

**“LOOK THEM IN THE EYE”:
SILENCE AND GAZE AS STRATEGIES OF HUMANIZATION IN
*PARADISE NOW*¹**

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RESUMO: Partindo de uma discussão sobre as relações entre cinema e história, o presente artigo busca analisar o filme *Paradise Now* (2005). O filme, que se autodenomina palestino, apresenta em sua narrativa dois jovens que decidem tirar suas vidas e morrer enquanto mártires por motivos políticos. O filme não só expõe as feridas ainda abertas da Questão Palestina, mas também foge dos estereótipos de homens-bomba ao apresentar a motivação pessoal dos personagens, humanizando-os. Focando nos momentos de silêncio e na troca de olhares entre os personagens, ou os olhares dos personagens direcionados ao narrador-câmera, objetiva-se evidenciar como a arte pode gerar empatia no público e humanizar um assunto tão complexo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Cinema; História; homens-bomba; *Paradise now*.

ABSTRACT: Starting with a discussion on the relationship between cinema and history, this article aims to analyze the film *Paradise Now* (2005). The film, which labels itself as Palestine, presents in its narrative two young men who decide to take their own lives and to die as martyrs for political motivation. The film does not only expose the open wounds of Palestine, but also avoids the stereotypes of suicide-bombers by presenting the personal motivation of the characters, humanizing them. Focusing on the moments of silence, and the gazes between the characters, or on the moments in which the characters stare at the camera-narrator, this article aims at showing how art may generate empathy in the public and humanize such a complex matter.

KEY-WORDS: Cinema; History; Suicide Bombers; *Paradise Now*.

For a long time, history was considered the faithful account of all events. According to Tony Barta, “Whether popular or academic, the nineteenth-century fascination with verifiable accounts of the past was central to the positivist faith of the modern era” (BARTA, 1998, p. 3). Recent debates question what official history can actually cover with arguments that all accounts are somehow biased and that

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historiography has limitations. Using Fredric Jameson's argument that "History is what hurts" (JAMESON, 1981, p. 102), one can understand that some wounds of the world history are not always present in official history, for being either so painful or hard to articulate. In these cases, different narratives may expose issues that official history may silence.

Nancy Peterson, when discussing the history of minorities, argues that "wounded histories are written as literature, or fiction, and not as history, for only literature in our culture is allowed the narrative flexibility and the willing suspension of disbelief that are crucial to the telling of these stories" (PETERSON, 2001, p. 7). Her argument can also be applied to cinema, as some films also use narrative to problematize painful historical events, and can be expanded to other contexts, as this article argues. By analyzing a film, I argue that narratives (specifically film narratives) can expose wounds that are sometimes not present in official history.

2. Cinema and History

The relationship between cinema and history generates discussions that trigger the development of both. Marc Ferro argues that the connection between cinema and history is concerned to the fact that films are "source and agent of history" (FERRO, 1988, p. 14). In this perspective, scientific development is one of the best examples, as films not only represent scientific investigations and researches, but also instigate them. Ferro still points out that films as narratives can be used to intervene in history, as they can use "the pretext of telling a story in order to indoctrinate and glorify" (FERRO, 1988, p. 14). A large number of films helped to spread propaganda and political perspectives, and it is possible to see that from the beginning of cinema, some films encourage the audience to act in different historical moments and contexts.

Not only films are sources of history, but they also represent history. Robert Rosenstone affirms that some of the earliest narrative films represented historical events and characters: “Long before cinema reached its twentieth birthday in the mid-teens of the twentieth century, the ‘historical’ was a regular part of screen fare” (ROSENSTONE, 2014, p. 13). Even films that focus on imagined stories may talk about history when historical events are part of the narrative: “In their microhistories, films can reveal social structures and social codes in a given time and space, sources and forms of alliance and conflict, and the tension between the traditional and the new” (DAVIS, 2002, p.6).

Tony Barta (1998) and Natalie Zemon Davis (2002) point out that Films present historical moments using a perspective that is built not only by the plot and the themes raised by it, but also by the cinematic apparatus (camera movements, framing, montage, lighting and etc). According to Davis, some reviewers of historical films only consider the plot when analyzing films – ignoring that the film technique also shapes the account of the events being told (DAVIS, 2002). When analyzing historical films, it is important to consider that their accounts of history are different from historiography, not only in their objective but also in their production. In this sense, Davis argues that

What the film looks and sounds will depend on small decisions from many sources - including the interpretative performance of the actors (tightly controlled by some directors, given free reign by others), the style of the directors of photography and music, unexpected events during filming, and post-editing intervention by producers. Such collective creation contrasts with historical book writing, whose cast of characters would extend at most to a few co-authors, student research assistants, an editor and copy editor, and a book designer. (DAVIS, 2002, p. 12)

Referring to the Russian film directors, Tony Barta argues that historical films are constructions. According to her, “Historians having trumpeted their aim to show the past ‘as it actually was’, the revolutionary Russians declared apparent realities needed to be ‘shot’ to pieces and ‘built’ anew before film could claim to be ‘showing’ anything” (BARTA, 1998, p. 4). Montage, which according to the Russian Film theoreticians is the principle of cinema, shows that films are constructions. Even when the objective is to show history “as it actually was”, the representation of historical events is never neutral, and always present a perspective. Considering historical films, she questions:

Watching a costume drama or a historical documentary, we want the screen to be a window on the past. We need to sustain a different order of curiosity once we see the scope of the problems our questions raise. What, then, *is* on the screen? What do we contribute to the reality, or the history, we experience? How does a selection of projected images and sounds succeed – as most do – in projecting a whole past?” (BARTA, 1998, p. 2)

I still add to her questions: How does cinema represent recent historical events? How can films about on-going events can change our way to understand the world? Considering the specific case of war, how can films change the way that the audience sees the conflicts and interfere in politics? If, as Stuart Hall argues, “[i]t is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, who signify” (HALL, 1997, p. 61) – how are we making meaning of suicide bombing and war? Regarding this discussion of films as source and agents of history, and questioning how films represent recent historical events, this article aims at analyzing the film *Paradise Now* (2005), directed by Hany Abu-Assad, which exposes the wounds of the complex context of the ongoing conflicts between Palestine and Israel.

3. *Paradise Now*

The Oscar nominated film *Paradise Now* (2005) surprises for presenting suicide bombing, a theme that is so stereotyped for Western audiences, in a very humane and artistic way. Instead of presenting suicide bombers as cold murderers, the film explores their subjectivity, humanizing them. The film presents two days in which the two Palestinian friends Said (Kais Nashif) and Khaled (Ali Suliman) are called for what they consider to be a martyr mission in Israel. The story develops in one day and a half, following both characters while they say good-bye to their families and meet events which make them rethink their decision. Khaled, who applied to the operation in a desire to be known as an important martyr, gives up on the operation, while Said, motivated by a family history of humiliation caused by the Israelis, decides to go to the last consequences. Even though the film presents the characters' histories and motivations, it is not an apology to suicide bombing. The very choice of defining it as a Palestinian film is a political act, as Palestine is not an official country.

Even though the story is told through the lives of two particular individuals, focusing on the characters and their personal and political motivations, it reflects the history of a larger group, and the consequences of the hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians. Nadia Yaquid points that the film explores “the division and sterility that characterize post-Intifada Palestinian society” (YAQUID, 2011, p. 221), exposing the wounds of an ongoing conflict which lasts for decades. *Paradise Now* was produced after the Second Intifada, which “differed fundamentally from the first Intifada in that it was conducted at roadblocks and borders rather than within Palestinian communities” (YAQUB, 2011, p. 222). Roadblocks are recurrent in the film, and, according to Nadia Yaquib, are presented as “loci of conflict and contestation” (YAQUIB, 2011, p. 222). Narrating collective history through the stories of individuals familiarizes the audience

to the context of the characters, humanizing events which would be coldly represented though the official historiography.

Violence in *Paradise Now* is not physically represented, but is constantly present as a theme in dialogue, actions and gazes. A very brief narrative on the violent acts of the First Intifada, for instance, is told by Khaled in one of the dialogues, but it is quickly replaced by a different sequence with a domestic scene of Said's house. Khaled's quick mentioning of the events in which his father lost one leg with a further silence reveals a wound that cannot be successfully talked about. Violence is also present in the film in what Sahere Bleibleh calls the "forbidden spaces" (BLEIBLEH, 2010, p. 1). By this term, she designates either inside spaces in which Palestinians cannot find security or outside spaces dominated by Israelis. Most of the time, characters are deprived to transit in streets and highways as a reminder of the Israeli presence in their lives, as in one of the sequences in which Khaled and Suha (Lubna Azabal) have to change their route in their way to the cemetery due to a roadblock. I also argue that the most violent moments in the film are not graphically presented, but that they are presented in the characters' silences and gazes².

The greatest achievement of *Paradise Now* is transforming the "unrepresentable", which is the suicide bombing, into a narrative (GANA, 2008). In *Paradise Now*, suicide bombing is not only presented as connected to the worldwide

² I acknowledge that the term "gaze" in Film Studies normally refers to Laura Mulvey's discussion on the "male gaze". According to Mulvey, mainstream movies are produced around a male perspective, directed towards the male visual pleasure. This includes not only the character's facial expression but also the whole cinematic apparatus, which creates a voyeuristic dimension in them. In this article, however, I do not aim at considering Mulvey's perspective – my aim is to analyze the characters facial expressions (gazes – not male gaze) and how they are used to present their subjectivity. For further reading on the definition of "male gaze": Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen* 16(3): 6–18, 1975.

idea of the Muslim theological view of *jihad*, but it also expresses their act as political resistance. The film presents the issue in a less stereotyped way than it is common to find in the media, generating a reflection on the humanity of suicide bombers which only art could make. According to Nouri Gana, the film is capable of “undo[ing] the spectacle of terrorism and [...] [of] articulat[ing] a more nuanced and challenging narrative of Palestinian nationhood, a narrative that has been so far both impermissible and/or readily discreditable by the hegemonic system of Israeli occupation” (GANA, 2008, p. 22)

Nouri Gana also discusses how *Paradise Now* both humanizes suicide bombers and represents their action as *unthinkable*. Her argument is that inscribing suicide bombing into a narrative legitimates the act as struggle for self-representation (GANA, 2008, p. 25). In the film, suicide bombing is explored through two characters with personal motivations, families, feelings, and the audience is invited to understand Khaled’s decision to give up on the attack and Said’s determination to carry it on, humanizing such a complex matter. Humanization, however, does not imply not being critical with the situation. The characters are portrayed as human beings to be understood, and not to be supported. My argument is that, in the film, humanization is produced by the acting of the characters, mainly through their facial expressions.

In literary history, an “early avatar” of a suicide bomber pointed out by David Punter is Joseph Conrad’s character the Professor in the novel *The Secret Agent* (1907). Using the expression “early avatar”, Punter acknowledges that this character is previous to the events that connect suicide bombers with a political context, as the Professor has no political motivation. According to Punter, the Professor “goes everywhere in the darkened spaces of the city with explosives strapped to his body. But what is even more distinctive about the Professor, if such a thing can be, is that he has no ‘cause’, in either

the more obvious senses of the world: no clear motive and no obvious reason” (PUNTER, 2008, p. 201). David Punter relates the Professor both with suicide bombers (called by him terrorists) and immigrants. According to him,

In encountering the terrorist, we are taken to the limit of understanding, to the end of inscription: nothing but death is written on this body, and death is not interpretable, it is the liminal case which simultaneously forbids all thought of the threshold. In the fate of the immigrant, we see the limitations of understanding, or of being understood; the inescapability of stereotyping and prejudice; the impossibility of ever being fully ‘at home’. And thus the fates of the terrorist and of the immigrant are already, in an uncanny way, indissolubly entwined. (PUNTER, 2008, 202)

Still regarding terrorists and terrorism, David Punter points out that terrorism is “low in the scale of immediate lethal impact” (PUNTER, 2008, p. 212), as statistically the number of deaths in the Twin Towers is lower than the number of deaths in wars, for instance. The effects of terrorism, thus, depends on the media and the repercussion of the acts, creating a collective feeling of terror and insecurity: “Terror is a ceaseless, immanent threat here, a permanent state of emergency – while horror realizes that threat, bringing atrocities close to home, provoking a sickening disgust, a state of despair” (GELDER, 2004, p. 152). To create terror, it depends on the “facelessness of the terrorist and the faciality (especially when partially erased) of the victim” (PUNTER, 2008, p. 212).

This illustrates how the terms used to label suicide bombers fail to represent the complexity of the issue – suicide bomber is a term that implies an outside perspective,

excluding their political and religious motivations. The label of ‘suicide’ also connotes an individual act that can be related to selfishness and associated to a removal from community, reducing thus the collective motivation of their acts. While they describe themselves as martyrs, connecting the act of killing themselves for political and religious reasons to glory, they may also be described by outsiders as terrorists, associating a negative connotation to their act. It is important to emphasize that the film is not an apology to suicide bombing – it humanizes the “suicide bombers”, or “martyrs”, without presenting a political solution to their situation or presenting violence as a means to it.

This article aims to explore how the Palestinian film *Paradise Now* exposes the wound of the Palestinian history and the resources used to humanize suicide bombers. I focus on the humanization of the characters, and connect it with the moments in which the characters silence about some subject and express themselves with their facial expressions, mainly with their eyes, which invite the audience to understand what words fail to express. Considering the absence of explicit acts of violence in the film, I suggest that in *Paradise Now* the unseen violence is also suggested through the characters’ silences and gazes.

4. *Paradise Now*: history through silences and gazes

In the first film sequence, these two elements (silence and gazes) give the tone of the film narrative. The very first image of the film is a long shot of the female character Suha standing in the highway, taking courage to face the Israeli checkpoint, and everything that going back to Nablus implies. Suha, in the Israeli checkpoint, does not need to say a word to express the political background of the film. When the Israeli soldier is searching her personal belongings, their mutual gaze is full of meanings. He

only lowers his eyes to look at her documents, and search her luggage, but even in these moments, his head is in the same position, returning quickly to the mutual gaze. By looking down on her, the soldier expresses the political dominance of Israel. Nouri Gana expresses how meaningful is this gaze, arguing that “compressing (...) a long history of distrust and condescension, [it] immediately sets the tone for the enveloping sense of captivity, daily humiliation, outrage, exhaustion and hopelessness” (GANA, 2002, p. 27). While the soldier looks down on Suha, she sustains the gaze as resistance.

Suha’s attitude towards the Israeli soldier is in accordance to an indication that Said and Khaled receive from Jamal (Amer Hlehel) when they are heading to Tel Aviv. Jamal is the character responsible for their martyr operation. When they are receiving the directions for their operation, they are advised to not be afraid of the soldiers, but to “look them in the eye”. Jamal explains that looking them in the eyes suggests that the person is not afraid of them, and, thus, in control of the situation. Staring at them in this context is not only an important form of disguise, but becomes a form of struggle, explaining Suha’s attitude in the first film sequence.

Maintaining the gaze is not only connected to the Israeli soldiers, but to different kinds of resistance. When Said and Khaled are smoking in one of the initial sequences of the film, for instance, the boy who serves them tea also uses his eyes to make a point. When Khaled pays him with one coin, the boy keeps staring at him expressing his wish to earn more. Khaled indicates with his head that the boy should leave, but he keeps on staring, resisting to Khaled’s order. After a period of silent gaze, the boy gives up, and leaves. Through this sequence, it can be perceived, thus, that keeping eye contact is not used only in political acts of resistance against Israelis, but in all cases that might be considered unjust. Again, there are no words to narrate his disapproval with the tip, but the facial expressions and the silence reveal much more. The boy, who probably was

born in the middle of the conflict, already knew that he could silently express much with his eyes.

In *Paradise Now*, the eyes of the main characters are not only responsible for gazes with political implications as acts of resistance, but also reveal their emotions and feelings concerning the suicide bombing. In some moments of major importance in the narrative, characters assume an attitude of silence and stare at the camera or look to an unknown place inviting the audience to read in their eyes what they are feeling. If eyes are considered to be the windows of one's soul, in this film the audience is invited to dive into their souls, empathize with the character and through that understand their situation. One of these moments is when Said is informed that he and Khaled have been chosen to the suicide bombing operation, and goes home to spend his last night with his family. In a silent long shot in his room, an emphasis is given to his facial expression while he stares at a point that the audience cannot see. No word is necessary to understand that he is reflecting upon his life and mission. With this, the film humanizes the suicide bomber (and terrorists as they might be called in the West) by presenting him with a personal history and subjective reasons to proceed with the terrorist act.

It is also in a silent moment that Said gives up on blowing an Israeli bus, and his eyes reveal his hesitation and further decision to go home. When Said and Khaled are going to Tel Aviv to complete their mission, Israeli soldiers unexpectedly appear, making it impossible for them to follow the original plan. Khaled returns to the headquarters of the so-called martyrs, while Said decides to continue alone his mission. When he gets to Israel, he looks down to the Israelis who are waiting at the bus stop, and a close up in his hand (which heads to the bomb detonator) indicates his objective. When the bus arrives, Said and the driver stare at each other in a silent dialogue, showing Said's resolution to explode that bus. Said then sees a little girl, who makes

him give up on getting on the bus that was full of civilians. All this information is transmitted in his expressions, as the sequence remains silent. An act which could be so violent is again represented with silence, and the character's thoughts, feelings and decisions are shared with the audience through the eyes.

The impossibility of concluding the mission as it was planned for the first time gives Said and Khaled an opportunity to reflect on suicide bombing. The following events make them question their decision and, while Said's decision becomes stronger, Khaled rethinks and gives up on the mission. Both characters in different places and circumstances are shown in front of a mirror, in crucial moments of discussion. When Said cannot find Khaled and the organization, a long shot in the toilet in which he sees the bomb trapped to his body shows him looking to the wall, with his eyes expressing his thoughts about his situation. In the next shot, he is facing himself in the mirror, and, different from the other sequences, he tries to convince himself out loud that suicide bombing is God's will, and the only way to resist in the Palestinian conflict. In this moment, he reveals his inner thoughts to an audience that now can follow his motivations to continue his mission, even if they do not agree with them. When he returns to the headquarters of the organization, it is Khaled's turn to face himself in the mirror. It is a moment in which it is possible to perceive him asking himself what he should do, even though he does not say a word.

When Said is left alone in Tel Aviv to conclude his mission, the audience is introduced to the other character's feelings towards his decision through their eyes in a silent sequence. The sequence presents a succession of reactions from the other characters, leading to a shot with Said inside the bus, ready to conclude his mission. First, Said's picture, taken in the beginning of the film, reveals a serious expression, with the same determination he has when he says goodbye to Khaled in the car. The

next shot shows Suha looking down to the picture, with a concerned expression and her eyes filled with tears. In this moment, she reflects her incapability of both having a relationship with Said and convincing him to resist to Israel in a peaceful way. Jumba in the next shot is looking to nowhere wondering about the success of the mission, as it also happens with Abu-Karem (Ashraf Barhoum). Said's mother is focused on the next shot, expressing concern (even though she does not know about the mission), as if she could sense what was happening. Khaled, the only one who actually knew Said's determination to carry on the operation, is presented crying. The silence in the sequence increases the tension of Said's act, and the different expressions show the different reactions to the operation.

The suicide bombing is not shown, and the audience can only imagine how it happened. When Said gets to an Israeli bus, his image among many young Israelis is zoomed in and it is slowly replaced by a close up to his eyes. The long silent image of his eyes invites the audience to read his thoughts and live few seconds of tension together with him. This time the bus is full of Israeli soldiers, so it is a better target than the first bus, which was full of civilians. The silent sequence presenting Said's eyes shows that the film gives the audience an opportunity to enter in his soul, or as the French DVD cover describes, to spend 24h in the mind of a "Palestine Kamikase"³. The white screen, followed by a dark one, suggests the blowing up of the bus, but nothing is really shown. The most violent act of the film, thus, is silenced, but the audience may imagine it.

³ In her notes, Nadia Yaquib points out that the French, Italian and Spanish posters refer to Said and Khaled as "Kamikazes", without acknowledging the differences between the Japanese Kamikazes and the Palestine, their contexts and their motivations. The U. S. poster, according to her, avoids such confrontation.

5. Final Remarks

With the analysis of *Paradise Now*, it is possible to see that film can indeed be source and agent of history. As it was demonstrated, in the film, the recurrent moments in which characters express their feelings and emotions through their eyes create an emotional bond between the audience and them, creating an empathy that ends up humanizing them. Instead of watching a terrorist with no emotions or feelings, the films present complex characters, human beings instead of live bombs. Violence, not graphically presented, is inscribed in their eyes, and silenced in everyday conversation. Even though *Paradise Now* is a narrative of two individuals, it reveals much about the Palestinian history as a whole, and how some issues concerning it are silenced, even in arts. By presenting a different perspective on the suicide bombers, the film questions the way we read the current events, and challenges us to look in the eyes of history to understand what lies behind complex matters as the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Silence, instead of being an indication of absence of something, is an indicative of a wound that still bleeds, but that is still painful and hard to talk about or to represent.

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