Male Whore – Hustling and the Unending Occupation**

The plot is revealed through the voice-over of Essam (Tahir Mahamid), a young Palestinian from a refugee family, illegally residing in Tel Aviv and earning his living as a street hustler. The entire film is bracketed by a car scenario, in which he masturbates in front of an elderly Israeli client and recalls scenes from his youth. The beginning of the flashback depicts the outset of his sexual maturity in an Arab village before it was conquered by the Israeli army: committing sodomy with a sheep, listening to his parents have sexual relations, and secretly watching a village girl, Asya (Ruth Bernstein), as she bathes in a spring. His memories date from when the village was first occupied, his father’s murder, and the rape of his mother. The film ends as Essam receives his payment and continues to walk the dark Tel Aviv streets.

*Diary* depicts the traumatic events reenacted in the flashbacks as historically ambiguous. The imprecise timeframe indicates that the film proposes to describe the everlasting character of the Israeli occupation, beginning from the *Nakba* and continuing through the 1967 conquest and the *Intifada*; in particular, it seeks to portray the trauma of the *Nakba* as an inter-generational burden. Taking into consideration Essam’s age during the flashback (twelve or thirteen), whether the flashback reenacts events during the
Nakba or the 1967 conquest, it would be impossible for him to be a young man residing illegally in Tel Aviv during either the first or second Intifadas. As a result, the tension between the Nakba, the Israeli Occupation, and the Intifada; between past, present, and eternal time; magnifies the tension between fantasy and trauma that stands at the core of the film.

*Diary* places interracial male-male sex between the Palestinian hustler and his Israeli client within a narrative structure in which the post-traumatic memory of the Nakba/the occupation, structured through flashbacks, accounts for the character of interracial relations (anonymous one-time sexual meetings, paid masturbation/voyeurism). In other words, in the present, Essam’s sexuality is depicted as post-traumatic. The first clue to causal relationships between past and present is presented in an incident with a prostitute that opens the film and is a portent to the scene in which Essam himself becomes a prostitute.

In the first scene, against the backdrop of noir photography of nighttime Tel Aviv (cars, people in cafés), his voice-over is heard: “The sheep and the hen were my first females. I first slept with a woman the day I arrived in Tel Aviv. My late friend, Abu-Krah, and I got drunk and we looked for a prostitute. I went in first. ‘How was she?’ ‘She has no teeth.’ ‘No teeth?’ he yelled. I answered, ‘The mouth between her legs has no teeth.’”

According to Barbara Creed,

The myth about woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them
up and cut them into pieces. The *vagina dentata* is the mouth of hell – a terrifying symbol of woman as the “devil’s gateway.”

The fear of the *vagina dentata* is already visually hinted at in the beginning of the film with a close-up of the prominent teeth of an Israeli woman sitting in a café. The editing cuts sharply between the prostitute incident, with its high level of anxiety, to the present: the client and reenactment of traumatic childhood memories.

When Essam enters the Israeli client’s car and the act of prostitution and memory process begin simultaneously, the editing uses flashbacks to tie together the two traumatic audial voyeuristic events that took place earlier in Essam’s youth: listening to his parents have intercourse (the primal scene fantasy) and his mother’s rape.

According to Kaja Silverman, the moment of infantile voyeurism signifies “the point of entry for an alien and traumatic sexuality.” The child-spectator is unable to decipher what he sees and, therefore, “The spectacle assumes its full force only later, after it has been internalized as representation.” The outcome is a complex dramatization of temporality, since the primal scene which “occurs not so much in ‘reality’ as in fantasy . . . is a construction after the fact . . . it is either constituted through a deferred action . . . or constructed as a fantasy on the basis of some remembered detail.” Being overwhelmed by the sounds and images of parental sexuality, the outcome – as Freud notes – is a profound disruption of the “conventional” masculinity of the onlooker. *Diary* confers a

---

6 Kaja Silverman, “To Early/Too Late: Male Subjectivity and the Primal Scene.” in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 156.
7 Ibid., 168.
8 Ibid., 164.
new meaning on Silverman’s paradigm of the look regarding the primal scene: it is not “either too early or too late,” as she defines the child’s experience with respect to sexuality. But, because of the extended primal scene – that is, the audial connection between being a deferred voyeur to his parents and a voyeur to the rape – the spectating child undergoes the “too early” as well as the “too late.” As the incident with the Israeli prostitute demonstrates, the primal scenes in Diary, revealed to be traumatic only much later, post-factum as it were, through their effect, had the shattering effect of being both “too early” and “too late” because of the Nakba; and so, predetermined Essam’s sexual behavior as post-traumatic.

In other words, Essam’s fear of vagina dentata (and his prostitution) is presented as resulting from his exposure to the primal scene, the absence of a father figure, and his consequent over-attachment to his mother during childhood. Of course, when speaking of the dyadic mother, the projection of the image of the mouth to her genitalia is linked to oral pleasure. Nevertheless, the fantasy of the dyadic mother that symbolically incorporates him ascribes the castrating position to her: “The image of the toothed vagina, symbolic of the all-devouring woman, is related to the subject’s infantile memories of its early relation with the mother and the subsequent fear of its identity being swallowed up by the mother.”

---

9 Creed, Monstrous Feminine.

According to Creed, and contrary to Freud,\(^{11}\) it can be argued that the genitalia of the mother that were depicted in the voyeuristic fantasy are unconsciously perceived by Essam as castrating, and not as castrated. If so, the racialization of the primal scene acts retroactively: during Essam’s first sexual experience with a woman as an adult the \textit{vagina dentata}, which characterized his mother in his imagination, is projected on the Israeli prostitute.\(^{12}\)

The question is, why didn’t Essam’s voyeuristic witnessing of the rape of his mother change the fantasy of \textit{vagina dentata}? That is, why was she not transformed from

---


castrating to castrated in his imagination? I suggest that racialization generates transformation that transcends the text: During the first audial incident, Essam presents himself as innocent and describes his voyeurism as naivety; during the second incident, the Israeli conquest and the rape, Essam fantasizes/remembers himself as a passive voyeur, almost a collaborator. He does not answer his mother’s calls, but hides. The editing uses cross-cutting to show Essam sitting in silence while she cries to him for help.13

As the narrative shows, Essam’s inevitable guilt feelings “froze” his (unconscious) perception of his mother before the rape in his imagination. The trauma of the rape and especially his guilt preserves the castrating mother in his “sexual memory.” If so, the survivor guilt he suffers expands his fantasy of the mother in the primal scene to his perception of her during the rape, so that her fantasmatic “status” remains unchanged. The result is projection of \textit{vagina dentata} onto the Israeli prostitute, and hustling.

By ascribing Essam’s interracial sexual relations, and especially his hustling, to his past traumatic experiences, the film, of course, severely criticizes the destructive consequences of the Israeli occupation (from the \textit{Nakba} to the second \textit{Intifada}) on

---

13 The rape takes place, as mentioned, during the period of the \textit{Nakba}. To the best of my knowledge, such rapes by Israeli soldiers only occurred before the \textit{Nakba} and the establishment of the State of Israel and shortly afterward; that is, until the mid-1950s. See Tal Nitzan, \textit{The Borders of Occupation: The Rareness of Military Rape in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.”} [Hebrew] (\textit{Master’s Thesis. The Hebrew University, 2006}). According to Benny Morris, during the 1929 riots “leaflets… were distributed by Husseini activists in nearby Arab towns and villages . . . One flyer . . . declared: ‘the enemy . . . violated the honor of Islam and raped the women.’” (In \textit{Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict} [New York: Vintage Books, 1999] 113, 700).

See an analysis of rape fantasies in my forthcoming book \textit{Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator Trauma and Cinema}. 
Palestinian society and masculinity. Still, one of the most subversive aspects of Abu-Wael’s oeuvre is that he combines criticism of Israeli society with criticism of Palestinian; moreover, he points out the interdependence of Palestinian and Israeli violence. The brutal relations existing between the father and other family members within Abu-Wael’s Palestinian cinematic families are reflected in Israeli violence. The violence wreaked by the Israeli soldier on Essam’s mother in *Diary* echoes his father’s violence towards her – both physically and as imagined by Essam in his primal scene fantasy.

In *Diary*, Essam confesses that he did not mourn his father’s murder because as a child he had been a target of his brutality. In this sense, the constant textual tension between traumatic fantasy and memory creates the (unseen) murder of the father as a fantasmatic unconscious realization and not only as an actual event. The double function of the flashback as both real memory and fantasy is intensified by its scenic quality (including the transition from the darkness of the car to the brightness of childhood scenes, and from the closed space of masturbation to an open one filled with participants and action). For Freud, the term fantasy, as many have claimed, is bound to a scenic quality. Similarly, Silverman argues that “unconscious desire generally assumes the form of a visual tableau or narrateme”\(^\text{14}\). Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis also name the fantasmatic “a *mise-en-scène* of desire.”\(^\text{15}\) In *Fantasme Originaire*, they further expand

\(^{14}\) Silverman, “To Early/Too Late,” 160.

their discussion about fantasy as dramatization in which the subject plays a role. Their analysis of primal fantasies ("Urphantasien") according to Freud, emphasizes that these fantasies – dealing with the origins of subjectivity, of sexuality, and of sex differences – are scenic.

Essam uses memory to direct his primal fantasmatic scenes so that the *dramatis personae* of childhood is projected, as Laplanche and Pontalis claim, on those participating in real scenes in the present. This dramatization containing a sequence of images from the past that leaves its mark on the roles played in the present is based on interchanging post-traumatic subject positioning. As a post-traumatic subject, Essam positions himself in the "time of auto-eroticism," as Laplanche and Pontalis suggest. The result is two contradictory subject positions: in the rape flashback, Essam is positioned as "himself" and observes himself as a young man; in the present, during his act of prostitution, he gives pleasure to the symbolic perpetrator, the elderly Israeli, who, given his age, could have been the soldier during the 1967 war: Essam is his prostitute, and so he is positioned as his mother. The elderly Israeli observes Essam in a way that gives him pleasure or sexual stimulation, as in the past (during the primal scene fantasy), Essam had observed his mother. Though the incidents are different, of course, the fantasmatic analogy of Laplanche and Pontalis exists. The disparity in age, race, and social standing perpetuate fantasmatic exchanges between the perpetrator and the victim in the victim’s post-traumatic imagination.

---


18 Ibid.
The film, however, does not relate only to the post-traumatic castration of Palestinian masculinity. Further to Abu-Wael’s other work, which proves “reciprocity” between Palestinian and Israeli violence, *Diary* reveals post-traumatic memory as bidirectional: the *Nakba*/occupation also castrates the Israeli, turning him into an (impotent?) onlooker dependent on a Palestinian hustler. The scenario in the present changes the oppressive hegemonic gaze of the symbolic perpetrator, and turns it – sexually – into a look based on dependence. Still, it is clear that from the perspective of the “diary” of the male whore that this is only a momentary reversal of power relations within the political reality: the Palestinian is the illegal resident and the Occupation, with its political and economic subjugation, continues. In the present, the Palestinian depends upon the gaze of the perpetrator for survival; in the past, observing his mother had become – as a consequence of the Israeli presence in the scopic space – a masculine version of the Medusa gaze. This, as I claimed above, froze him in the *vagina dentata* fantasy and in self-objectifying relations. The primal scene paradigmatically emphasizes the isolation of the subject against the backdrop of the union of the parents, and imparts knowledge of adult sexuality, a situation exacerbated by the conquest and the rape.

In *Diary*, past memory is neither dead nor alive. It is fixed neither in the stability of nostalgia nor in denial. The past haunts Essam’s consciousness in the present through various agents: memory, yearning, trauma, guilt, and the body. The ghost of the past is present in the body defeated time and again by traumatic memory’s overwhelming powers. According to Abu-Wael, nothing can free the Palestinian from his tormenting past: not remembering, not confession, and not automatic day-to-day survival. It is no wonder, then, that *Diary* constructs commensurability between reenactment of past
traumatic events and the sexual act in the present: The editing cuts from the groaning soldier to Essam moaning as he climaxes in front of his Israeli client.

What is the meaning of the choice of prostitution based on masturbation/voyeurism? Of transition from fantasmatic-imaginary orgasm to an actual one? And from the Nakba to the Occupation? It is clear from the horrific incident with the Israeli prostitute that Essam’s post-traumatic sexuality divorces women from the domain of sexual pleasure. His only prospect, described above as a variation on the Medusa myth, is a re-living of the traumatic jouissance with the mother and “planting of the symbolic . . . in the materiality of the body.”

Structuring the rape (the [supposed] orgasm of the Israeli soldier) together with Essam’s orgasm in the present signifies uniting in traumatic pleasure. Given that the two-fold traumatic violence (conquest and rape) irreversibly sabotaged Palestinian sexuality, as far as Essam is concerned physical pleasure is possible only through a post-traumatic ritual of remembrance. Diary of a Male Whore asserts that Palestinian male pleasure is totally and paradoxically dependent on the trauma of the (past and present) occupation.

In this world of the body-subject, that is, of the subject embodied through his body, masturbation enjoys a special status. Diary undermines both structuring interracial male sexuality as penetrating and/or being penetrated and the myriad implications of colonial power relations. Representing the voyeurism of the rape as a continuation of the voyeurism of the primal scene, as discussed above, completely changes the indeterminacy of the primal scene and the possibility of sadomitical (which emphasizes

---

19 Laplanche and Pontalis, Fantasme Originale, 68-69.
20 See Elizabeth Grosz, Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994).
identification with the father and penetration) or queer identification (which emphasizes identification with both the mother and the father).

Abu-Wael’s decision to represent voyeurism/masturbation rather than homosexual contact as a form of post-traumatic sexuality takes on, I believe, a radical significance not only in regard to Palestinian castrated masculinity but to potential interracial relations as well. Under permanent occupation, this is but an alienated sexual transaction. Fantasy-ridden masturbation leaves each of them, the Israeli and the Palestinian, the one masturbating and the one looking on, isolated and captive within his own world. The film emphasizes this by almost completely avoiding any two-shots showing them together in the frame.

Moreover, as Laqueur argues, masturbation contains three components: fantasy, solitude, and insatiability. I believe there is a direct link between them and the post-traumatic reaction. Masturbation, in fact, has a double function – it symbolizes (in a somewhat paradoxical manner) the repetitive nature of post-traumatic behavior and at the same time, as will be elaborated later, it allows a subversive view of (political, patriarchal, and sexual) repression. In Diary, masturbation is unique as post-traumatic repetitious behavior. In contrast to other forms of sexuality, it represents the dominance of post-trauma in the solitary life of the Palestinian male since in an almost literal sense it is based on repetition compulsion. The power of masturbation as a physical accompaniment to post-traumatic reenactment is embodied in its practice, based on continual repetition. In other words, because of its repetitive character, masturbation probably corresponds more than any other form of sexuality (either penetrating or

---

pierced) to traumatic repetition. Essam seems to bodily enact the inaccessibility of past images by repeating them over and over: the repetition embodied in masturbation turns it both into a metaphor for and a performance of this compulsive practice. In this sense, masturbation symbolizes the perpetuation of trauma. Each night the Palestinian male serves as a hustler (post-traumatic reenactment/masturbation) makes him reproduce anew the seemingly interminable past.

The film alludes, of course, to Jean Genet’s novel *The Thief’s Journal (Journal du Voleur)*22 and his short film *A Love Song (Un Chant d’amour, 1950)*. Subordinating Essam’s adult Palestinian subjectivity to colonial interracial relations is noteworthy given Abu-Wael’s homage to Mohamed Choukri’s autobiographical novel *For Bread Alone* [Arabic].s world is ’Though most of the narrative elements appear in both, Choukri23 more dominant than Genet’s in *Diary*. Although Choukri’s novel about Genet, *Jean Genet in Tangier*, is free of orientalism,24 Abu-Wael apparently abstains from referring more directly to *The Thief’s Journal* because Genet’s persona is infamously linked to Western sexual projections on the East, especially on Morocco. His diary and well-known film are present in Abu-Wael’s film mainly in his use of masturbation as a medium.

As an autobiographical memoir, *For Bread Alone* describes appalling brutality in Choukri’s home; escaping his father; life on the street; abject poverty; and his wanderings

---


23 Mohamed Choukri, *For Bread Alone*, trans. N. At’amma (Tel Aviv: Andalus, 1972/2000) [Hebrew]. In direct translation from the Arabic, *The Barefoot Bread*. The blatant descriptions of sex made finding a publisher in Arabic very difficult. The book was published in Arabic only in 1982, after it had already been translated into English (by Paul Bowles) and French (by Tahar Ben Jelloun).

- from Tangier to Algeria – in a constant search for casual work, food, and shelter. It is also replete with descriptions of his male prostitution, without which he could never have survived, and homosexuality. Choukri’s childhood in Morocco during the 1950s took place against the backdrop of French colonialism and the 1952 uprising against the French, and that, apparently, is the importance of the homage for Abu-Wael. It is not by chance, therefore, that the changes he makes in the narrative elements taken from Choukri’s novel have to do with racialization: his fantasy of love for Asya is replaced by the fantasy of his mother’s rape, and oral sex with the old man is replaced by masturbating in front of him: “In order to come quickly I imagined that I was raping Asya in Tatwan . . . What am I doing with this old man who gave me a blow job? I will hate myself and everyone else, if I’ll keep doing this . . . he gave me fifty pesetos . . . if so, this is how one falls into prostitution.”

Contrary to Choukri, however, who asserts in his novel that learning to read and write at twenty-one liberated him from the colonial, social, and familial cycles of oppression, Essam remains caught up in these cycles through prostitution and dependence on the overwhelming destructive force of post-traumatic memory. Does the film claim that liberation from the past is impossible? On one hand, as noted, the cycles of oppression take an orgasmic-repetitious form, based on “stimulation” by the past and its “release”; on the other, as hinted above, masturbation itself allows a subversive view of repression, and alludes to its possible disruption. Though Essam’s masturbation is part and parcel of his prostitution, that is, carried out on the borderline between privacy-

25 Choukri, Bread Alone, 81-82. This is a translation from the Hebrew edition of the book.
secrecy and sociability-openness, it is still beyond social panoptic control and defies Israeli society at least as much as it defies Palestinian.

Essam’s subject position as a witness to the conquest and to rape is problematic, and not only regarding the ambivalence of his actual presence in the time and place of the trauma. It is also problematic vis-à-vis the extent to which Essam has lost moral authority emanating from being a bystander to an atrocity. *Diary* does not judge its protagonist. The disparaging force of post-traumatic memory and latent guilt produces a constant performance of embodied reiteration in which the imaginary witness doomed by an overwhelming past becomes self-oppressive.

The following analysis entails a shift from the nuanced psychoanalytical explorations (mainly of the primal scene) adopted in the above analysis of *Diary of a Male Whore* to a primarily cultural analysis of *The Bubble* and *Gevald*, especially regarding such terms as passing, performance, shame/pride, and race. The nature of Fox’s and Braun’s films warrants such a shift. *Diary’s* linking of traumatic histories to queer sexualities is based, as described above, on the fantasy of origin and identity; that is, on exploration of the foundation of the Palestinian subject. As I see it, *Bubble* and *Gevald*, though very disparate in style and ideology, are clearly films made in a sovereign country, eliminating the need to delve into the traumatic origins of the subject (psychoanalytically and/or historically), since they are taken for granted. *Diary*, driven by the Palestinian lack of state and unrelieved traumatization by a colonial regime, is “forced” to dive into the origins of subjecthood and decipher its vicissitudes from the *Nakba* onward. In other words, the following shift in methodology from psychoanalysis
to cultural studies is an outcome of the huge disparity between the relationships of the films to their respective political-social contexts.

**The Bubble – Projecting A Suicidal Fantasy**

*The Bubble* focuses on forbidden love between Noam (Ohad Knoller), a young Israeli who lives in a bohemian quarter of Tel Aviv, and Ashraf (Yousef ‘Joe’ Sweid), a Palestinian from Nablus. Ashraf lives with Noam and his roommates Yelli (Aron Friedman), who is a gay, and Lulu (Daniela Virtzer). On their advice he takes the Hebrew name Shimi and pretends to be Israeli; he gradually becomes part of the gay Leftist community. When he decides to tell his beloved sister Rana (Roba Blal) he is gay, she angrily disapproves. Rana marries Jihad (Shredi Jabarin), a local Az-Adin El-Kassam leader, but the morning after the wedding she is accidentally killed by Israeli soldiers searching for the perpetrator of the latest Tel Aviv suicide attack, in which Yelli had been injured. Jihad tries to force Ashraf into marrying his cousin and threatens to reveal Ashraf’s secret if he refuses. Instead, Ashraf decides to revenge Rana’s death in place of Jihad. In the final scene, with a bomb strapped to his body, Ashraf comes to the Tel Aviv restaurant where he used to work as a waiter. Noam, his Israeli lover, hugs him in greeting and the two explode.
The film opens with two reversals that are symbolically tied to the fantasmatic ideologies on which it is based: “passing” and the “enlightened occupation” (which enables an interracial romantic love). The first occurs in the opening scene at a checkpoint, where Ashraf, together with the other Palestinian men standing there, follows regulations and lifts his shirt. The gaze of an Israeli soldier attempting to discover hidden explosives, which has become one of the symbols of the Occupation, reverses when Ashraf returns the gaze (of Noam, a reserve soldier standing in front of him). The militaristic gaze, based on racialization and racial differentiation, becomes, in Fox’s queer Israeli narrative, a sexual gaze, following the “love at first sight” formula.

The second reversal is tied to the arbitrariness of the plot that makes the romance possible: Ashraf passes the checkpoint and later goes to Noam’s apartment in Tel Aviv to return Noam’s Israeli identity card, which he had dropped at the checkpoint. This is a
fantasmatic reversal of the modus operandi of the Occupation, in which Palestinian identity cards are handled by Israeli soldiers, and not the opposite. Returning the gaze and the identity card presciently symbolizes within the political reality of the second Intifada the geo-psychological space of fantasmatic identity reversals. This denies the reality of the Occupation and makes it ideologically “enlightened.” These reversals are the cause of a two-fold passing fantasy for Ashraf – both spatial (crossing the border between Tel Aviv and Nablus) and sexual (passing as an Israeli gay in Tel Aviv).

Spatial passing in Bubble is constructed as gay fantasy which disavows its political scopic dimension. Gay liberation, that is, the process of gay-ization that Ashraf undergoes under the supervision and guidance of gay Israelis, replaces acknowledgment of the urgency to liberate the closed Palestinian space (as well as the political-historical factors that created the pathology of the Occupation). It seems as if the Israeli gays give Ashraf refuge and out him; in reality, Bubble constructs them adhering to the spatial fantasy (denial of the Occupation) through a semi-colonial act, the gay-ization of Ashraf.

In this sense, despite the interracial love story, Bubble is part of the Western model of gayness that Joseph Massad considers oppressive. In his groundbreaking work, Desiring Arabs, he claims that this oppressive discourse, which he calls the Gay International, is the direct outcome of an “orientalist impulse borrowed from predominant representations of Arab and Muslim cultures in the United States and in European countries.” Massad argues that the Gay International “produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices.

that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology."27 The Gay International especially affects the persecution of the yet un-Westernized poor and nonurban men “who practice same-sex contact and who do not necessarily identify as homosexual or gay.”28 This imperialist-missionary project therefore destroys the sexual beings it wants to “liberate.”29

In contrast to Diary, Fox’s film contains absolutely no representation of Ashraf’s process of sexual maturity within his society. This exemplifies the problem Massad (2002) points to, and thus strengthens his claim that the universalization of gay rights is based on the premise that “‘Oriental’ desires . . . exist . . . in ‘oppressive – and in some cases murderous home-lands,’” and therefore are “re-oriented to – and subjected by a ‘more enlightened’ Occident.”30

As described above, in Fox’s film, Ashraf’s gay-ization is masked as a spatial and sexual enlightened liberation; but in fact, the colonialist gaze at the checkpoint is converted into the gay gaze that controls Ashraf’s behavior in passing rituals (changing his name, biography, attire, accent, bodily gestures, and lifestyle). In this sense, gay Israelis supervising Ashraf’s passing as an Israeli is but a variation on the Israeli surveillance regime. Both at the checkpoint and in Tel Aviv, passing is based on checking racial identity. By making confirmation of identity dependent on the Israeli gaze, Bubble denies the pervasiveness of Israeli politics of surveillance: the film structures these gazes

---

27 Ibid., 163.
28 Ibid., 188-189.
29 Ibid., 189-190.
as two different mechanisms of confirmation, while in actuality the same omnipresent
gaze tries to determine if he is a Palestinian/an illegal resident/a potential terrorist.

Structuring Palestinian passing in Fox’s queer cinema conforms to the basic
definition of passing as “a performance in which one presents oneself as what one is
not.”31 I suggest that under a scopic regime, passing inevitably involves its traumatic
failure. According to Carole-Anne Tyler, “In fact, passing can only name the very failure
of passing, an indication of a certain impossibility at its heart, of the contradictions which
constitute it: life/death, being/non-being, visibility/invisibility, speech/silence,
difference/sameness, knowledge/ignorance, coming out/mimicry.”32

Ashraf’s failure of passing is not only the epistemological failure described by Tyler
and others, e.g., Ginsberg;33 the failure prophesized by Massad;34 or that defined by Homi
K. Bhabha as “not quite/not white,” that is, one embedded in colonial relations.35 Bhabha
describes mimicry as an ambivalent and ironic compromise: “colonial mimicry is the
desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the
same, but not quite.”36 As a form of colonial discourse, mimicry poses as least as much
an immanent threat on Whiteness as does imitation and appropriation: The failure of

31 Valerie Rohy, “Displacing Desire: Passing, Nostalgia, and Giovannis Room,” in Passing and the Fictions
Cultural Studies 6 (1994), 212.
34 Massad, Desiring Arabs.
35 Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in The Location of
36 Ibid., 122.
passing in the context of the *Intifada*, as I hinted at above, is the result of it being dependent upon a political culture based on the gaze as a means of hegemony, subjugation, and control. Ashraf wants to look like an Israeli, but does not want to be Israeli/Jewish. Despite that, he wants to be gay and look like an (Israeli?) gay. It should be noted that Ashraf participates not only in his stylization as Shimi, a young Israeli, through the gaze of the gays around him, but also through his Jew-ization, as exemplified by his adoption of a loving gesture from the Israeli stage adaptation of *Bent* (Sherman 1979) that he saw with Noam. Should Israeli queer cinema, which structures Jew-ization as the climax of the process of gay-ization, be seen, following Massad, as contributing to “destroying social and sexual configurations of [Arab-Islamic] desire in the interest of reproducing a (Arab) world in its own image”? Is the dominance of the scopic regime a means of avoiding Bhabha’s split, that is, the immanent threat of mimicry?

---

**Palestinian Passing in The Bubble: Ashraf (right), Noam, Lulu & Yali.**

37 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 189.

38 Bhabha, “Of Mimicry.”
What happens when an Israeli performs passing? Does *Bubble*, like *Diary*, reveal the interdependences of the Israeli and the Palestinian? Does it expose Bhabha’s double bind of mimicry, “where the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed”?

After someone at the Tel Aviv restaurant exposes “Shimi” as a Palestinian, he panics and returns to Nablus. Noam is despondent over his loss and Lulu obtains a temporary foreign press card so they can travel to Nablus to visit him. They decide to pass the checkpoint by impersonating French journalists, and introduce themselves as such at Ashraf’s home. They set up a clandestine meeting between Noam and Ashraf using the excuse that he invited them to photograph his sister Rana’s wedding for French television.

Noam and Lulu’s passing is for the most part spatial. They own the cultural capital necessary to insinuate themselves into forbidden spaces. In a complete reversal of Palestinian passing, Israeli passing, in both senses of the word, is entirely void of racialization.

Lulu and Noam’s decision to pretend to be French rather than Palestinian suggests that Israelis would almost never consider passing themselves off as Palestinian. The two Israelis are not exposed to the gaze at the checkpoint since in any case, as

---

39 Ibid., 127

40 Israelis are forbidden by law to enter Nablus.

41 In this context, it is interesting to recall that the term passing may be derived from “pass,” the slip of paper that granted slaves permission to move about the countryside without being mistaken for runaways (Juda Bennett, *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* [New York: Peter Lang, 1998]).
foreign journalists they are in an advantageous position. In fact, for a short while they
simply exchange their privileged position as Israelis for a different one. Accordingly,
Lulu and Noam’s passing does not make them renounce their denial of the social
pathologies Palestinians undergo at the checkpoints. Assuming the identity of French
journalists, passing into the Palestinian space, and Noam pretending to be heterosexual in
Ashraf’s home are all temporary impostures that were never meant to lead to closeness to
the other, either racially or sexually, or – similar to the Israeli client in Diary –
experiences of social marginality and multiple subject positions. Consequently, the level
of spatial fantasy makes the trip to Nablus both practically and symbolically futile in its
attempt to structure the Israeli world as open to otherness.42

Moreover, Fox’s playfulness fantasy relates to these forbidden spaces as
unconflictual, free of danger. In contrast, Noam’s passing is a dramatic turning point in
Ashraf’s life: After Jihad, his future brother-in-law, sees him kissing Noam, he is trapped.
His reaction during his secret meeting with Noam (“Do you want them to kill me? Are
you crazy?”) is a portent of the future. Bubble represses not only the disparity between
Noam’s playfulness and Ashraf’s falling into a trap, but the meaning of the asymmetric
passings. In fact, the mischievous heterosexual passing of Noam in Nablus is the cause of
the traumatic failure of Ashraf’s heterosexual passing in Arab society.

Eytan Fox’s Israeli queer cinema, which contributed to Israeli society’s homo-
normative legitimating process during the 1980s and 1990s (mainly through the success
of the television series Florentin [Hebrew] [1997] and Yossi and Jagger [Hebrew]
[2002]), fantasmatically denies racial differences during the 2000s, revealing the failure

42 See Massad, Desiring Arabs, 188 note 103).
of *Bubble* to establish queer epistemology in a colonial ethnic-sexual space. The gay-
ization of the Palestinian masked as romantic love enables the ongoing denial of the
Occupation, the humiliation of the Palestinian, and their replacement by gay pride. This is
especially noticeable because the editing links the Nablus visit with a rave party
demonstration against the Occupation – a sort of substitute for a gay pride parade.

Judith Halberstam claims that “shame can be a powerful tactic in the struggle to
make privilege (whitening, masculinity, wealth) visible.” She strongly criticizes the
identity politics of white gay males that exclude the queer adult brown man, the absence
of appropriate white gay masculine language for discussing shame, and the role of the
brown gay male body in the white shame narrative. She presents – while criticizing –
three solutions to the white gay male shame: normalization (gay white men can work
through gay shame by producing normative masculinities and presenting themselves as
uncastrated, muscular, whole), projection/aestheticization, and adoption of “gay shame
[that] can be used…in ways that are feminist and antiracist.”

Unlike the Israeli gay who has come out of the closet and romanticizes gay pride in
order to deal with his shame, Ashraf’s situation in the context of shame as a “gendered
form of sexual abjection” is complex. The tension between being closeted or out that
Ashraf is forced to deal with does not conceal the tension between pride and shame
(exemplified by his participation in the rave), but rather between (gay) pride and (racial)
humiliation. To-be-gazed-at at the checkpoint is for Ashraf a physical experience of
shame (involving feminization and castration), which (in contrast to Noam’s experience)

---

44 Ibid., 228-229.
45 Ibid., 226.
undergoes racialization and is not transformed into pride. The checkpoint experience, unlike the childhood experiences of the white gay, is not transformed from “abjection, isolation, and rejection into legibility, community, and love.” This is true not only because Ashraf is too young to have had the chance to adopt the theoretical language of the adult queer in order to recognize his sexuality, as Halberstam claims regarding Western gay communities. For Ashraf, humiliation at the checkpoint is both gay shame and racial humiliation. It cannot, therefore, be reinterpreted or resituated in the gay pride world. The film does not offer the option of recognizing both worlds; the more Ashraf becomes gay within the Israeli community, the more his experiences at the checkpoint are suppressed. Bubble does not directly address the latent collusion between the different apparatuses of repression and is therefore not critical of the tension between racial shame and gay pride.

Israeli queer cinema offers the solution of projection: instead of recognizing the ethnic humiliation of the Occupation, it projects white gay male shame on the “brown male” in the “white narrative” it rewrites. This projection is intensified through disavowals: first, through the playfulness of Noam’s passing, that is, by gaining access to vulnerability and humiliation without embodying it; second, through Ashraf’s self gay-ization, displacing racial humiliation with gay pride (When he arrives late at the rave, for example, he hurriedly apologizes and mumbles something about how hard it was to get there and about the checkpoint, and immediately joins the party); and third, through romanticizing the terror.

46 Ibid., 221.
Indeed, is it surprising that Ashraf finds himself at the vanishing point of subjectivity? In structuring the suicidal terrorist, the gay Israeli narrative fantasy reaches its most extreme juncture. What is the relation between romance and terror? Between presenting sexual relations and presenting the suicidal terrorist? *Bubble* offers a more progressive representation of interracial sexual relationships between men than had appeared in Israeli cinema before the turn of the century; that is, it is not based on power relationships tied to the tension between penetrating and penetrated. Ashraf and Noam change positions according to the anal-oral circuit. As Elizabeth Grosz has written, “It may be this…that distinguishes heterosexual men from many gay men who are prepared not only to send out but also to receive flow and in this process to assert other bodily regions than those singled out by the phallic function.”\(^47\) Even though the film presents a radical sexual structure freed from constraints of (cinematic) tradition, hierarchy, and perception of the body as a battlefield, the gay Israeli narrative cannot integrate the gay racial body (even if, or perhaps because, the narrative rewrites it, á la Massad, as a non-racial body).\(^48\) The result is a fantasy of loss.

The film does not present the suicide terrorist as a radical fundamentalist Moslem, Israeli society’s conventional profile, but as a person whose sexuality is repressed and desairs of ever being able to live as a proud gay in Arab society; that is, he is tragically unable to work through shame and humiliation. *Bubble* does not take responsibility for

\(^{47}\) Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 201.

\(^{48}\) In this regard, see Eytan Fox’s declaration during an interview with Merav Yodilovitz: “[Yousef Sweid] was amazing, I am completely in love with him and I think he is brave. No one speaks about it, but he is the first Arab teen idol. He makes 16-year-old girls admire him and not say: ‘Disgusting Arab.’ That is power and it couldn’t have happened in the Israel I grew up in. I am very proud of him because of this achievement.” Merav Yodilovitz, “Interview of Eytan Fox” [Hebrew] *GoGay* 30 (2006).
the (lack of) awareness and/or the playfulness of the “enlightened” Israeli. By tying shahidism to the tragic detachment of a man from his social image as well as to traditional Arab society’s attitude towards homosexuality, the Israeli narrative is able to cast off its guilt for both Ashraf’s gay-ization and his becoming a suicide terrorist. Bubble chooses to solve this through projection, since the film is unable to contain its own epistemological contradictions in a racial and scopic context. Although I do not completely agree with Massad’s vehement belief in a Western narrative conspiracy (inter alia because he regards the various Western queer schools monolithic), it is clear that the starting point for understanding this contradiction is linked, as he claims, to colonialism. I believe it is also linked to colonial guilt, which by and large Massad obviously does not relate to. By structuring a terrorist attack, Fox’s cinematic narrative of the Israeli gay during the post second Intifada projects the repressed sin of denying the Occupation (shame/humiliation) onto the closeted Palestinian gay. Noam pays the price of unconscious guilt when he becomes the victim. But even this quasi-confession of unconscious guilt for denying the Occupation undergoes gay romanticization during the final scene of the film.

This scene presents an imaginary picture of Ashraf and Noam as children playing together in a playground in Jerusalem, where the Israeli neighborhood French Hill converges with the Arab village of Esawiya. The shift from the romanticized fantasy of lost coupling (the camera circles the two at the moment of the explosion; Noam’s words of love contrast with the sight of their shrouded bodies) to that of a shared childhood is anchored in Noam’s narration; that is, not in Ashraf’s (or the shahidic promise of
paradise), but in a seemingly shared fantasy of reconciliation. Except that Ashraf and his family abandoned Esawiya after their home had been demolished and traded their identity as Arabs holding Israeli citizenship to become Palestinian refugees in Nablus. Furthermore, Noam recalls a conflict from his childhood over whether to allow Arab children from Esawiya to play together with Israelis in French Hill. That is to say, Noam “returns” post-mortem to the moment of “enlightened” reconciliation. Ashraf seemingly “returns” (in Noam’s fantasy) to the same reconciliation, but in actuality returns to an asymmetric and repressive reality of the Occupation. Regardless of the nostalgia for a lost paradise of a common childhood (which never occurred), the fantasmatic picture of the two with their mothers is taken from the reservoir of Israeli rather than Palestinian images.

**Gevald – A Queer Terrorist Show**

In contrast to *Bubble*, Netalie Braun’s short film *Gevald* is a radical queer text in every respect. Self-reflexive and multi-layered, it presents gay and lesbian bonding in a communal environment shared by Israelis and Palestinians, in which the Palestinian lesbian is given voice. Although terror also hits this community, the source is ambiguous. More important, however, is that there is no projection of violence on the other, as in *Bubble*, because pre-terror relations are based on multi-ethnic queer bonding unaffected by colonialism’s evils. Thus, as “a site of contention,” queer bonds in *Gevald* “name a mode of recognition to the side of this deadly epistemology [of the closet], a laterally

---

49 The dialogue contains jokes about this: “If a homo becomes a jihad, who awaits him in heaven, seventy virgin twinks or seventy muscle hunks?”

constituted togetherness that persists in the face of homophobia, sustains us, and allows queer life to go on.”

*Gevald* was intended to be screened at a festival usually held at the close of the annual Jerusalem gay pride parade. As the film’s opening titles indicate, three participants were stabbed by an ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) Jew during the 2005 parade; in 2006 the ultra-Orthodox community protested and fought desperately to cancel the parade. After first being postponed, it took place in a closed stadium.

Set in a gay club in West Jerusalem on the eve of the 2006 parade, the film’s exaggerated rhetoric immediately reveals that it was inspired by the *Pashkevil*. This Yiddish word, which means protest or a cry for help, refers to posters pasted on public walls in the ultra-Orthodox community. Frequently used to publicly attack or undermine a person or group, it spells out what is virtuous or acceptable behavior and what is not. Despite the proliferation of other modes of mass communication, the *Pashkevil* endures as one of the primary weapons of the ultra-Orthodox community and one of its main sources of entertainment. Through editing; sound bridge; and insertion of footage, Braun (who is also the scriptwriter) reflects on both functions. For instance, the editing cuts from footage of a *Haredi* demonstration where homosexuals are described as beasts and there are calls to “stop the abomination” during a “wedding” performed between two real donkeys in the streets of Jerusalem dressed in pink blankets with the word gay written on them, to a drag show in which a singer, dressed as a cow, ironically performs the Hebrew version of “Old MacDonald.” Thus, by embodying and mocking homophobic hatred, the

---


52 “Those who fear and obey God.”
gay community at the bar enthusiastically participates in an imaginary confrontation with Jewish fundamentalism.

However, it is Moslem fundamentalism that is staged as the radical show intermingled with the film’s main (Israeli) lesbian love story between a secular dyke (Noga Meltzer) and her religious ex-lover, Na’ama, who comes to the club on the eve of her own arranged marriage to warn her ex-lover of the threat of ultra-Orthodox violence at the parade. In the queer space of the bar, they watch a drag-king show performed by lesbian Palestinians: Youssuf, a young Palestinian wearing the traditional Arab galabiyya, is singing a heterosexual Saudi love song (by Hussein Al Jamsi) to his lover Jabbar, while the latter is preparing for a suicide mission. The camera shows Jabbar in a semi-striptease act exposing his half-naked body covered in metallic strips representing an explosive belt as he puts on a jacket and reads the Kur’an. Youssuf confesses his
belief in their eternal love and finally expresses the song’s words of separation: “Go! I will accept your absence!”

The drag show is multi-layered: First, the names Youssuf and Jabbar parody Eytan Fox’s popular Israeli gay film *Yossi and Jagger* that tells the love story of two male soldiers, one of whom dies in battle in Lebanon. The drag act recasts Fox’s homo-normative national gay love story into a queer Palestinian narrative of fundamentalism and opposition embodied by the suicide bomber. Parody is both like and unlike, it re- as well as a trans-contextualizes previous work. Like other modes of repetition, parody is a *mise en abyme*, a “mirroring” of the origins of the process of realistic figuration, and consequently has a meta-fictional function. This has a special resonance in Youssuf and Jabbar’s act: Fully available for repetition, impersonation, and appropriation, Israeli masculinity is represented as unstable and fraudulent by Palestinian “kinging,” as Judith Halberstam calls this sensibility. Kinging undermines the Israeli soldier’s bodily hegemony and alleged superiority over the Palestinian masculine body through parody. Thus, kinging the terror not only parodies, but transcends the well-known historic definitions of the Jewish-Israeli masculine body (described by Boyarin, Biale and others) beyond the “feminine-masculine/ diasporic-Sabra/ Old Jew-New Jew” transformations. Queering terror through kinging, that is, expands traditional Israeli body conceptualizations and calls for a new, hybrid, epistemology.


Second, the parody refers to Yossi and Jagger’s secret gay love as well as to the Palestinian couple’s and Na’ama’s presumably hidden secrets. In this way, unlike The Bubble, both Jewish and Moslem fundamentalism is named as the cause of the real and imagined romantic separations on and off stage. Challenging the primacy, authenticity, and originality of dominant masculinities, staged and costumed masculinity channels ethnic and gendered secrets through the drag act.

The third layer revealed in Youssuf and Jabbar’s drag-king show relates to yet another performance. Na’ama’s ex-lover translates the Saudi love song into Hebrew for her while they are watching the show. Translating the Palestinian love song becomes the means through which the Israeli lesbian love story is imaginarily reenacted and
narrativized. The similarities between Youssuf and Jabbar’s love and forced separation and that of the two lesbians creates a layer of *hommage* to Yossi and Jagger’s unfulfilled love as a source of inspiration, a romantic myth. Using the Palestinian narrative as a substitute for reappraising their own relationship helps the women communicate a richness of feelings and impressions they cannot express in words. It emphasizes the resemblance to the love stories of the internal and as well as external others – Yossi and Jagger; Youssuf and Jabber – despite the disparate contexts. Translation, therefore, becomes production, not reproduction.

Based on four levels of enunciation (lip-syncing the Saudi song, performance of a drag-king show, parody of an Israeli film, and narrativization of a lesbian relationship), translation, performed as an emancipatory practice, focuses on the ways bonding is structured in/by language. In other words, knowing the other’s language and participating in his creative ethno-sexual reflection becomes a way for the Israeli lesbians to (dis)place themselves in a reality burdened by fundamentalism.

*Gevald*’s queering of terror, which involves transtextual or hypertextual relations, functions as a palimpsest working on problematic ethno-sexual notions of identity, dependency, and resistance. Both parody/*hommage* and lip-sync/translation concern themselves with inter-discursive repetition. The lip-sync and the translation of the Arabic song into Hebrew, are, in fact, two similar forms of repetition (sung and spoken) of the words of others, and thus embody a fantasmatic form based on resemblance to truth. The

---

55 The scene refers to the “lethal” club scene in Pedro Almodóvar’s *High Hills* (1991), in which a group of fans imitate the drag queen performer who imitates the singer.
texts’ meaning is derived from being transformed, which entails a steady tension between fantasy and reality.

Fourth, though *Gevald’s* subversiveness lies in how it integrates Palestinian and Israeli texts and parody and *hommage*, and especially in its open-endedness. Repeating the words of love uttered before the planned suicide is a portent of the deadly blast at the end of the show. The terrorist’s kinging body, which, beginning with the semi-striptease, crosses the gender boundaries, is finally subjected to objecthood.56 The Israeli lesbian ex-lovers, who participate in the show through the self-reflexive translation, ironically assume through translation-as-repetition the imaginary status of the two Palestinian and Israeli gay couples, projecting on themselves a “no future,” to use Lee Edelman’s famous thesis regarding the death drive and queer negation of the social order.57

The film leaves the source of the explosion unknown, though it tacitly suggests that in this climate of intensified repression, it was a *Haredi* hate crime. But, blurring the boundaries between fiction and documentary, the explosion eerily recalls the drag show’s suicide bomber.

*Gevald* resembles *Bubble* in its tragic ending, though the queering process and thus self-projected violence are entirely different. *Gevald’s* gay and lesbian club, unlike the urban bubble in *The Bubble*, becomes a counter-reality to the failed parade in which both real and imagined fundamentalist violence are negotiated, tested through their


theatricality, and comprehended as radically unpredictable. Through celebration of opposition, it offers both Israeli and Palestinian drag queen and king shows for the pleasure of internal and external audiences. In this, the film turns the club to an imaginary space, where the relations between colonizers and colonized are expressed in terms of bonding, co-presence, interaction, and communality. As an Israeli film, it even suggests that the outside reality’s dialectics of the dominant/subordinate can be conceptualized as the symbolic performance of Palestinian coming-into-being as shahid. Conjuring Palestinian resistance authenticates the performance and elevates the Palestinian production of new identity. Taking for granted the objecthood, queering the terror underscores not only how the negotiations of lesbian love are implicated within contestatory “acts” of representation, but how uncontainable is the excess of the sexual function in a repressive order. In this, “queer bonds mark the simultaneity of ‘the social’ and a space of sociability outside, to the side of, or in the interstices of ‘the social’ — bonds that occur not in spite of but because of some force of negation, in which it is precisely negativity that organizes scenes of togetherness.”

Conclusion - Queering Terror

In the three films analyzed here – Diary of a Male Whore, The Bubble, and Gevald – the process of queering terror is presented as based on the Occupation’s traumas and entailed fantasies. However, the mechanism of trauma (self-objectification through an acting-out of past violence, guilty projection of violence onto the other, fatal conceptualization of queerness under a repressive environment, respectively) and the

58 Weiner and Young, “Queer Bonds,” 236.
content of fantasy (castrated memories, gay-ization, ethno-sexual bonding) attest to the marked differences in the perspectives and ideologies of these films.

*Diary of a Male Whore, The Bubble, and Gevald* present mirror images that refer to the perennial other. The three films deal with intimate bodily interracial interaction or bonding, and the symbolic and actual violence of the Israeli Occupation precludes their proximity from being free of either past or present traumas. The imaginary bodily merger becomes a real or fantasmati c parting, and leads to temporal or eternal loss. In *Diary*, after Essam gets paid he is seen wandering the streets of Tel Aviv, with the red lights of passing cars signifying future danger. In the last scene of *Bubble*, the lovers’ bodies are seen from a high angle shot, in the center of the suicide site. In *Gevald*, after the explosion, on the background of a black frame, a tearful drag queen performs Annie Lenox’s “Why?” as a reflexive elegy.59

Will Essam become an Ashraf or will he become a “Jabbar”? This absurd post-textual question makes it clear that although the films stage a psychic mirroring pattern, there is an essential gap between them, as the immense differences in the nature of ethno-sexual relationships – financial transaction, romantic love, and queer bonding – reveals. Analysis of the main mechanisms of sexual and ethnic repression attests to antagonistic consciousness that places the Nakba/Occupation; the rape; and the hustling on one side, and racial denial of the Occupation; denial of the scopic regime; gay-ization; and homo-

59 The final title screen says that the gay and lesbian bar, Shoushan, was closed in 2007, thus marking the hopelessness of the situation in Jerusalem both in ethnic and sexual terms.
(suicidal) romance on the other. In the middle, queering the terror act turns “a sociality created in… moments of enjoyment”\(^{60}\) into a shattered one.

The analyses of *Diary* and *Bubble* discussed in this chapter, which point to the striking differences between the depictions of interracial relationships in the two films, seek to examine the significance of these differences. More specifically, they, as well as *Gevald*, seek to explore what these differences mean to Palestinian vs. Jewish-Israeli understanding of fe/male (homo)sexualit-ies; repression; and identification, and to explore the place of post-traumatic fantasy in shaping the encounter between the *I* and the *other* in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

*Diary*’s defiance intermingles with its claim of victimhood, and though Fox’s film makes a similar claim, his definition of victim is totally different. As I hope the above analysis has shown, in Abu Wael’s film, victimhood – presented as a direct outcome of Israeli policies of exclusion, occupation, and dispossession – is an ever-reenacted irrefutable subject position onto which the collaborator’s identity is carefully sutured. Therefore, it is not clear how the rape as the constitutive event of Essam’s post-traumatic identity stands in relation to Frantz Fanon’s claim that “the concern about heterosexual rape functions doubly: it attends, importantly, to violence against women, but it also forcefully masks triangulated desire, whereby the fear – and fantasy – of the penetrated male is displaced onto the safer figure of the raped female.”\(^{61}\) The link in editing between the primal scene and the rape, described above, points to the power these events have had on Essam’s solitary form of sexuality. *Diary*’s retrospective fantasizing turns Fanon’s and

---


Bhabha’s colonized apparently “same but not quiet” desire into self-staged victimhood, even to the point of risking pathologizing queer sexualities. Moreover, as claimed above, both the primal scene and the rape suggest how queer sexualities might form the basis for understanding the link between loss of sovereignty and post-traumatic subjectivity (in this respect, Abu Wael’s liminal position as an Arab-Israeli director is very much like that of his protagonist).

Both films require the fantasmatic to work through the pathologies of interracial sexual relations – be it a past-oriented fantasy, as in Diary, or a future-oriented one, post mortem, as in Bubble. But the gap between Abu Wael’s endless acting out, which becomes a device for self-examination and Fox’s “benign” ethnocentrism points not only to disparate options of using the fantasmatic in cinema, or different narrativizations, but, in Bhabah’s words, to epistemic violence.62

By fantasizing suicidal terrorism, post- second Intifada Israeli gay narrative (in The Bubble) projects the repressed sin of denial of the Occupation on the closeted Palestinian gay; that is, on traditional Palestinian society. In this way, it rids itself of any sexual or political responsibility. Nostalgia for the imaginary paradise of a shared childhood is part and parcel of this denial. The sexual celebration of the Israeli white gay produces only a façade of victimhood shared by the Palestinian and the Israeli. Although the suicidal terrorist attack might be interpreted as an unconscious guilt-ridden Israeli act of self-loss, it still, in contrast to Gevald’s representation, ignores the ethnic otherness. Transforming the Arab Ashraf into the Israeli Shimi not only makes him invisible, but precludes any interconnectedness between sexual and ethnic mechanisms of repression. Projecting gay-

ization and the violence of the Occupation on the destructiveness of the Palestinian suicide terrorist while avoiding any subversive attitude towards the (ethnic or sexual) Israeli occupational order stands in sharp contrast to the ethnic and sexual subversiveness of *Diary* and *Gevald*. Till the very end, Noam does not interpret Ashraf’s suicide as a mirror-image of himself; i.e., as a racially violent projection of Israelis onto Palestinians. Moreover, the deferred deaths of Ashraf and Noam, embodied in the final scene’s postmortem redemption, are taken from the Israeli bereavement myth that presents shared death as an integral part of men’s comradeship. This myth plays a central role in Israeli society and contributes to forging a gendered and eroticized nationalism. In complete contrast to the drag-king show in *Gevald*, *Bubble* expands the boundaries of this myth in service of the re-staging of both Ashraf’s Jew-ization and Israel-ization, regardless of the circumstances – Israeli and Palestinian “buddies” dying in a terrorist attack rather than Israeli comrades-in-arms killed in war. In other words, the mechanisms operative in the conflictual interaction between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians stand at the fateful juncture of sexual and national claims to gay and lesbian pride; love; desire; and pleasure, on one hand, and space; rights; justice; communality; and acknowledgment, on the other. The collapse of othering stands at the core of these processes and inhibits new possibilities of the self and identity while curtailing the development of alternative modalities of belonging, connectivity, and intimacy.

Under the Occupation, queerness becomes an ethical positioning in *Diary of a Male Whore*, and to a lesser degree in *Gevald*, but not in *The Bubble*. Teresa de Lauretis suggests that a queer text is one that “carries the inscription of sexuality as something
more than sex . . . as enigma without solution and trauma without resolution." During and after the Intifada period, however, as these films show, queering cannot sustain the burden of enigma. If, indeed, the history of queer theory is defined in terms of “an interplay between a centrifugal drive away from sociality and a centripetal pressure toward sociable belonging and linkage,” the films discussed here show that under Israeli occupation, the ethical queer position necessarily entails pressure away from sociality to self-extinction.

The “anti-social thesis” has a different manifestation and ramification within the context of the Intifada, regardless of different forms of queer communality. It is precisely in face of the danger of double (ethnic and sexual) repression that the question of undertaking a false identity (by Shimi in Bubble or even by Na’ama, and Youssuf and Jabbar, in Gevald) is endowed with surplus value. As Diary shows, erotic forms of sociability come into being only under the shadow of post-trauma. Thus, in a social space torn apart and under an ethnic disguise (an illegal resident pretending to be legal), queering cannot become an “inventive sociality.” As an anti-social form, it calls into question the meaning of the social in a practical and symbolic order imposed on the illegal hustler in order to (psychologically and practically) survive.

Under Israeli occupation, the films apparently point to two opposing body trajectories: either projecting violence on the other, as in suicide bombing; or on oneself, as in hustling. However, in both Israeli films, which set the suicidal terrorist figure, projecting violence on the ethnic other also means projecting violence on oneself. In

---

64 Weiner and Young, “Queer Bonds,” 223.
65 As Weiner and Young claim in “Queer Bonds,” 226.
other words, a deep regressive guilt-driven desire for death lurks beneath the surface of Israeli forms of queering terror. It is enacted in the extreme when deep denial is involved in textual processes of queering (Bubble) and to a lesser degree, when the fantasy of a liberal, pleasurable, multi-ethnic gay and lesbian communality is taken for granted to be short-termed and doomed under the pressures of outside reality.

*Diary of a Male Whore, The Bubble, and Gevald* revolve around possible encounters between the *I* and the *other* (prostitution, masturbation, gay-ization, passing, romance, communal bonding). In the contested post-traumatic spaces of the 1948 Nakba, the 1967 conquest, and the second Intifada, these encounters are subjected to denial, repression, projection and fantasy. By proving the unavoidable failure of the (fantasmatic) mirror images of each another (albeit as a drag show), in the end the films do not represent a wished-for (cinematic) reconciliation, but rather a reproduction of the unsolvable pathology of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Queering terror, that is, is revealed to be a suicidal end.

**Bibliography**

Bennett, Juda. *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature.* New York: Peter Lang, 1998.


