

Writing the History of the Palestinian *Nakba* in *Return to Haifa*. From Novella to Militant Film

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Directed in 1982 and primarily screened to Western audiences, the film *Return to Haifa* is one of the first visual productions to show to the West a major episode of the Palestinian modern history, namely the expulsion of most of the Palestinian population from their homes by Zionist forces in 1948. This article examines the film of Kassem Hawal, an Iraqi filmmaker engaged in the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), as a medium that writes the history of the Palestinian *Nakba*. Reproducing on the screen Ghassan Kanafani's eponymous novella (published in 1969), the film borrows major features of the Palestinian author's visual style, specifically in the use of the narrators' points of view and in its depiction of the individual experiences lived by the novella's characters. Yet, far from being a mere adaptation, the film stands out in its representation of the collective experience of the *Nakba* by Palestinians. The predilection of Hawal for archival images is central to understand the film as a tentative to use the novella in a visual writing of the Palestinian history of 1948. The analysis of interactions between archival and fictional shots demonstrates that Hawal's film reflects on the types of images that are necessary to write this history. The analysis finally shows the cinematic suggestion of the need of impossible images to visualize the collective experience of Palestinians in 1948.

Introduction

Published in 1969, twenty-one years after the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes (*al-Nakba* in Arabic), *Returning to Haifa* is a novella written by the Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani¹. It narrates the return of a Palestinian couple to their home in Haifa in 1967, a home from which they had been expelled during the *Nakba* in 1948 and which had been occupied since then by a Polish Jewish family. In 1982, Palestinian filmmaker Kassem Hawal adapted the novella into a film shot in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. Although the novella's title suggests

¹The English translation of the film's title is *Return to Haifa* while the novella's translation is *Returning to Haifa*. The article follows this distinction.

the return home as a major event, most of the story is a remembrance of the events that led to the departure of Said and Safia from their home on April 24th, 1948. They return to Haifa right after the war in June 1967 to look for their missing son, Khaldoun, whom they had to leave behind in 1948 amidst the bombings of their home city and the attacks on the local population. The devastated Palestinian couple goes back to its home in Haifa and meets the new occupants: Miriam, the Israeli adoptive mother of their son, and later their son who has been renamed “Dov”. From the latter encounter starts a dialogue about the meaning of identity.

Compared to its relatively short period as a historical reference in the story, the day of expulsion from Haifa is nonetheless central, and “these visits [returning home] are sometimes an attempt to comprehend Al-Nakba” (Sa’di, 2002: 190). The journey our characters undertake in the diegesis can therefore be understood as a way of remembering this important event. The novella can be seen as “an attempt to give the Palestinian memory a new form of resistance rather than stressing a memory that languishes in the darkness of nostalgia.” (Al-Haj Mohammad; Meryan, 2020: 75) In this manner, the *Nakba* seems to be more than a mere background for a fictional plot. It is the central source to which the memory of Said and Safia goes back to when trying to justify to themselves what happened.

The symbolic importance of Hawal’s film resides in being “the first extended visual representation of the Palestinian experience of leaving Palestine in 1948” (Yaqub, 2018: 160). His interest in *Returning to Haifa* may be explained by his need to create a visual narrative of this major event. In addition, Hawal – and other filmmakers – waited many years before adapting *Returning to Haifa* to cinema. Ten years before Hawal, the Egyptian filmmaker Tawfiq Saleh adapted Kanafani’s novella *Men in the Sun* (1963) into the *The Dupes*, a Syrian production of 1972. *Men in the Sun*’s relates the tragedy of three Palestinian refugees who were expelled to Kuwait in 1948 and who died in their smuggling car on their way back to Palestine. Therefore, it is obvious that the *Nakba* is a topic of an extended visual representation for specific reasons.

If the representation of the *Nakba* in Kanafani’s novel is admittedly central to the memory of the two characters, his depiction of the events which occurred on April 14th, 1948, is an instance of his “journalistic style” (Hamdi, 2011: 37). In fact, Kanafani seems to offer more than the personal memories of Said and Safia and pays attention to the factual exactitude of events. According to T. Hamdi, the information reported by Zionist newspaper the *Jerusalem post* confirms that the Zionist attacks against the Palestinians of Haifa “forc[ed] them to flee by only open escape route – the sea” (Hamdi, 2011: 38). For the Palestinian critic Ihsan Abbas, the realism of Kanafani was not a reproduction of reality in a “documentary” way (Abbas, 1993: 12). If “History divests the lived past of its legitimacy” (Nora, 1996: 3), if the individual witness usually interrogates History as an epistemological category that demands to establish the veracity of sources, we can raise the question in this article about the ways in which a reflection on the history of the *Nakba* as a collective experience of Palestinian people is treated in Hawal’s film as an act of militant cinema.

Hawal’s Militant Visibilization of the Palestinian History of *Nakba*

In addition to his cinematographic creation in the 1970s, Kassem Hawal’s *Return to Haifa* is part of a Palestinian militant cinema that was defined as “an institutionalized, though modest film movement, operating within a national liberation movement of a stateless people.” (Yaqub, 2018: 1) Even though he refuses to be identified as an ideological filmmaker who serves a political goal, his work can be thought as a part of “the context of political cinema movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly [...] third world cinema

movements.” (Yaqub, 2018: 1) After fleeing Iraq for political reasons, Hawal met Kanafani in Beirut in 1970 and worked as a literary critic for *Al-Hadaf*, the journalistic tribune of the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which Kanafani was then presiding. This personal relationship between the two authors is determined by the problematic of representing Palestinian history that the militant Palestinian cinema tried to resolve.

Return to Haifa is institutionally identified as a production of *Al-Ard* (“The Land” in Arabic), the artistic organ of the PFLP. It thrived in making Palestinians visible and audible at a time where Zionist leaders, such as Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, affirmed that “it was not as though there was a Palestinian people and [Israelis] came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist.” (Waxman, 2006: 50) The treatment of the Palestinian *Nakba* endows Hawal’s film with a major merit of contributing to a debate about writing the history of the events of 1948 in Palestine. The Arabic word means “Catastrophe” or “Disaster” and describes the expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland in a series of events that started on 29 November 1947, when the UN announced the partition plan between Zionists and Arab Palestinians and ended on 14 May 1948 when the Zionist authorities announced the establishment of the State of Israel. The *Nakba* is a word that connotes the expulsion of Arabs from their homes and lands in Palestine. A historical debate emerged between the Zionist-Israeli and Palestinian-Arab narratives about the “departure” of Palestinians. Was it provoked by the mortal Zionist attacks and massacres or the appeals of Arab radios for Palestinians to leave their country? The two conflicting historical narratives are somehow sources of the present political situation and that’s why historians have been debating since 1948 on how to “rewrite” the history of Palestinian’s expulsion from their homes to rethink the relations between Palestinians and Israelis².

The enterprise of Hawal can be situated within the efforts of Palestinian historiography to produce a *visual counter-narrative* to the Zionist one. Since 1959, Palestinian major historian Walid Khalidi prepared the way for generations of researchers through his article “Why did the Palestinians leave?”. Through archival research, Khalidi debunks the myth according to which Palestinians were ordered to leave by Arab broadcasting channels and affirms that “the Zionist offensive which caused the Arab exodus was a mixture of psychological and terroristic warfare.” (Khalidi, 2005: 49) Further publications of other historians have not ceased to detail the massacres and the horrors that were endured by Palestinians in 1948³. However, the Palestinian narrative remained unheard and/or denied by the (pro-)Zionist historians, “alienating the public opinion in the West” (Masalha, 1992: 37). Given this situation, the cinematic production can be a powerful media to make the Palestinian voice hearable and visible in the West. As Franco-Lebanese intellectual Samir Kassir mentions in his commentary of the Israeli invasion of Beirut in the Summer 1982, Palestinian images in the press created “emotional recognition” among the Western readers: “Without erasing quite the emblematic figure of the terrorist, the image of the Palestinian is enriched, on this August 21, by the emotional dimension which determines, but in far greater proportions, the relationship of Westerners with Israel.” (Kassir, 1983: 20) Such an emotional dimension is also decisive in using the film as a medium to narrate the past.

² The bibliography on this topic is very rich. A major reference is ROGAN Eugene L., SHLAIM Avi, *The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

³ To mention but a few, one can refer to the works of the Irish historian Erskine Childers (1961), of Nafez Nazzal (1978), and of Israeli New historians such as Benny Morris (1988) and Ilan Pappé (2006).

Rewriting the history of 1948 becomes *writing the history of the Nakba* for the Palestinian cinema of 1970s, especially after the release of the American film *Exodus* in 1960 by Otto Preminger, which offers a Zionist point of view on this history (Yaqub, 2018: 157). The film's institutional militant background reflects an intellectual preoccupation of the PFLP and *Al-Ard*. After the Zionist invasion and the massacres of 1948, Kanafani witnessed "destruction of the Palestinian cities [which] left the Palestinians without any cultural reference and created a huge cultural vacuum." (Khoury, 2012: 259) That's why Kanafani assumed the responsibility of rehabilitating Palestinian culture. Given this intellectual and political engagement, the *Nakba* in Kanafani's work can be considered part of the Palestinian efforts to write history. As Edward Said has mentioned: "One of the features of a small non-European people is that it is not wealthy in documents, nor in histories, autobiographies, chronicles, and the like. This is true of the Palestinians, and it accounts for the lack of a major authoritative text on Palestinian history." (Said, 1992: xxxviii-xxxix) Kanafani insists on this disadvantaging perception of Palestinians as a people unable to speak and to narrate its experience. In his novella, he insists on the idea that Palestinians were considered inferior to the European Zionists. He writes: "They're saying to us, 'Help yourselves, look and see how much better we are than you, how much more developed. You should accept being our servants. You should admire us.'" (Kanafani, 2000: 151)

Hawal's cinema responds to this problem of lacking credibility in the Palestinian potential to narrate on the international level. If *Return to Haifa*'s language is Arabic, it was *directed* to a European audience, in addition to the Arabic one. In fact, the film premiered in Damascus, but it was also screened in Tunisia, Russia, Algeria, Libya, England (Yaqub, 2018: 161). It is because of the lack of documentation of their history that Hawal granted importance to the cinema as an engaged apparatus to accumulate historical knowledge. In this way, he demonstrates what the French historian Marc Ferro had written earlier: "for colonized people, historical knowledge depends on media" (Ferro, 1988: 158). The concept of "visibilization" is essential to understand *Return to Haifa* as a militant film that relies on media to affirm the Palestinian narrative of this tragic historical event they suffered. The term comes from the visual culture studies to reflect on marginalized groups who are victims of "social invisibility", a political situation that characterizes "individuals who are excluded from authorized visualities and majority visual discourses" (Arrivé, 2020: 1) and who wait for a process that makes them *seeable* by others (Arrivé, 2020: 4). More specifically, this invisibility is about "the condition that certain images do not appear in the media, certain names of the dead are not utterable, certain losses are not avowed as losses." (Butler, 2004: 38) Visibilization is about an active social construct, rather than a passive state of being. Cinema, as an art of taking and projecting images, is a place to visibilize these populations and more importantly, it is a material device which creates images of these groups.

Literary and Cinematic Points of View on Collective Experience of Nakba

The encounter of the book and the film seems evident when we consider that Kanafani's *oeuvre* is profoundly marked by a cinematographic style expressed in his "attention to the visual" (Yaqub, 2018: 36). This is expressed in his interest to the details of scenes, which make of his novellas an example of the ascendancy of "Marxist realism" (Khoury, 2012: 252). The film adapts the novella's fictional narrative that revolves around the couple and their son, but it also pays attention to Kanafani's depiction of the displacement of Palestinian people from Palestine. In fact, the individual fate of Said, Safia and their son as a family on that day of the

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Nakba is intertwined with the masses' movement in Kanafani's novella. This cinematographic realism of Kanafani is literally interpreted in Hawal's film on many levels in order to highlight the collective experience of fear and panic.

This first type of visual depictions of Kanafani can be seen in the interpretation of Safia's and Said's panic movement through the Palestinian masses leaving their homes to Haifa port. Kanafani's visual style uses the metaphors and comparisons to highlight this experience of panic during this day: "Like someone swimming against a torrent of water plummeting down a lofty mountain, Said forged ahead using his shoulders and forearms, his thighs, even his head." (Kanafani, 2000: 155) The narrator's point of view in the novella is dominant in almost all the depictions of the family as part of a Palestinian people. It is not the character who describes what she/he saw, but the narrator of the story. We can in fact notice that Kanafani chose an omniscient narrator, which gives an objective description of events (not distorted by the character's individual memories) and which puts the emphasis on the collective episode. It is therefore possible to say that in these individual-collective experiences, Kanafani seems to shed light more on the historical event rather than on the characters' memories. This hypothesis is confirmed when we look at Hawal's adaptation of the scene:



Figure 1a



Figure 1b

To evoke Safia's disoriented search of her husband Said while she left her son Khaldoun at home, Kanafani wrote: "She didn't remember exactly, but she knew that some staggering force rooted her to the ground, while the endless flow of people streamed by her and around her as though she were a tree surrounded by a flood of rushing water." (Kanafani, 2000: 157) The metaphor of the flow is reproduced in the film exactly as it was written. The omniscient narrator of the novella is translated in the bird's eye view: "it dwarfs the subject, which seems to be viewed with what may be omniscience, contempt, or superiority" (Grellet, 1996: 200). While the flow of people represents the crowd in both mediums, it is even more powerful in the film thanks to many factors. Watching Safia and Said trying to find their way against the current, represented by a disorganized, fast crowd, during a long scene which lasts 24 seconds and which is accompanied by the stressful, dramatic music, adds to the difficulties the main characters are facing (figures 1a and 1b). Moreover, the crowds' frenzy is heightened by the actors' participation, who are all refugees of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon for whom the participation in the filmmaking was an existential "meaningful experience for the Palestinians and Lebanese of North Lebanon" (Yaqub, 2018: 159). One last factor is the duration of those shots, thirteen seconds for Safia's movement and eleven seconds for Said's. The cinematographic time on the screen undoubtedly contributed to creating the masses as another character of the story, not less visible than the two individuals.

In this way, we can say that the novella and the film approach "social and historical problems [...] from below" (Ferro, 1988: 163) as in the historical films or in the films about history. The questions are analyzed "from the viewpoint of the masses"⁴ (163). Individuals' panic is part of a collective one: it is an individual-collective historical experience. It is the first technique used by Hawal to work on the collective experience of Palestinians from a different point of view than the subjective one of memory. However, if the film uses the previous images according to the novella's description, its work on the collective experience using archival images raises questions about how the filmmaker wants to visibilize the history of Palestinian people.

Duplication of archival and fictional images

Hawal's passion for archival images is here essential to understand the efforts of his militant cinema in writing a history that lacks visibility, especially in the Western World. These archival images are current events images of cinema or television borrowed from archival documents and inserted in a posterior non-fiction or fiction work (Maeck; Steinle, 2016: 13). *Return to Haifa* uses archival images that are inserted and integrated throughout the film. They are recognizable because of the "grainy aspect of the footage, damaged by time, the black and white images" (Fourest, 2012: 2). In the 1970s, Hawal showed interest in the archival images in the experimental film he made about September 1970, *The Hand (Al-Yad)* (Yakub, 2018: 94). Since they are retrieved from another source than the filmmaking process, the question here is how they are used by the filmmaker, and with which goal.

The introduction of archival images in *Return to Haifa*, was sometimes considered as a feature among others to contribute to an "ideological education" of Palestinians (Yaqub, 2018: 160). Images of three women running through the explosions, people escaping through the Haifa's port and leaving on boats appear among this category of images. However, these images raise the question on their function, as there are already fictional images that were made by the film to represent these events.

⁴ Marc Ferro uses the term "viewpoint" here in its political, not cinematographic, connotation.

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This is the case of two series of images that depict the masses fleeing the land of Haifa. The first set takes place at the opening scene of the film:



Figure 2a



Figure 2b

These two figures correspond to Kanafani's narrator point of view, expressed directly at the end of the first chapter when Said “[f]or the first time in twenty years [...] remembered what happened in minute detail” (Kanafani, 2000: 153):

Even though he could not concentrate on anything specific, he couldn't help but see how the throng of people thickened with every step. People were pouring from the side streets into the main street leading down to the port – men, women, children, empty handed or carrying a few small possessions, crying or being floated” (Kanafani, 2000: 155)

The fictional image and the archival one both show the thick throng of Palestinians leaving after the bombings of the city. The parallelism of these two categories of images is not random when we see in the same scene another parallelism:



Figures 3a, 3b

The archival shot of figure (3a) directly follows the shot of figure (2a). It is the transition towards the fictional image of figure (2b) that, after some aerial shots of the port, is followed by the figure (3b). These parallelisms show that the editing process of the fictional film respects an order in which the archival images prepare the fictional ones. If the film was mainly meant to ideologically educate Palestinians, then what is the point of inserting what looks to be redundant thematic images that duplicate the same point of view?

The montage is considered the main technique to conceive the director's intentions in making films about history: "The use of parallel montage, the alternation of sound and image give the narration a form which can be found only in cinema" (Ferro, 1988: 162). This duplication shows that the film parallelizes fictional shots *according to* the archival images as a way of attributing a referential historical value to the fictional shots. This may explain Hawal's work not only as representing history of *Nakba* but also as writing it: "In the end, this intertwining of the notions of history, documentary and fiction, the relationship they maintain between one another to create meaning and achieve a form of truth, is not as far from historiography as one may think". (Veray, 2003: 5)

If, for now, we gather that Hawal writes the history of the masses fleeing the country during the *Nakba* through his montage of archival shots, we still are not sure about the goals of this practice. Indeed, the previous analysis shows that Hawal wanted to maintain the fictional structure of the narrator's point of view as well as the couple's own representations of the collective experience, but they also demonstrate that Hawal's intention was in conserving their perception of historical reality as it is represented in the novella. However, the duplication of archival and fictional images seems to denote more significance when it comes to the insertion of archival images which do not translate, or not directly, passages from Kanafani's novella.

Palestinians in 1948: Visible But Still Invisible?

In the second set of shots, there is a change in the point of view of the narrator regarding the Palestinian throng's movement. An archival scene comes right after the fictional image of Safia, when, in a tense moment of the dialogue with their son Khaldoun, she starts remembering what happened. At the beginning of a very long scene of almost eight minutes, identified as the largest of the film and representing the exodus of Palestinians, Hawal inserts an archival scene filmed in a long tracking shot to the left: the shot shows a group of Palestinians who took refuge scattered on the beach and who are filmed from the side or against the light (like in figures 4a, 4b). The more the camera moves, the more organized the line of refugees becomes.

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Figures 4a, 4b, 4c

This scene is long (26 seconds), but the fast travelling does not allow us to see the movement of the people. This archival image is linked to a fictional one that films the departure of the Palestinians:



This full shot allows the spectator to see the movement of departure of Palestinians from a slight pan shot to the right for twenty seconds. Between the two images, Hawal superimposed the fictional image over the archival one but in a very fast way. The archival images do not fade away and, consequently, does not leave the time for the spectator to see that there will be a transition between the scenes:



The quick bridging of these two scenes suggests a continuity between the archival and fictional scenes, although the viewpoint between them is not identical. In addition, although the fictional scene lasts fifteen seconds and allows the spectator to observe the Palestinian exodus, it maintains some invisibility of the Palestinians despite their presence in the image. This scene shows that the shadowed faces and silhouettes (figures 4a, 4b, 4c) in the archival shots are subsequently followed by Palestinians who are filmed from behind.

Identifying the Palestinian faces in the crowd is almost impossible in the archival scene because of the speed of the camera, the lateral shots, and because of the materiality of the

archival film which blackens even more the already black color of original shots. In Hawal's fictional shots, we see the Palestinians leaving, from their back, without being able to see their faces. As we saw in the previous section of this article, Hawal seems to value the visual realism of Kanafani by a loyal interpretation of the characters' point of view in the novella. His duplication of the fictional shots by the archival ones enhances the visibility of the history of the Palestinian masses. According to this analysis, there is a paradox in the invisibility of these masses. The introduction of archival images seems to anonymize Palestinians and can autodestruct the project of visibilizing the Palestinian people's history of the Nakba. In addition, as I stated earlier, the participation of Palestinian Nakba survivors in making these shots is morally valuable for them and unquestionable for Hawal.

The shadowing of Palestinian faces seems to be an intentional creative act of Hawal, that we analyze as an essential component of the fictional shot. It starts to show the fleeing of Palestinians at the horizon before a small child pops out from behind the camera to cross its field. The long shot by the camera focalizes the spectator's attention on the far movement of women and men. That's why the appearance of the child confirms Hawal's will of not showing the Palestinians. The boy's face is also non-identifiable, despite his proximity to the camera. Although he crosses the camera's field laterally, he *makes sure* not to show his face.



The child's appearing is not without reminding us of *Handala*, the famous character of the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali. The in 1987 in London assassinated author said that his graphic character “was the arrow and the compass, pointing steadily towards Palestine. Not just Palestine in geographical terms, but Palestine in its humanitarian sense – the symbol of a just cause, whether it is located in Egypt, Vietnam or South Africa” (Masalha, 2012: 128). By refusing to show Palestinian faces, Hawal seems to affirm an ethical and political position on the type of images that should compose a history of their *Nakba*.

In all, Hawal's adaptation of Kanafani's novella puts the emphasis on a secondary character: the Palestinian people. Although represented as a disoriented crowd or as faceless individuals, they are at the heart of the work created by Hawal's editing, his intertwining of fictitious and archival images, and the time he allows the spectators to observe them and the aftereffects of this major historical event on them. Hawal's project is more than making Palestinian visible since they are at the center of the fictional narrative and the archival images. His project is about showing the limits of representing the feeling of loss.

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