Palestine on the Screen: Trauma and Ignored Voices

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Abstract
The Israeli-Palestinian conflicts can trace back to the Nakba in 1948 and are probably to continue at least in the near future, rendering the region invariably a turbulent land and a focus in the international society. For a long time in the past, the western media largely engaged in broadcasting news about these conflicts, while Palestine itself, as the colonised part, appeared much too silent in both international politics and mass media to be noticed. However, such a silent situation has been considerably changed in recent years, with the emergence of certain distinctive Palestinian films across various film festivals. Thanks to the accessibility of inexpensive camera equipment and international co-production, the indigenous filmmakers are able to document the region's collective memory as well as the ongoing repressions. These films, thus, can be regarded as the region's creative responses to the conflicts and as non-violent protests to the occupation. They, on the one hand, call for human rights, and, on the other, attempt to present the real Palestinian people and alter the impression around the region of being uncivilised. Moreover, these works share common stylistic features, such as documentary-like quality, handheld camerawork and discursive editing. Drawing on two recent, typical Palestinian films, *Five Broken Cameras* (2011) and *Ambulance* (2016), this paper examines the cinematic representations of the region and the people in response to the destructive ethno-nationalism, and the multiple roles of film as a media: witnessing the reality, re-enacting the traumatic moments, and voices calling for human rights.

Keywords: Palestinian; decolonization; documentary; trauma

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Introduction

Palestinian cinema is arguably exceptional in the field of post-colonial studies. It literally renders the term 'post-colonial' ambivalent, as the status quo of the nation is being colonized, where the earmarks of colonialism have been ongoing since the Nakba in 1948 to date. This continuity, to some extent, makes Palestinian cinema a rather dynamic, encouraging case of colonial cinema, as involves the history in the past, and the happenings of the present, and even the unpredictable changes in the future. Thus, the regional cinema has managed to keep refreshing despite the long period of time, and consequently, distinguish itself.

This uniqueness, on the other hand, not only depends on its current situation and possible changes but lies in pieces that are acknowledged to be essential to the Palestinian resistance. Through documenting the traumatic moments, or inspiring protests, these audio-visual texts prove that 'there is no necessary contradiction between aesthetic merit and political themes', because the two parts are intertwined (Said & Barsamian, 2003, p. 164). At the same time, these texts are closely associated with their social contexts, and often engage in topics such as race, gender, generation and trauma. Thus, films produced around Palestine, or in particular, the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, are undoubtedly resourceful in the enquiry of unfolding the psychology, ideology, politics, humanity, and other socio-economical properties of this unquiet, turbulent land.

The uniqueness of this regional cinema, however, does not seem to correlate with its popularity among scholars and critics. As Edward Said (2003) stated, various obstacles have led to a consistent lack of systematic studies on Palestinian cinema (pp. 1-2). Even to date, the absence is still apparent. Noted by Terri Ginsberg (2016), (prior to his work) only two book-length academic texts regarding Palestinian cinema have been published: *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, an anthology edited by Hamid Dabashi (2006); and *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma, Memory*, co-authored by Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi (2008). Thus, there arises an urgent calling for further research into Palestinian cinema, which would considerably enrich the post-colonial studies, as well as garner more attention to the parts of its populous that are in misery.

Based on the above premise, I will explore two recent Palestinian films: *Five Broken Cameras* (Emad Burnat & Guy Davidi, 2011), and *Ambulance* (Mohamed Jabaly, 2016), both of which have been screened at various international film festivals and have successfully inspired heated discussion and concerns. It is obvious that the two films share many similarities; these include being made out of raw footage, the participation of unprofessional filmmakers, a documentary-like quality, and testimonies from the frontline. Through a close reference to these two representational works, this essay will reflect upon how Palestinian filmmakers integrate reality into certain cinematic elements, recording everyday oppressions and struggles, and ultimately fostering an alteration of an international stereotype towards the Palestinian people.

The desire to be visible

The chronicle of Palestinian cinema can be traced back to over eighty years ago, when Ibrahim Hassan Sirhan made a 20-minute movie in 1935, thus marking the first Palestinian film made (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 11). Afterwards, Palestinian went through four periods: most of the historical resources for the first period (1935-48) has been lost; while the second period (1948-1967) is dubbed as the Epoch of Silence, as no films have been produced; for the third period (1968-82), most films were created in exile, and were closely attached to specific institutions (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, pp. 11-30). By comparison, the fourth period (1980 to date) appears particularly outstanding, and has two notable changes: first, the filmmakers have gradually shifted their subject matters from remembering the traumatic history to recording Palestinian life; second, owing to the development of digital technology, amateurs can now participate in low-budget filmmaking, by using their own small cameras (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, pp. 4, 34). This inadvertently contributed to the booming Palestinian cinema, and can be considered as prerequisites for the production of *Five Broken Cameras* and *Ambulance*.

Five Broken Cameras and *Ambulance* tell the actual life in the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip respectively. These are two places where oppressions are widespread, and where normal life has become nothing more than an illusion (Gugler, 2011, p. 28). *Five Broken Cameras* documents the protests against Israel's 'Wall' in Bil'in across five years. Israeli officials claim that the Wall is simply a 'seam-line obstacle', built for the purpose of protecting Israeli people and their property (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 169-70). However, as Yosefa Loshitzky (2006) argued, the Wall erects a boundary between the colonizer and the colonized (p. 334). It is, more directly, a solid, material embodiment of state ideology, which ironically contradicts the Israeli political rhetoric (Weizman, 2012, p. 253). *Ambulance* deals with the horrific siege in the Gaza Strip, during which ambulances functioned as a life-saving mechanism, transporting people from dangerous areas to shelters. Through the shaky, handheld cameras, the director also transports the viewers to the real, chaotic frontlines.

Indeed, the increasing amount of Palestinian films represents the desire to film and to document. Such desire does not only belong to professional filmmakers, but to everyone. Both *Five Broken Cameras* and *Ambulance* are filmed by untrained amateurs. Emad Burnat even said that he had never thought of making a film, but he felt a need to film the happenings. As such, filming the brutality, the oppression, and the protests has become an act of non-violent protest. That further explains why most Palestinian films take the form of documentary. The reality is more striking than fictitious stories. Cameras, for most Palestinian filmmakers, could be likened to a weapon used to fight against atrocity, rather than an outlet to fulfil personal creativity. As suggested by Nur Masalha (2012), Palestinians' struggle to publicize the truth is essential for protecting their rights and keeping the hope for peace and justice alive (p. 253).

Certainly, a variety of similarities can be detected through a comparison on these two films, both formally and substantively. Both straightforwardly record the reality, which is also prominently adopted by post-colonial filmmaking. Both are made on the basis of raw footage filmed by amateurs. Both include a massive amount of testimonies and illustrate collective trauma. Furthermore, both involve subjective

comments and emotional expressions from the perspective of the directors (also the narrators). These common characteristics shape the overall impression of Palestinian cinema, through associating itself with specific cinematic elements. However, I would argue that despite the similarities, these two pieces vary from each other in certain aspects, such as its rendering of people's inner feelings, the structuring the footages, and other equally distinct factors. As a whole, they provide two distinct approaches of presenting trauma and appealing to the audience. In the following sections, I shall focus on *Five Broken Cameras* and *Ambulance* respectively, and discuss the two approaches of voicing collective trauma, which has been often misrecognized and neglected.

Five Broken Cameras: The everyday and the trauma

Five Broken Cameras was jointly produced by Emad Burnat, a farmer who lives in Bil'in, and Guy Davidi, an Israeli who supported the protests in the village. Prior to their cooperation, Burnat had little intention to make a film, while Davidi, as a trained filmmaker, has an acute awareness of the power that could be generated through the camera lens. Subsequently, the protests connected them, with both individuals playing dual roles: as a part of the protests, as well as people who were slightly detached and recording the fighting. The cooperation between them turned out to be elaborate and efficient, as during the production they each contributed to the project in different ways. As a local resident, Burnat witnessed all the conflicts across the five years, and filmed most of the raw footage, establishing the foundation for the film with this core material. Seeing and recording is the power that Burnat prudently utilized in face of devastation and loss (Dworkin, 2012, p. 70). For Davidi, he made a creative attempt to construct the story out of the footage, and from Burnat's perspective. His editing produced a coherent and compelling narrative, allowing us to intimately follow the weekly demonstrations, with the camera being broken, one after another (Rogberg, 2012, p. 24).

The structure and the narrative render the work with a complex duality. A strong sense of 'being there' is generated through Burnat's camera. Viewers are placed in Burnat's position, or even being beside him. In another word, we see the events through Burnat's perspective, as well as experience his personal life. There is a combination of the traumatic moments and personal everydayness. These two parts intertwine and interact with each other, keeping spectators deeply involved in the story.

Indeed, what makes the storytelling more authentic is that how Burnat's voiceover narration presents him as a typical Palestinian dweller. As he explains, 'everyone is a farmer in Palestine', with engineers and doctors also having to farm, as they rely on the land to fulfil their consumption needs (Rogberg, 2012, p. 24). At the very beginning of the film, following the title 'five broken cameras' on the black background, the first sequence presents the landscapes and farming life in Bil'in. Accompanied by Burnat's nostalgic narration, imagery such as lush trees, fertile soil, a farmer ploughing the fields, and deer crossing the grassland, are collaged together to illustrate the inhabitant's reliance on the land, both physically and psychologically [Figure 1-4]. Then the conflicts come: Israeli plans to build a separation barrier in the middle of their land. similar sequences can be found throughout the film, continually reminding us of Israeli atrocity and the Palestinian people's sentiments for the land.

Here, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been simplified and crystallized, making it more poignant and understandable for the viewers. For farmers, the land is a fundamental condition for living. Occupying the land is thus tantamount with seizing their rights to survive.
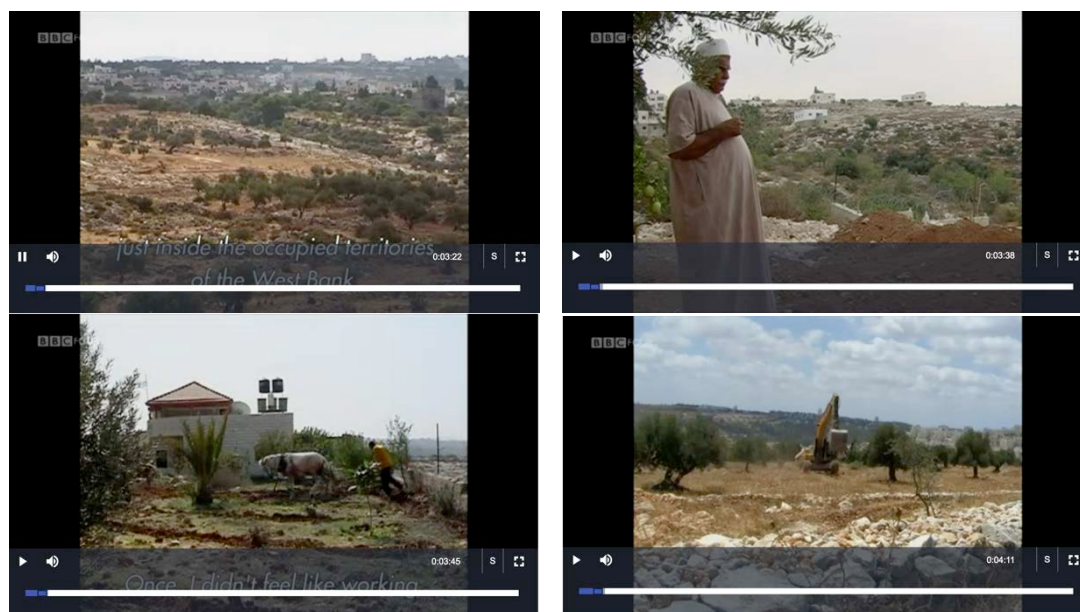

Figure 1-4: The landscapes in *Five Broken Cameras*

Those peaceful sequences rationalize Palestinian people's anger, without making the film excessively radical. The emphasis has been laid on the people's desire for normal life. Through these apparently simplified presentations, further ideological, political connotations is unfolded. As such, it can be seen that this is also an approach that Palestinian cinema uses in an attempt to confront the trauma; the depiction of a utopian, idyllic past, and juxtaposing it against the state of deportation and homelessness of the present (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 3). The normality of everyday life has thus been dissolved within the ongoing traumatic events.

Certainly, within the fighting for the collective interests, some individuals stand out. Most include Burnat's families and friends, who are carefully shaped through his cameras and voice-over narration. The first is an exceptionally charismatic, indefatigable group who are at the front of every march (Dworkin, 2012, p. 70). These individuals represent the core strengths within the protests, encouraging others to keep up and leading the team personally. They are not, however, portrayed as superheroes that save the whole village or turn the scale. Instead, they are simply ordinary people with a strong desire for justice. As Burnat notes, his brothers pay for what they have done, but they never give up. Among them is an individual named Adeeb Abu-Rahma, who got shot on his leg but returns to the resistance after recovery. Another is Phil, who was killed by Israeli soldiers in a messy demonstration. His death was the most heart-breaking moment in the film, as he was the only adult who carried hope and joy. In a way, Phil symbolized the hope, the most powerful motivation needed for further fighting. The significance is rendered through his sacrifice, making it the most tragic moment in the film, for both the Palestinian people and the audience.

A contrast might arise here, in terms of gender. While the male figures' courage impresses us, female figures seldom show up on the screen. The absence of female characters is constant in the demonstration scenes, and almost throughout the film. Burnat's wife Soraya is the only female that he focuses his camera on. The film depicts her as a laborious wife and an amiable mother, but with no interaction with the protests or the social circumstances. Thus, two distinct worlds are markedly divided, between the female and the male. The male take part into the outside world, while the females are restricted at home for most of the time. Only in one scene does the mother speak out regarding her real wishes and expresses her distress [Figure 5]. When Burnat is arrested for the second time in the film, Soraya makes the longest speech, in the hope of persuading his husband to stop filming and go back to the family. Nevertheless, Burnat does not respond to her, and joins in another demonstration shortly after. This can be defined as a moment when Burnat shows his masculinity as a responsible and brave man, but also serves a metaphor for the gender power in the Palestinian society.

Figure 5: Soraya is persuading Emad to stop filming in *Five Broken Cameras*

Gibreel, Burnat's youngest child, is also a central person in the film. When Gibreel was born, his father receives the first camera. It is partly Gibreel's birth that inspires the father to record the new life, and then subsequently to record the demonstration. Emad Burnat records a five-year protest, as well as a five-year period of Gibreel's growing up, during which we can easily obverse how the surroundings have gradually shaped or affected him. Near the end, when the family celebrates Gibreel's fifth birthday, marking the five years of resistance as well, his innocent smile has disappeared. When his father asks if he wants to go to the sea, the little boy is so indifferent and responses as 'leave me alone' [Figure 6]. After witnessing his father being arrested, and Phil's death, he has found the world to be confusing and disappointing. In addition, Gibreel represents the next generation, sparking Burnat's thoughts about future. From his viewpoint, he believes that the only protection he can offer is by allowing Gibreel to see everything with his own eyes. The problem, however, is how to remove the hatred, and anger on a psychological level, as this may last long after the conflicts have been resolved. Memories of trauma thus can be continually passed on, and transform young generations' understanding of the world.

Figure 6: Gibreel says 'leave me alone' in *Five Broken Cameras*

The film has attempted to document the lengthy resistance in Bil'in, and operates as a non-violent protest itself, thus raising attention and concerns. Another distinct achievement is how *Five Broken Cameras* has successfully altered the prejudice to Palestinians, to an extent. From the perspective of a local resident, the people are presented as normal beings, rather than terrorists or querulous victims. They are a people who have the ability to make something positive out of the catastrophe: through courage, love, intimacy, optimism and imperishable hope. On the whole, *Five Broken Cameras* lays bare the realities of the occupation, and more significantly, challenges the stereotype of a 'violent Palestinian', asserting the visibility and the humanity of the nation (Gils & Shwaikh, 2016, p. 451).

Ambulance: on the run, in the massacre

Dramatically different from the opening sequence of *Five Broken Cameras*, *Ambulance* starts with a striking sound of explosion accompanied violently shaky shots, after briefly illustrating the consequences of the disaster by data. Unlike *Five Broken Cameras*, no harmony or nostalgia can be sensed here. Instead, it is only fear that is consistent throughout the film. What is recorded in this piece is an intensive, ruthless 51-day-war, during which the people living in the Gaza Strip have no time for reactions or sentimentality. The filmmaker, Mohamed Jabaly, is never seen on screen, but his presence can hardly be ignored. We view the catastrophe from his perspective, and the whole film is rife with his personal narration. When Jabaly states his fear and anger in an incoherent manner, the same feeling is impressed upon the spectators.

Through this perilous journey, two visual modes are applied. The first is the raw hand-held footage from inside the ambulance, capturing the bomb explosions, the chaos in the hospital crowded with people seeking for shelters, and the blood and bodies at every corner, among others equally disturbing footage (Jabaly, 2018). The rushing ambulance renders the viewing experience as one on the run. Explosions are likely to happen everywhere without warning. Crowds of victims are waiting to be rescued. People do not really walk or talk, instead, they run, scream, and shout. These fast-paced chaotic situations do not allow viewers to sit at ease but keep the viewers on the run. Through such cinema-vérité-like quality, the film transports us to the frontline and makes us feel on a personal level regarding the massacre.

The second treatment is that of reflective moments, for both us and Jabaly, during which the time slows down or even stops (Jabaly, 2018). As one piece of his monologue says, 'the time disappeared'. It seems like a paradox that everything is so urgent that people scarcely have the space to think about time. All the ambulance crew wants to do is to save as many lives as they can, and they create a miracle. It takes the ambulance only ten minutes to rush into the ruins to rescue the injured, before returning to the hospital. On the other hand, the disaster distorts people's perception of time. Certain scenes are deliberately in slow motion, which is close to the instinctual real feeling that is experienced after witnessing something terrifying. The elongation of time symbolizes a blank mind with no space for thinking and reacting, and additionally foresees the post-traumatic stress disorder that would probably plague the Palestinians for a long time afterwards. Four times in the film Jabaly presses the camera shutter, freezing the tragical moments [Figure 7-10]. The rapid movements are paused three times in the scene where the ambulance crew rushes to the beach to save a boy's life. The three successive still images encapsulate the people's astonishment and panic. The injured little boy has lost his consciousness, shows no vitality, and is almost dead. By pressing the shutter, Jabaly freezes the time, and henceforth ingrains the traumatic scenes in his mind, which will not be erased and will recur from time to time.
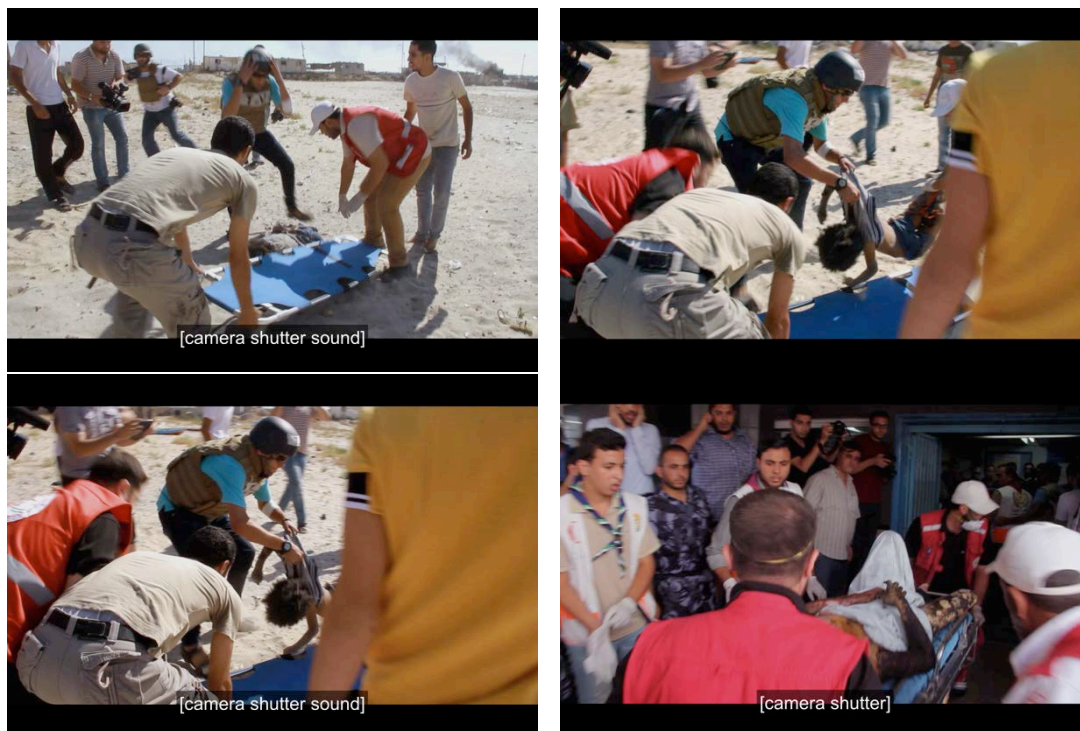

Figure 7-10: Moments in *Ambulance*

As such, the two modes above are combined to create a strong sense of being on the scene, along with contemplative moments, in which people would reflect on the influence of the war, the vulnerability of life, and so forth. In addition, the fusion of these visual elements recalls the traditions of video journalism and citizen journalism, which can also be used in the description of the film, apart from documentary. A video journalist is a person who combines the duties of the journalist, cinematographer and cutter, and work as a 'one-man team' (Wittke, 2005). This

indicates the multiple roles that Jabaly played during the production (though he did not do the editing himself). Citizen journalism refers to 'the act of a citizen, or a group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information' (Bowman & Willis, 2003). According to these definitions, Jabaly is arguably a video journalist and a citizen journalist, who uses the video as the medium, and speaks as a citizen.

Thus, besides recording the massacre, Jabaly closely interacts with victims as a journalist. Testimonies from various people are scattered throughout the film. They act as representatives, who experience the historical events and stand out both for themselves and for the collective. In the sequence at the Rafah border, women, men, children, the elderly and people of all ages are shown on the screen, complaining about the situation that has trapped them. Indeed, the presence of camera means something significant to these people in misery. It functions as an authoritative witness, and even an avenue to justice, to which people are willing to voice their anger, rage and accusations.

A collection of testimonies, moreover, establishes the image of Palestinian. As illustrated in the survey by Philo, Gilmour, Rust, Gaskell, Gilmour and West in 2003, the media, particularly the western media, broadcast the conflicts in Palestine as terrifying events 'but not the human inequities, the essential imbalance of the occupation, the day-to-day humiliations of the Palestinians' (p. 138). People's suffering on this land is scarcely discussed in the public media, while Palestinian terrorism is intensified and relatively exaggerated (Said, 1984, p. 30). As a member of the community, Jabaly is more reliable to the local people than any foreign journalists and is viewed as an ally standing at the victims' side. The way he conducts the interviews is rather distinct compared with traditional modes of interviews, which is partly equipped with the quality of 'stream of consciousness'. Instead of a large amount of conversations or otiose explanations, Jabaly allows the interviewees to voice what they really want to say, thus displaying the real mental state of Palestinians under the oppression, with little intervention. Even though some of the testimonies are merely complaints and condemnation, they are valuable attempts to be visible, to alter the facts that have been misunderstood for long.

Echoing the testimonies, the film largely deals with different spaces, including the inner space of ambulance, the domestic space of people's house, and the public space where most attacks happen. Through rapid transfers within them, nuanced connections are constructed. A similar occupational practice can be seen in *Five Broken Cameras* as well; when the army comes to Emad's house and tells him that it is a 'closed military zone', marking the disappearance of private spheres (Gils & Shwaikh, 2016, p. 451). In *Ambulance*, gunfire invades then destroys the private spheres [Figure 11]. Previous property owners would have to transfer themselves through the ambulance space in order to seek for shelters in the public space. This is a traumatic event, as the distinctions between different spaces are completely broken down. Beyond the destruction of lives and properties, the Israeli army further deprives of the populous of basic human rights and harms the nation on an ideological level.

Figure 11: Houses are destroyed in *Ambulance*

On the whole, *Ambulance* exposes the hidden atrocity in Palestinian to the outside world, from a local citizen's perspective. It offers a viewing experience on the run, during which the audience rushes to all directions together with the ambulance crew, directly faced with blood, dead bodies, ruins, explosions, and trapped in endless chaos and oppression, just like the Palestinians. The intersectional combination of both visual arts and journalism has turned out to be a powerful non-violent protest, voiced by first-person narration and ranges of testimonies, and voicing accusations of the ruthlessness of Zionism.

Conclusion

As aforementioned, *Five Broken Cameras* and *Ambulance* share several common characteristics of Palestinian cinema, while differing from each other in terms of presenting approaches. The former shows an interplay of everyday life and unflagging resistance, while the latter offers real scenes in the sanguinary conflicts and pieces of reflection. Arguably, Palestinian creativity has not dried up in spite of the prolonged occupation and the widespread indifference of the international society (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 53).

Both endings are rife with a sense of hope, no matter how cruel the reality is, or how tough their resistance will be. For the former, though five cameras have been broken, the sixth camera is still working, and more 'cameras' will be engaged into the silent yet powerful protests. For the latter, though houses have been destroyed by relentless bombings, there will be brilliant heroes rescuing victims out of the ruins, and there will be eternal sunshine driving away memories of misery. A series of beautiful moments is collected by the director to erase the bloodiness and violence (though superficially). In any case, the optimism about the future is a required, a 'should-be' attitude, used in order to continue the colonized's indefatigable fighting against colonialism.

Regardless, trauma can hardly fade away. According to Freud (1958), trauma is an unchanging, living event, involved into a repetitive stage, in which the traumatic memory would be activated again and again (pp. 243-58). For the present Palestinian, the ongoing tragedy serves as a reminder of the Nakba in 1948, where all the nightmares began. Trauma will keep coming back so long as the oppression

continues. Even if the colonization comes to an end someday, painful memories would probably be passed on to the next generations and remain in their minds. As Israeli human rights activist Jeff Halper (2010) analyzed, the only possible solution to overcome the oppression and achieve the integration, normalization and reconciliation in Palestine is that Israel itself decolonizes (pp. 205-22). This might sound hopeless yet is realistic. The Palestinians' battle for fairness and normality ahead is doomed to be long. Thus, at the moment, the recording of the history through cameras is certainly a profound, effective attempt. As Emad Burnat stated at the end of the film, 'forgotten wounds does not heal, so I film to heal.'

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Resources

Five Broken Cameras. Dir. Emad Burnat & Guy Davidi, Prod. Alegria Productions, Palestine & France, 2011. Main Cast: Emad Burnat (himself, narrator), Soraya Burnat (herself, wife of Emad), Gibreel Burnat (himself, son of Emad).

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