



Still from *Chic Point* (dir. Sharif Waked, Palestine, 2003)

Queering Palestine: Piercing Eytan Fox's Imagined Bubble with Sharif Waked's *Chic Point*

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The very nature of Palestinian daily life is queer. That is, if we utilize the word in the now anachronistic adjectival sense whereby the word *queer* describes a sense of strange(ness) or even the life of a stranger. The forced and unpredictable movement of individuals from the now depopulated Palestinian towns, villages, and holy sites into refugee camps and diasporas evidences the queering of modern Palestinian identity in this sense.

The emotion or impression that one is a perpetual stranger in one's birth land, without an inherent or stable representation of community identity, encourages one to cling vicariously to "the imagined."¹ In Fernando Pessoa's posthumous and factless autobiography, *The Book of Disquiet*, the poet's imagined reality becomes as heightened and true as his everyday life. The imagination, Pessoa believed, was the only guise by which a person could remain grounded.² Similarly, the possibility of a secure and collective Palestinian citizenship currently exists only in a fictive guise, as the

Camera Obscura 80, Volume 27, Number 2

DOI 10.1215/02705346-1597249 © 2012 by *Camera Obscura*

Published by Duke University Press

narrative of perpetual conflict continues to shadow any vision of what a peaceful reality might look like.

Thus it is increasingly difficult to speak of sexual politics without reference to grander institutional schemas. How does a sexual minority function, let alone exist, within this hierarchy? There is a coarse irony in that the most liberal visions of a so-called queer or LGBTI representation within the Arab world, or indeed, the Middle East, hail from the Israeli metropolis that is Tel Aviv. “The Bubble,” as it is popularly called, exists in effervescing isolation—an erogenous cityscape that bears architectural parallels with both Dubai and Miami. In Israeli filmmaker Eytan Fox’s 2006 feature film, *The Bubble* (Israel), the city is a cocoon devoid of the everyday narration of the Palestinian condition. In the film, the Tel Aviv characters inhabit a secular milieu, in which the tracks of imperialism are less important than the fashion ensembles of the fictional American personality Carrie Bradshaw of HBO’s *Sex and the City* (1998–2004).

My goal herein is to address the construction of male homosexuality in Fox’s *Bubble* in contrast with its presentation in the artist Sharif Waked’s short film, *Chic Point* (Palestine, 2003). Examining the tensions between Palestinian and Israeli masculinity and homosexual desire, I espouse a narrative about the dualities of representing Palestinian queerness.

Fox’s film revolves around three Israeli best friends—two gay men, Noam (Ohad Knoller) and Yali (Alon Friedman), and their female compatriot Lulu (Daniella Wircer). Their proverbial bubble is burst upon the entry of a young Palestinian man, Ashraf (Yousef Sweid), into the circle. Ashraf’s initiation into this world had been set in motion when Noam, a young Israeli reservist working at a checkpoint, locked eyes with Ashraf during a harrowing incident that found a Palestinian woman giving birth to a stillborn baby. Upon completion of his military service, Noam returns to his bohemian lifestyle only to be surprised by the arrival of the sexy Palestinian at his door. Ashraf has come to return Noam’s passport, which the soldier had conveniently left behind at the checkpoint.

At this point, Noam takes Ashraf up to the rooftop so that he may cast his eye over the city skyline. As Noam natters, Ashraf

boldly kisses him. When dawn breaks, we find Noam outstretched atop Ashraf. The dominant male, he is both the enemy and the caregiver of the subjugated Palestinian. Subsequently, Noam fashions a plot to allow his lover to integrate into the fabric of his life. He devises a false Jewish identity for Ashraf in Tel Aviv so that he may live his life freely as a gay man in a manner that would not be possible on the other side of the checkpoint in the West Bank.

In turn, by accepting a false Jewish identity, Ashraf foregoes his Palestinianness. Fox's film thus suggests that Palestinian homosexuality is tied to Israeli colonialism in that an openly gay identity cannot exist within a Palestinian male. This implication is borne out as Ashraf returns to his hometown when his Palestinian identity is at risk of being revealed. Back in Nablus, the young Palestinian man must partake in an arranged marriage. Yet before long Noam makes his way there under cover with the intent to "rescue" Ashraf from "giving up" his queer identity—an identity that the film suggests is perpetually at war with the Palestinian sociocultural tradition.

But figurative and literal roadblocks stand in the way of the star-crossed lovers. When Ashraf's soon-to-be brother-in-law catches him and his Israeli lover together, he lays down a political ultimatum. From this point, the film descends into the archetypal narrative associated with the Palestinian people. Ashraf becomes enlisted into a Hamas-led suicide attack, and the final image of the film finds the gay couple about to be blown up by the bomb strapped to Ashraf's body. Ultimately, the narrative of conflict subsumes all facets of Palestinian life and identity, forcing the gay Palestinian male to forgo his sexual identity for the greater cause of Palestinian militancy.

The Bubble is comparatively liberal in that the characters are pro-Palestinian; they hang out at "anti-occupation raves"—a hilarious notion. Yet Fox's narrative ultimately attributes the entirety of the Palestinian conflict to the issue of miscommunication. By structuring his plot as a dramatic thriller fueled by the protagonists' lack of access to information or knowledge (about how one character feels about the other), Fox reduces the complexity of his story to simple binaries of good and evil and implies a resolution

in romance. Ultimately, the film's closing images suggest that love between an Israeli man and a Palestinian man is doomed. This conclusion, it can be argued, is tantamount to writing off any hope for reconciliation. If both unconditional love and the camaraderie of a shared sexual identity cannot bridge the gap, then what will?

This complexity is dealt with explicitly in the seven-minute video *Chic Point* by the eminent Palestinian visual artist Waked. Subtitled "Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints," Waked's video reinvigorates the representation of queer Israeli/Palestinian identity by merging the terrifying experience of checkpoint humiliation with a form of performance art. Here, beautiful Palestinian and Israeli men with toned midriffs stroll along a catwalk to a thumping rhythm.³ The backdrop is black—an abyss that can simultaneously be interpreted as a gay sex dungeon and a hermetically sealed containment cell. As the video progresses, layers peel back to reveal a discomfuting state of social and political affairs.

The unifying visual device—exposed male flesh—is revealed with an irreverent nonchalance. The models wear robes (*jalabiyyas*), suits, and sportswear reconstructed to reveal the parts of the body that Israeli defense forces are accustomed to checking to ensure that a border crosser is free of any explosive device. Waked queers his subjects by fetishizing them and their ensembles. Fashion garments are cropped into such revealing items as crocheted tank tops akin to S/M fetish attire. The sexualization of the act of inspection is enhanced by the postures adopted by Waked's players. As the men gaze at the camera, lifting their shirts with taunting call-boy seduction, the artist shifts the video's focus; the silent second half of the work consists of a series of photographic stills from Gaza and the West Bank that evoke starkly violent counter-realities.

In these documentary interventions, Palestinian men from Jerusalem and Qalindia to Jenin and Gaza City are seen quarrelling with the Israeli state apparatus. Waked's video uses the body to unify these two distant spaces—the body is an object of surveillance and stimulation. It also functions as an allegorical figure that evokes the painful prodding of the Palestinian/Israeli landscape. This allegory reaches to assumptions surrounding Semitic male-

ness. In popular Arab culture, the stereotypical male is oafish, brutish, and tactile in equal measures—it is Mafioso-style masculinity. The Israeli state is built on similar conceptions. As Gil Z. Hochberg notes in a reading of *Chic Point*, a key organizing principle of Zionism was the remasculinization of Jewish national identity, a need to regenerate a Jewish masculinity and to redeem it from its historical ties to effeminacy.⁴

However, in Waked's video these notions are exposed in their fragility. The beautiful men are used in *Chic Point* to play with hermeneutics and to instigate desire within the viewer. By correlating desire with the capitalist mise-en-scène of a fashion runway and subsequently juxtaposing it with the hierarchies of power that charge Israeli checkpoints, Waked uses the male body as the border from which both the Palestinian and the Israeli man may be observed. Waked's volatile juxtaposition of masculine ecstasy with the climactic scenes of male humiliation differentiates his work from the startling use of stereotype in the finale of *The Bubble*.

This horrific shift in the narrative relays how the Palestinian male is more often than not consumed and degraded by the Israeli male—not unlike the Israeli/Palestinian relationship in *The Bubble*, in which the Palestinian male is fallible and in need of care. He is a passive sexual subject, unable to take full control of his (homo)sexuality or indeed to take his narrative trajectory into his own hands. However, Waked complicates this distribution of power by mixing Palestinian and Israeli models side by side on the same catwalk and thus subjecting them both to the same audience gaze. In the end, Waked's video is an unsettling parsing, more complex than the fated embrace that clinches Fox's film.

What's more, the exaggerated theatricality of Waked's video—the ebullient pink opening credits, androgynous clothing, and catwalk modality—boldly propels the work into the explicit terrain of “queer interest.” Like Marky Mark in the historic Calvin Klein ads of the 1990s, Waked has deployed the Semitic male with his olive-toned complexion and cultural draping in a critical work about the relationship between visual representation and differential male power (heteronormative or otherwise). With his

panoply of diverse male bodies, *Waked* imagines a queer visual representation that posits the sexualized Palestinian and Israeli side by side—indiscernible in their queerness to the desiring male.

Notes

1. Fadi Tofeili, “The Imagined,” *Portal 9*, no. 1 (2012): 1.
2. Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).
3. We can tell this mixed heritage from the names of the characters shown in the opening credits: Yigal, Danny, Oded, and Nir strut alongside Ashraf, Walid, Samir, and Saleh.
4. Gil Z. Hochberg, “‘Check Me Out’: Queer Encounters in Sharif Waked’s *Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints*,” *GLQ* 16 (2010): 588.

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