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## The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination

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## The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination

### Abstract

This is a book review of *The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination* by Greg Burris.

### Author Notes

Joseph W. Roberts is an Associate Professor of Politics and International Relations at Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island. Dr. Roberts serves as an editor of the *Journal of Political Science Education*. Dr. Roberts has been a Fulbright-Hayes Egypt Fellow (2011), an Alwaleed Fellow for Oman (National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, 2015-2016), and an NEH 'Islam in Asia' Fellow (Hawai'i 2017).

Burris, Greg. *The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019.

*The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination* is a rich and multifaceted work that significantly adds to the understanding of Palestinian identity through popular culture. It is an excellent examination of the Palestine question introduced eloquently and passionately through an analysis of contemporary media, with special attention given to film. The book is framed by Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, not only through the colonization of territory but also the attempted colonization of the Palestinian mind. This point is highlighted by an anecdote Burris relates of Ariel Sharon surveying an Israeli settlement that sat in the midst of the Gaza Strip. Sharon was asked if there "was any point to maintaining it. Sharon reportedly answered in the affirmative: 'I want the Arabs to see Jewish lights every night 500 meters from them'" (1). For Burris, this story forms the first intellectual foundation of the book – the situation is not just the colonization of territory but the attempted erasure of Palestinian identity. In *The Palestinian Idea: Film, Media, and the Radical Imagination*, Burris effectively argues that the Palestinian spirit persists, and even flourishes: "it is precisely through film and media that hope can occasionally emerge amidst hopelessness, emancipation amidst oppression, freedom amidst apartheid" (8).

For Burris, the Palestinian idea builds on the legacy of Edward Said. Said's Palestinian idea is a vision for the future of a democratic state in Palestine for Arabs and Jews based not on race or religion (18). To make this case, Burris provides a rich, nuanced, historical, and theoretically grounded analysis of both theatrical and documentary films from Palestine. Burris also discusses the new artistic, philosophical, and activist media generated in the name of Palestine including memes, poetry, and music. The Saidian Palestinian idea is not without its flaws and

Burris clearly places those flaws within a larger narrative of the struggle for freedom and equality. “When equality is relegated to the future, inequality is given free rein in the present” (19). Burris is a film and cultural theorist who studies race, media, and emancipatory politics. This nexus between US Black activism and Palestinian activism forms the second intellectual foundation of the book.

Chapter 2 opens with an apocryphal story of the quest to get the Palestinian film *Divine Intervention* (2002) by Elia Suleiman into the Best Foreign Language film category for the Oscars. The film was denied a place, despite numerous awards elsewhere, because Palestine “was not a recognized state. For AMPAS [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences] in late 2002, then, it would seem that Palestinian cinema did not actually exist” (33). The question of whether there is a Palestinian film industry is important because so much of our understandings of place comes from film. Scholars and society routinely use film, both documentary and fiction, to tell stories that show varied sides of complex issues. Burris carefully lays out a competing set of problems for the Palestinian film industry: place and idea. There is increasing international recognition of Palestinian cinema as a place but it is far from settled. In the Oscars, the Palestinian place shifted from the exclusion of *Divine Intervention* (2002), to *Paradise Now* (2005) being attributed to the Palestinian Territories, then to *Omar* (2013) finally being attributed to Palestine (34). The evolution from non-existent to Palestinian Territories to Palestine is an important part of his argument. The idea and recognition of place is plastic.

Burris argues that the subjects of Palestinian films reflect competing plasticity of Palestine, the occupation, and the people. By plastic, Burris builds on Catherine Malabou’s definition of plasticity as that which can receive form — “coincid[ing] with the traumatic imposition of identity from without, this is what I am calling the forces of Nakba” (57). Plasticity can also give form —

“correspond[ing] to the practices of self-identification, or the forces of the Intifada” (54). Finally, plasticity can also annihilate form— “destructive plasticity coincides with disidentification or revolutionary suicide. This is where we should locate the Palestinian idea, the scandalous supposition of equality amidst inequality” (54). Plasticity helps us to understand that processes of subject formation can be shaped by power and can, in turn, work to reshape that power. To demonstrate these correlative notions of plasticity, Burriss provides detailed analyses of several films including Annemarie Jacir’s feature films *Salt of This Sea* (2008) and *When I Saw You* (2012) in Chapter 3. Burriss argues that both films expand and articulate the fullness of this Palestinian idea. Burriss examines the cinematography and the story to outline a nuanced notion of Palestinian identity that changes with time and place. It is the everyday subtleties in film that form the foundation of identity.

In contrast, Burriss’ analysis of Mais Darwazah’s documentary *My Love Awaits Me by the Sea* (2013) opens the discussion in Chapter 4 about the changing nature of the Zionist political system and its impact on Palestinian identity. Here again, it is the nuances of the depictions on the screen that shape identity. Burriss notes that one of the subjects of the film declares the Zionist project to be over. As Burriss relates the story, the director in a discussion after a screening at the London Palestine Film Festival in 2014 was challenged about the scene being “premature and unrealistic.” Burriss notes that the director pushed back against it being unrealistic. Burriss concludes that the audience member and director had different conceptions of time. “The former conceptualized time in a Newtonian fashion as an objective, linear process, the latter treated in a subjective way — as a task, a project, or even a vision” (84). The director, and Burriss, conclude that the Zionist project is in flux. While the Zionist project has colonized space or time, it “has been unable to stamp out all traces of tomorrow inhabiting the interstices of today. Time is hollow,

and it can therefore also be bent in directions that run against the grain of Zionism” (85). In a teaching context, Darwazah’s documentary and Burris’ analysis of it would pair well with Gershom Gorenberg’s insightful book *The Unmaking of Israel* (2011). The documentary provides an important corresponding narrative to the book regarding the decline of Zionism.

Chapter 5 is, to me, the book’s center of gravity and most important chapter. The chapter focuses on how surveillance renders Arabs as aggressors, terrorists, or the enemy through Israeli control and deployment of these images. Surveillance for Burris is visibility. The images we get of Palestinians are when they are engaging in political violence or other behavior unacceptable to the state. The minutia of daily life is invisible because of real, material conditions. In contrast, the hypervisible extremes are shown repeatedly. Burris’ point is that the Orwellian nature of the surveillance state shapes how Palestinians are viewed in ways that cannot be escaped. The surveillance state only shows the negatives of the Palestinian cause. Moreover, the images of the Palestinians are really part of a larger settler-colonialist narrative. When we do see positive images, we see those of “‘good Arabs’ that are used to prove Israeli tolerance towards non-Jewish minorities ...” (103-104). We never witness of the richness of Palestinian identity through culture, society, or even the simple, daily joys of life. Palestinian films reflect this as well from *The Time that Remains* (2009) to *Paradise Now* (2005). Indeed, Burris’ discussion of the latter is particularly nuanced and is essential to any discussion of the film, especially in the classroom.

Burris uses films and media to show how Palestinian activists have been connecting the Black quest for equality and justice with their own. Seeing images of Martin Luther King, Jr. or motifs bearing sayings attributed to Black American activists (“I Have a Dream” among others) in Palestinian cinema is to draw connections between the two emancipatory movements. In the first chapter, Burris introduces the reader to *Fix ME* (dir. Raed Andoni, 2010) referring to the

Palestinian idea as “‘the big dream’ (*al-helem al-kabir*)” (18) to firmly connect the Black activist mindset with the Palestinian. Of course, there are hundreds of Palestinian social media activists who have also connected with Black groups to advance a global cause for equality. Chapter 6, entitled “Palestine in Black and White,” expands on the affinities between Palestinians and Black Americans against white racism. Both sides seek freedom from violence, oppression, poverty, and other mistreatments. Palestinian activists have found inspiration in the activities of the American civil rights movements, especially the Hands Up, Don’t Shoot and similar movement events that decry the racist infrastructures in the United States. Likewise, Black activists alighted with the Palestinian cause as well. Exploring these connections provides a richer and far more sophisticated look at both movements’ broader reach than is typical. Overall, Burriss rightly cautions the reader against reading too much into these disparate regional connections. As he says “Gaza is not Ferguson; the West Bank is not Watts; Baltimore is not Jerusalem” (138).

Burriss sees culture in very broad terms and runs full force into tearing down the traditional disciplinary silos of culture, politics, and media. For me, this is one of the strongest features of the book because it seems impossible to divorce these overlapping issues from one another. Politics is culture and culture is politics. Equally important, Burriss is not just analyzing film here (though he does include over 100 films); he also includes radio, internet video, and social media to make his points. The book is far more conclusive for this. The most notable omission in the book is a discussion of religious identity. In the Palestinian context this is difficult because there are two important religious groups within the community: Muslim and Christian. Burriss only mentions Islam in the context of the Black community in the United States. It is inconceivable that Burriss ignores the centrality of religion to those in the region (and the films that tell their stories). Why not discuss the centrality of religion and culture in a film like *Wedding in Galilee* (1987), religion

and political violence in *Paradise Now* (2005), or the juxtaposition of religion, culture, oppression, and violence that centers the documentary *Arna's Children* (2004)? Burris provides a thoughtful and compelling look at the notion of Palestinian identity and it is too bad that he overlooks religion.