Palestinian director Elia Suleiman’s films blend fictionalized memoir, burlesque, formal experimentation, and pungent reflection on Mideast politics. A memorable sequence in *Divine Intervention: A Chronicle of Love and Pain* (2002) exemplifies the hybrid aesthetic. Near the end of the film, the character of ES (played by Suleiman himself) visits his sick father in hospital and then sits pensively in his car at a ramshackle Israeli checkpoint. These sad, quotidian scenes are followed by something drastically different. We cut to a desert plateau where Israeli soldiers perform a target-practice dance routine in the style of a Bollywood action film. Then a ninja clad in black leather appears from nowhere to wreak wire-fighting havoc; she hovers in mid-air and uses her keffiyeh to lassoo the commander’s machine gun. After this delirious interval, we return abruptly to ES, who is chopping onions in his dimly lit kitchen. A close-up shows his meager tears. Achieving a powerful effect of juxtaposition, Suleiman switches between mundanity and fantasy, introspection and exuberance, vignettes of personal distress and political cartoon. (Suleiman’s first feature, *Chronicle of a Disappearance* [1997] is divided into two parts: “Nazareth: Personal Diary” and “Jerusalem: Political Diary,” reflecting a similar interchange.)

Whereas the two previous films are set in the more-or-less-real present, Suleiman’s latest, *The Time That Remains: Chronicle of a Present Absentee*, has a historical span. The four main sections of this superb film are chronologically ordered. 1948: Nazareth surrenders to the Israeli army and is annexed. Fuad, ES’s father, repairs guns—an act for which he is denounced and, after a mock execution, beaten senseless by Israeli soldiers. 1970: among other sketches of family life, this long section includes a series of comic scenes in which Fuad tolerantly intervenes to prevent a drunken neighbor hurting himself. Meanwhile, ten-year-old ES is berated for talking about American imperialism in class. 1980: Fuad has heart trouble. Now it is ES who is denounced; he leaves the country to avoid arrest. The present: ES returns to care for his dying mother. He visits Ramallah and in a fantasy sequence pole-vaults the security wall.

Both *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *Divine Intervention* use text being written by ES—notable are the neat rows of sticky-note scene headings we see on his apartment walls in the latter film—as punctuating intertitles (“The day after,” “Father falls sick”). *The Time That Remains* dispenses with verbal signposting in favor of other narrative devices. We hear the mother’s letters being read out as introductions to the 1970 and 1980 sections. There is also a frame story. The film opens with ES getting into a taxi on a stormy night. He and the driver travel into an eerie no-place. The driver is alarmed: “Where are the kibbutzes? Did the earth swallow them up?” This episode resumes just before the coda to *The Time That Remains* and reminds viewers that this historical narrative is still a self-reflexive fiction even though it lacks some of the experimentalism of its predecessors.

ES is a complex character. In *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, he is at his most multifaceted. In one sequence in a darkened room he sits in a deskchair that is upholstered with the Palestinian flag before getting up to peer at a manikin: here he is alert, curious. Grim humor verges on slapstick later when armed police appear outside his window and then burst in. They rush around inside without seeming to notice the unperturbed ES. Shortly afterward, ES’s face contorts childishly as he eats spaghetti in close-up. This is straightforward physical comedy. More subtle is an earlier scene, in which he is due to give a lecture—“I’d like to introduce film director Elia Suleiman,” says the host, “back from his voluntary exile in New York.” When ES gets ready to speak the screech of microphone feedback and the sound of audience cell-phone chatter stop him before he can even begin. We never hear his words and ES’s silence is the most consistent character trait.
In *Divine Intervention*, ES manages to be an accidental action hero for a few moments. He eats an apricot while driving and then tosses the pit out of the window. The stone explodes like a bomb, destroying a tank at the roadside. But elsewhere in the film ES is, more typically, inert and inexpressive. He waits and watches; more than anything else, ES is a witness.

The comedy drains away almost altogether and the mood of melancholy intensifies in *The Time That Remains*. In the final section, ES enters a deserted restaurant. Suddenly he is grabbed from behind and we see an exchange of slaps with another man. Then they embrace: for this is an old friend (Jamal Daher, who sits next to ES outside The Holyland gift shop in *Chronicle of a Disappearance*).

The brief burst of ambivalent pantomime underlines how nonconfrontational ES is here, even by the standard of the previous films. The play-fighting and slow-motion pole-vaulting in *The Time That Remains* are significantly less combative acts than the tank incineration.

What should we make of ES’s restraint? Interviewed about *Divine Intervention* in September 2002, Suleiman referred to the Palestinian predicament in terms of “the paralysis that comes from the conscious or unconscious acknowledgment that the dominant force that rules over you can’t be shaken” (*Journal of Palestine Studies*, winter 2003, 70). Reticent and often frozen, ES nevertheless gives expression to an experience of powerlessness. And if he personifies detachment or even resignation, that does not mean that hope has been lost. After all, here is Elia Suleiman himself acting onscreen, assertively present in his own fiction. The characterization of ES and Suleiman’s performance of the role—which is the author’s public act of testimony, reflection, protest—thus constitutes an intervention and not a retreat.

Still, there is no getting away from the pathos that suffuses *The Time That Remains*. It is a more tonally even and harmonious film than either *Chronicle of a Disappearance* or *Divine Intervention* but its harmony is very much in a minor key. Starting with the title’s intimations of mortality, *The Time That Remains* sustains a mood of poignancy at the expense of much of the playfulness of the earlier features. Some scenes achieve tremendous intensity, particularly the mock execution of Fuad. He is one among a whole group of
letters she sent me from her visit to Amman. (It impressed her: letters, in,popped up again, but differently, and different pieces of the film. But then I never made that film and finally they letters in a box and I knew that one day I would use them for
I had even made a short film), and it had letters that my
I thought was going to be my first feature film (this was before Ozu; then I felt I could be at home with filmmaking.
I saw that the man whom I was always fascinated by, who is
Japan are actually like Arabs in Nazareth, or vice versa. Then

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which would become "archives," the images that come to my mind are a lot less

There's only one place in the world that I think the camera
can be put for a certain shot, and this is a total hallucinatory
position on my part. Then the cinematographer tells me:
"Elia, this is it, trust me, there is no other place."

Blindfolded prisoners (most of them forced onto their knees
in the quiet old orchard) whom Suleiman films in piercing
wide shots that accentuate their plight. Much later there is a
remarkable series of images framed by a window of ES's
mother sitting on her balcony. It is a sad and vivid portraiture

I met Suleiman at a famous London hotel on May 26,
2010, having heard him take part in a Q&A about The Time
That Remains at Tate Modern two days previously. I was es-
specially interested in asking him whether he acknowledged
the tonal and stylistic consolidation I detected. (For further
background, see another Journal of Palestine Studies inter-
view, winter 2000; an excellent article by Gary Indiana in the
January/February 2003 issue of Film Comment; and a pen-
etrating analysis by Bresheeth Haim, “A Symphony of Absence:

Rob White: The Time That Remains is dedicated to the memory of your
parents, and based on your family archive, including your mother’s letters,
which are read out during the film. Can you say something about this process
of research and its incorporation into the film?

Elia Suleiman: when you say “research” or when you say
“archives,” the images that come to my mind are a lot less
precise than this. The first script I tried to make, a version of
which would become Chronicle of a Disappearance, was very
interwoven, in the manner of Hou Hsiao-hsien. He was one
of the people who convinced me that it’s possible to make the
films I was thinking of making. It started with Ozu, in fact.
The first time I watched an Ozu film (during a New York
retrospective), suddenly it occurred to me that people in
Japan are actually like Arabs in Nazareth, or vice versa. Then
I saw that the man whom I was always fascinated by, who is
sitting idly in a garden, watching people passing by with a
certain alienation, is someone filmable. But I didn’t know
this was cinematic until I got the signature, the approval of,
Ozu. Then comes Hou Hsiao-hsien, who followed on from
Ozu; then I felt I could be at home with filmmaking.

So when I had never made a film, I wrote a script which
I thought was going to be my first feature film (this was before
I had even made a short film), and it had letters that my
mother was sending to me when I was in New York and in
London, where I lived for seven months when I was very
young. That script was my first incorporation. I had put the
letters in a box and I knew that one day I would use them for
a film. But then I never made that film and finally they
popped up again, but differently, and different pieces of the
letters, in The Time That Remains. But some of the words are
from letters she wrote to relatives in Amman and others from
letters she sent me from her visit to Amman. (It impressed her:
big houses, clean roads, an Arab city which had developed
without her knowledge.) So there’s a lack of precision about
this thing you call “archive” and it would put me in a much
more serious position to have to defend than to say simply that
if it rings true, that’s what is important, if the letters in the film
carry in them what could be the potential truth—that’s what
concerns me. The fact is of course that we never document
any memory, we never reproduce it, and especially when we
make films. I would say that initially what we very much want
to do is deviate from reality and metamorphose that reality
somewhere else. So it’s important to be significantly precise
about the lack of precision in whatever I do in my films.

As for my father: when I made Divine Intervention, he
had already passed away, but before—maybe ten or twelve
years ago—when he started to get very sick (he had cancer),
he had already told me many interesting stories. He was a
great storyteller, he had great punchlines. One day I asked
him to start to write because I wanted him also to forget. And
at the same time I was thinking I would need more than just
my memory if I was ever to do any of this. I have to say that
the pieces that fascinated me from his storytelling, and were
fascinating as potential narratives for film, were not neces-
sarily the ones that I got to be fascinated with when I became
mature enough to look at them cinematically.

Can you say more about Ozu’s influence?

It’s very difficult to answer such questions. I can tell you
only a certain vague memory of seeing Ozu and thinking,
“this is who I am,” but in fact every time I tried to imitate
him—and I shot a few scenes which are terribly Ozu-ish—it
ended up in the garbage. Every time I tried to imitate him, I
failed. Was he an inspiration or not? I’m sure he was, but now
I can’t even determine that. I watched also a lot of other film-
makers. But my fascination when I went to an Ozu film was
total helplessness. I had no muscles but to surrender to his im-
ages. I melted in the face of Ozu, almost like he was my dis-
coverer. When I saw Ozu, I thought: “if that’s what it is, then
I can make films.” I was more uptight (in a good way) and on
my toes when I was watching a Bresson movie. There was also
Wenders, Antonioni, but Ozu was the closest in terms of the
frame. When I frame I am obsessive, I am truly obsessive. To
the point of delaying a shot so the assistant director goes crazy.
There’s only one place in the world that I think the camera
can be put for a certain shot, and this is a total hallucinatory
position on my part. Then the cinematographer tells me:
“Elia, this is it, trust me, there is no other place.”

I would say that this new film has more coherent, integrated storytelling
—less fragmented, less experimental. Do you agree?

There are two ways to answer this. One is to say “no.”
Full stop. Another is to say, “I don’t know because I haven’t
made another film so I have no way to know.” And a third
DIVINE INTERVENTION

answer is a lot more complex—if I look critically, from a distance, at my work and how it progressed. Of course when I made my short film, *Homage by Assassination* [1992], you can find a lot of conceptual things in it. It is infested with references, Godardian to Anonionesque! Of course I did not have my own language intact. I had a sense of it, but whenever there was a lack of a poetic image, the concept always came in very handy—intellectual stutters et cetera. I say “Godardian,” in fact I mean “conceptual.” (I don’t pray to Godard every day! But he is such a genius, encompassing a lot of what can be done conceptually in film, and poetically of course.) But then slowly, slowly as I gained more secure ground in terms of my own self-expression, I started to abandon a lot of the inside-out filmmaking, throwing myself further and further into more risky ground; more and more into the emotional and into the poetic. I’m not attacking myself here. There are two faces to this: insecurity and maturity. The script notes in *Divine Intervention* were not at all out of lack of other alternatives.

Since I make personal films, this is part of my life, truly, my everyday life. If you come to my Paris apartment now, there are scene headings awaiting me for the next film. Let me tell you something about *Divine Intervention*. When I was writing the script, there was a more narrative script and in that narrative the father in this family gets sick and passes away. And of course it’s semi-biographical, but my father was not sick then. And it was traumatic for me when I then learned that he was sick and I had written it that way. So I abandoned the script. I felt guilty. I left Paris and went back and took care of my father. I stayed a long time in Nazareth. And in the film you see the slips on the wall again. That’s why in the film it says, “Father falls sick.” This is exactly what happened. I wrote him sick on the wall and he got sick. So I was faithful eventually to that moment. You are probably the first person ever to hear this story. It always skipped me to tell people, I don’t know why. This yellow slip was a very dramatic thing for me because of this prediction that my father was getting sick. So here we have different facets of the conceptual, not-the-conceptual, and where it comes from insecurity, and where it becomes secure.

At the Tate you described your appearances in your films as “striptease.” One must not overlook the complexity of the personal element of your films and also the fictionality. Of course one cannot avoid the recognition that you are there, and your parents are there, and your relationship to your parents is there. Yet ES is also a mysterious, silent, inaccessible figure; the personal is also impersonal perhaps. In any case, it’s not simply confessional. So in what way is *The Time That Remains* a personal film?

“Stripteasing” is also an emotion that you are giving, showing, expressing, that you want to share with a spectator. This character and this filmmaking are always on a borderline, even in what we call fiction. I am there slightly more than in a fiction. You are on a very thin rope here between what is fiction and what is not. In a way my presence is hyperreal (I’m not so sure, by the way, what is the antithesis of fiction) and in a way I am almost close to being myself. It goes to both extremes. It’s on the edge of fiction to the right and on the edge of fiction to the left. One is close to reality and one is close to something dreamlike.

There is also something to be said about the progression of this character, ES. Going back to *Homage by Assassination*, it’s interesting for me to see the character evolving—who, in the screen and out of the screen, he and I became. There’s an element of insecurity again: who it is that I wanted to be on the screen and who it is that I ended up being in *The Time That Remains*, what happened physically and spiritually to the character. I was a nice-looking guy in *Homage by Assassination*, who knew he had some kind of aura! I find that rather funny. I was so young. I never studied acting. It was a last-minute decision to be in front of the camera. But I had a feeling of what it meant. Anyway, there was something I could rely on—the physical as opposed to the conceptual. But then the confidence-building: who I am cinematically as a character also evolved and I would say that what you saw in *The Time That Remains* is the absolutely nothing-to-hide. So if you talk about stripteasing, then truly I became a real stripteaser only in *The Time That Remains*. I became more naked and without reserve. Here I’m not talking about my physicality, but the whole film. Yes it’s stripteasing when you relive your mother being in the hospital and it’s naked when you’re filming in your own bedroom where you’ve lived all your life. It’s stripteasing because you’re really showing every little intimate detail of your life in the movie. A lot of what you saw in *The Time That Remains* is really what it is: my parents’ house, my grandparents’ house, the neighborhood where I grew up. Maybe there’s no precise terminology, but the nakedness of it is an intention.

I think the character is like a ghost, a ghost of yourself, and that’s the nature of its fictitiousness. But also a ghost because what comes to the fore nakedly in the persona in this film, and in its title, is the sadness, the grief, the sense of trauma. This is also to do with the relative lack of jokes in *The Time That Remains*.

Yes. I have a tremendous strong attraction to gags. I’m wondering how I will relate to the burlesque in the future. I’m hoping that I will retrieve it. In *The Time That Remains*, I didn’t really know what determined the tonality of it exactly. I discovered that the film was sad, let’s say, in the first cut. I brought some of my associates, friends to watch the film and I saw tears dripping from someone and I was shocked. I said: “You are crying!” And she said: “Yes, it breaks my heart when
CHRONICLE OF A DISAPPEARANCE AND THE TIME THAT REMAINS

I see your mother on the balcony with the music” [ES plays a CD to his mother at one point]. I did not know the extent. I knew it gave me a little melancholy. I knew this is my mother on the screen who has passed away. And by the way it’s my aunt, her sister, who acts the role, because my mother passed away a couple of months before I started. And in fact I wrote the hospital scenes into the script. This was not the way the script originally progressed. There is a whole other part to the script because there was a finality that I could not but have to face, which is that my mother passed away. That is why the film ends that way. So this sadness is something I myself captured more or less (though there are plenty of funny things in the movie). Nonetheless I did not know that the tonality was actually burdened by that until it was finished, until it was shot and edited.

And I’m wondering now about the next film. I never have a full film in front of me, but I have an idea and this idea is attracting me and it’s not at all in that tonality. Well, actually that’s not correct. It has some of it, but it’s the reverse if you take the ratio of my intention (because I never know what the film is really going to be like until I finish it). There will be melancholy, but there’s a great attraction to very gaggy things—to things that I’m almost embarrassed to tell you! I’m so excited about scenes where I’m going to be so ridiculous to the point that I laugh when I think about how ridiculously I can portray myself.

The way you capture the everyday is important. In The Time That Remains, there is the scene in Ramallah: the street protest stops in order to let a woman with a buggy come through. But there is also the Kafkaesque, sinister everyday. You have talked about growing up in Nazareth: “People knew that if they wanted to be able to support their families or send their kids to school, they’d better keep their mouths shut. There were also lots of collaborators or informers around. So people lived in fear” [Journal of Palestine Studies, winter 2003, 67] — and this is strongly conveyed in the film; two denunciations occur. Will you say something about whether your quiet poetic economy in depicting the everyday is a form of resistance?

I could always tell you “yes.” In a similar fashion to when the sheriff and his deputies in a Western, when there’s a gang entering town, before they go out the door, they pick up the hanging shotguns and they leave. I could list what “resistance” means in cinema, just as simply as that: silence, for instance. It’s so easy to list, but one has to always announce them again because if they start to become just the guns that you pick up in order to go and fight the bad guys, then you just become another counter-aggressor, and so just to say “silence is a tool of resistance” is not sufficient at all. One has to redefine always. The fact that I have to put myself to the effort of redefining or rephrasing is necessary. It is necessary always to speak about why silence is a tool of resistance, and why humor is a tool of resistance. I’m always with the fear that I will institutionalize the terminology by uttering it. The fact is one can always also turn silence into a counter-resistance. But, yes, silence can destabilize a certain microcosm of power. And that is the poetic also. I have faith that the poetics do have a role in destabilizing poles of authority. There is no exact way to describe what it is I do in terms of the poetics. But as long as it is felt that way—and more of us that feel it that way.

In other words: what determines exactly if a scene I directed falls in the category of poetic? It is probably that few of us think that way. I don’t know of any other way to actually describe it. Which by the way reminds me of when someone asks me about the humor or the poetic in terms of “use of.” How can you make a use of? I don’t just open a cupboard and take a joke and throw it into the cinema. It’s not an anecdote. The poetic is a very undefined space. It’s an emotion that we feel when we are composing it or when we are receiving it. For the time being, this is a good description for what I’m calling the poetic. I don’t know. I’m always talking and then counter-arguing myself. Maybe there is a more precise wording for it. It’s not about intelligence. There is a sensation in the interior that evolves. This cosmos keeps rotating until a moment comes where you get a little sensation that this is it, and you decide to make this scene because you get a little euphoria. Instead of finding a center, you find the most decadecentered moment. You find the place where you are lost and it becomes the pleasure. But it’s difficult to announce it until you have it in front of you and the scene was shot and it was successful.

There are two components. One is faith and one is doubt. I can give you an example: exploding the tank in Divine Intervention. You know the amount of energy it takes to explode a tank? A whole army in France had to be engaged in that! It was a real explosion. So much plastic explosive. We burnt the forest! It’s obnoxious almost. This scene was in fact exactly in the script as it ended up. The father falls on the ground, ES drives along the highway eating the apricot, throws the pit out of the window, and the tank explodes. You really have to have a lot of faith to do a scene like that. It scares me when I talk to you to think if I could ever do this again. Now that I know it exists I’m happy that I don’t have to do it again! But you have to have so much faith that this moment will do something to a spectator—and at the same time have so much doubt that you keep coming back to yourself, that you make sure to yourself that you aren’t just being pompous or arrogant. There’s so much checking. You pull your hair going back and forth. Anyway this is how I work. Sometimes I see a director being so cynical about his spectators, so full of contempt, without any respect for spectators that he will shoot a scene that will cheat them.
There is one scene in *The Time That Remains* that stands out for me in relation to the poetic: the 1948 denunciation. Fuad is led into a walled orchard where blindfolded prisoners have been forced to kneel among the trees. It is very quiet: insects chirp, the wind blows. Before Fuad is interrogated and threatened at gunpoint, you cut between a close-up of his blindfolded face and a POVs shot—the low, old wall and the ancient landscape behind it which he would be seeing if he were not blindfolded. Can you say something about this scene, which seems to me to be poetic in its representation of an impossible viewpoint?

Yes, but he is seeing it. There’s a political sentiment that I have to insert into this. The fact is that this is Palestine that now is being, at this very moment, lost, and Fuad can see it and is saying at the same time farewell to it for the last time. That’s really what these images are saying. And then there’s the fadeout, the cut to black. But this cut to black is resisting and is almost a testimony to the fact that Palestine exists even if he doesn’t see it (but he’s seeing it at the same time). So it’s a complex reason why this image is there. I’m saying: even if he is blind, he can see. He can always refer to it in this theoretical fashion.

Is ES’s mother looking at the same time when she’s sitting on the balcony. Is she looking at a lost or imagined homeland?

No. There is absolutely the personal and individualistic sentiment of the older person who’s had enough. After my father passed away, my mother was living with this very, very intense personal solitude. It was not really happy especially, and this is what you are seeing on the balcony.

At times in your films, fantasy erupts into the fiction—most memorably the ninja-fighting sequence in *Divine Intervention*. It seems to me that fantasy is less prominent in *The Time That Remains*, but there is one notable exception, a scene in which ES pole-vaults the Israeli security wall. What does this sequence signify? It might seem like a fantasy of escape, of flight—an exit rather than the confrontation that occurs between the Palestinian ninja and the Israeli soldiers in *Divine Intervention*. Do you acknowledge any privileging of pathos over politics in *The Time That Remains*?

No, but there is no simple answer, and the complexity of my position is exemplified in this jump. Of course I am escaping, but in the narrative, it’s escape from the obscurity of the situation—from soldiers who start to dance, all the burlesque in Ramallah with the tank. In the narrative, the character cannot take it and so he’s just leaving. He escaped to Ramallah from Nazareth and the sadness of the situation. He then goes to Ramallah and finds it completely obscene and strange and burlesque, and he jumps over the wall because there is no exit. I think this duality between the personal and the political, and the burlesque and the antipolitical, is something that has been in all my films. All the time when I am speaking about politics, I am escaping it. So I am walking a thin rope.

But you mentioned something that is slightly painful. You said: as opposed to the ninja, I realize why it was painful. The ninja has all the potentiality to win a fight, and all the propaganda—flags, all that. So I played this game and I went almost to the extreme of the hero winning, only to find out that at the end of the ninja sequence, she disappears, she becomes an image. In fact she is an image only. She comes out of the target and she returns to the target. In fact nobody won anything. She did not come to earth to win and then leave us with a victory. For in the scene after, what do we have? It’s ES, completely impotent; he cannot even cry. He doesn’t even have the power to shed a tear. He cuts an onion to cry, which is the total other extreme. This is what I’m talking about! I put this very playful imagined hero that comes to save us from Israel, only to tell you after that ES is unable even to cry. So you have these two extremes, the personal and the political.

*The Time That Remains* is bookended by strange scenes in which ES is driven in a taxi around a no-place in torrential rain and darkness. The taxi driver cannot find any landmarks. Is this a landscape of despair?

The fact that I’m making a film in that landscape [in Israel] escapes a “yes” answer. The fact that I make a film is a sign of hope. Yes, it’s a landscape of despair, but if it’s truly despair, why do I make a film in it? I make films because I’m always hopeful that something will save such a place. And I say “such a place” because I am never just talking about despair in one place and not the despair of another. Because I think the despair exists here and it exists everywhere. I think this lobby [where the interview was occurring] is probably a quite theatrical image of the absolute magnitude of despair: for me, this is a place I cannot make a film in and make you laugh there, and a lot. I cannot make you laugh here. I hate that sort of despair that I experience when I cannot do anything about it. Here, if you want, is where hell can begin for me.

**Rob White** is editor of *Film Quarterly*.


**Abstract.** An interview with Palestinian director Elia Suleiman in which he discusses family history, the influence of Ozu and others, his films’ poetic qualities and their politics, with particular emphasis on *The Time That Remains*.

**Keywords.** Elia Suleiman, *The Time That Remains*, *Divine Intervention*, Chronicle of a Disappearance, Palestinian cinema.