Book Review

Palestine & Media Studies

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

Review by Rawia Inaim

While passing through the Allenby border crossing on one of my trips to Palestine, the soldier who was checking our papers looked at my sister who was five years old at the time, and said, in Hebrew, "you are very pretty." I did not know how to read the soldier's words and their implications on the hierarchical differences present in that moment. However, a reading that sees this interaction as an instance of the agent's rejection of her state's unjust reality is a reading stuck in the Imaginary realm in the Lacanian sense. In other words, in that instance, the agent was still enforcing the occupation, and we were still being occupied, the only change that might have occurred is that the agent humanized herself.[1] I was reminded of this interaction after reading Greg Burris's *The Palestinian Idea*. In the preface to his book, Burris recounts an anecdote describing Jaffa/ Yafa beach, where he spotted in a short period of time "an apparently secular couple taking a dog for a walk, some Muslim children flying kites, and an Orthodox Jewish family enjoying a picnic. I heard both Hebrew and Arabic, as well as the sound of bells ringing from a nearby church" (Burris 2019, xi). Burris sees this putatively idyllic scene of civility as evidence of the failure of the Zionist policy of separation (*hafrada*) – the same logic can also be extended to my anecdote – and an indication that

"the notion of one state in Palestine is not a future prospect; *it is a present condition*" (Burris 2019, p. xii).

Burris frames these scenes of the de-Zionization of Palestine and the revolution in the parable told and retold by Walter Benjamin and Ernest Bloch, respectively, a parable that suggests that the paradisal coming world will resemble our world today, yet will be marked by a slight difference that allows for the reconfiguration of the relationship between things. This is the crux of his idea of revolution, a revolution which does not require new acts of violence, destruction, genocide, and so on, but rather the recognition of the present instances of harmony and equality that can be seen through the cracks and fissures of the Zionist present. Building on this parable, Burris argues that "the Palestinian Idea" – the term he borrows from Edward Said and uses to denote the prospective state of equality among Palestinians and Israelis – is not to be deferred to the future, nor does it come about through the physical destruction of Israeli society and infrastructure, but rather one that can be uncovered today, in the current state of the conflict, through emphasizing the already present fractures in the Zionist present. In addition to the Jaffa Beach scene, Burris provides another example of cooperation between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians from Michael Khleifi's 1987 film, *Wedding in Galilee*, which Burris sees as an almost equalizing instance of cooperation that demonstrates briefly the possibility of the dissolution of the hierarchies between Palestinians and Israelis.

These examples provide the basis of the main argument in *The Palestinian Idea*, which aims to "catch a glimpse of this other place, this world that is concealed within our world…[where] utopia erupt[s] from dystopia…[and] *equality emerge[s] from inequality*" (Burris 2019, p.15). The main argument of *The Palestinian Idea* is that the de-Zionization of Palestine requires emphasizing the failures of the Zionist policies of separation, colonization, and ethnic cleansing, as well as the recognition of the presence and fundamental supposition of equality in Palestine. Burris further contends that the media has a radical emancipatory power, especially in the way they are used to represent and engage with fantasies, to materialize the fictitious and impossible, in order to shed light not only on the cracks in the hegemonic Zionist reality and the forms of equality already extant in Palestine, but also on their ability to depict a radical idea of the future.

The Palestinian Idea is comprised of a preface, an introduction, and six chapters that deal with issues of identity, temporality, surveillance, and solidarity politics. In the introduction, Burris discusses the media and its relation to the psychosocial extension of the occupation of Palestinian land and the effect it has on Palestinian minds in connection with Baruch Kimmerling's notion of "politicide." Politicide, as Burris explains, refers to "the endeavor of successive Israeli regimes to de–Palestinianize the Palestinians – that is, to deny their existence as a legitimate collective body, to destroy any sense of Palestinian unity, and erase the possibility of their self-determination" (Burris 2019, p.3). While recognizing the oppressive weaponization of media against Palestinians, Burris rejects the idea that politicide has succeeded in Palestine. He believes that "the Palestinians still retain the ability to dream – that is, to think beyond those colonizing lights, to transcend the suffocating universe of Zionism, and to challenge the coordinates of reality itself" (Burris 2019, p.4). Importantly, it is through film and media, as Burris argues, that we can materialize what is considered to be impossible in the Palestinian-

Israeli context. It is this focus on media, Palestinian films especially, that makes this book an important contribution to the field.

In chapter One, Burris differentiates his notion of the Palestinian idea from Said's take on the issue. While Said sees the "Palestinian Idea" as a state of equality between Palestinians and Israelis that we can hope to strive toward, Burris contends that "equality is already being enacted and mediated in Palestine, and it is this scandalous affirmation – this assertion of equality amidst inequality – that [he] call[s] "the Palestinian Idea" (Burris 2019, pp. 15-17). Burris draws on Rancière's presupposition of equality to develop this idea: rather than see collective struggles as reactions against inequality, Rancière argues that these struggles emerge as a verification of the presupposed de facto state of equality that is simultaneously transgressed upon by the aggressor (Burris 2019, pp.21). Burris extends Rancière's analysis by drawing on the Black Radical Tradition, in particular, Cedric Robinson's assertion that resistance in the context of slavery does not simply arise as a reaction to oppression, but also as an affirmation of pre-existing cultural, ethnic, and linguistic consciousness (Burris 2019, p.26). Finally, the last section of this chapter correctly recognizes the emancipatory potential of fantasy in materializing the presupposed state of equality in Palestine.

"Can a Palestinian cinema even be said to exist?" and "can the Palestinian even be said to exist?" are the central questions investigated in chapter two, "Plastic Palestine: Part One." The former question is explored in relation to whether there is such a thing as Palestinian films in light of the nearly inexistent Palestinian infrastructure for a film industry, the various citizenships that Palestinian film makers hold, and the controversial sources of funding used for these productions. The latter question, however, engages with Freud's decentralizing and opening up of Jewish identity in *Moses and Monotheism* to argue in a similar fashion that a Palestinian cannot exist because there is no fundamental Palestinian essence or rather "no ontological foundation to Palestinian identity" (Burris 2019, p.47). Instead, Burris engages with Catherine Malabou's idea of "plasticity" to argue that Palestinian cinema and identity are constantly formed by external and internal forces, as well as have the potential to destroy and reconfigure those very forms. Additionally, because of this absence of fixity, Burris argues that Palestinian cinema enjoys the ability to experiment with modes of production that disrupt the status quo – both politically and creatively. In the chapter that follows, Burris applies Malabou's idea to two films by the Palestinian film maker Annemarie Jacir namely, *The Salt of this Sea* and *When I saw You*. He demonstrates that while the former movie fails to enact all three components of Malabou's plasticity (formed through external and internal forces, as well as has the explosive potentiality), the latter succeeds in doing so.

In the fourth chapter, Burris shifts his analysis to the temporal dimension of Palestinian films, which enact what he terms as "Hollow Time" – a term he uses to denote the subjective manipulation and representation of time – in their materialization of fantasies and impossibilities in the Palestinian-Israeli context. He suggests that "just as the Palestinian Idea serves to annihilate our notion of identity, this scandalous presupposition of equality amidst inequality has the capacity to explode our understanding of time" (Burris 2019, p.85). He thus emphasizes the idea that any radical considerations of the present must also simultaneously take into consideration the already present traces of the future; here, he builds on C.L.R. James, as well as Ernst

Bloch.

In the fifth chapter titled "Equality under Surveillance," Burris returns to the issue of the construction of Palestinian identity and analyzes it as a product of the Israeli surveillance and various protest movements (Burris 2019, p.104), especially in relation to notions of power and representation. He proposes shifting our analysis of surveillance and spectacle from "visibility to *visuality*," and from "an axis of power–resistance" to "*an axis of equality-inequality*" (Burris 2019, 104). In other words, Burris moves away from the Foucauldian power–differentiation that arises in a situation of surveillance. Instead, he argues that because the power that arises can be appropriated and utilized by both the agent and the object of surveillance as Foucault suggests, in the context of Palestine, we should not necessarily focus on the oppressive effects of Israeli surveillance and Palestinian visibility, but rather think about Palestinian *visuality* or representation and how it can be utilized in materializing and giving force to the *Palestinian Idea*.

In "Palestine in Black and White," the final chapter of this book, Burris examines the relationship of expressions of transnational solidarity and Palestinian media. The radicality of such expressions, as Burris argues, can only be truly radical "insofar they escape the exclusive identitarianism of the settler-colonialist projects they contest. That is, they should be considered radical precisely insofar as they embody the Palestinian Idea" (Burris 2019, p.123). Additionally, Burris tracks the development of Black-Palestinian solidarity and how it is expressed through hip-hop, protest iconography, religious figures, cartoons, public performances, and so on. However, Burris questions the efficacy and radicality of expressions of transnational solidarity that are framed within the complexities of identification with *whiteness* and *blackness* in the U.S.

While Burris' book stands as a necessary contribution to Palestinian studies, *The Palestinian Idea* falls short of persuading the reader of its argument regarding the present utopia waiting to be uncovered. Moreover, this failure is the result of an inconsistent and selective application of the various theoretical approaches with which this book engages.

The first of such inadequate applications of theory is actually rooted in this book's fundamental attachment to the Benjamin-Bloch parable. As mentioned above, Burris correctly summarizes this parable's argument: the coming world will not require a complete and violent destruction of the present state of things, but rather a minor and radical element of transformation that has the potential to change the relationship between things as they are. However, this is only one component of the parable. As Jessica Whyte recalls, Bloch sees this radical element of displacement as being so difficult for humans to achieve that it is necessary for the Messiah to return and offer a divine intervention (Whyte 2010). Burris, however, omits this difficulty and near impossibility from Bloch's retelling of the parable. But what are the implications of this omission? Without recognizing the limitations of his insistence on what he sees as an extant state of equality in Palestine, in effect, what Burris leaves us with is an implicit suggestion that the solution in regard to the Palestinian-Israeli context requires a shift in perspective that turns away from the power imbalance, symbolic and systemic violence, land theft, and so on, that victimize the Palestinian population, and instead, focus on the instances of cooperation and collaboration between Palestinians and Israelis, and by doing so, he obfuscates and displaces Zionist settler colonialism. The issue here, however, is that the Palestinian involvement in such a state of cooperation and equality is

necessarily involuntary. This involuntary nature has been recognized by Jamil Khader in his reading of a Banksy painting depicting an Israeli soldier and Palestinian boy engaging in a pillow fight. Here, Khader argues that the "homosocial and intimate subtext of the pillow fight betrays the dialectic of involuntary participation and forced identification in such power games between persecutors and their victims" and goes even further to compare this painting to the logic of the forced soccer matches between Holocaust inmates and Nazi guards (Khader 2020, p.9). What is really baffling about this argument is that Israeli hasbara/ propaganda uses the same discourses of equality, tolerance, and inclusion to whitewash, conceal and obfuscate its genocidal, racist, and violent policies toward Palestinians. For example, Angela Davis has recognized and critiqued the "deceptive depictions" of gender and sexual equality and tolerance in Israel through the "practice of "pinkwashing" – the state's use of ostensible support for gender and sexual equality to dress up its occupation" (Davis 2012, p.182). Burris' task, then, is to demonstrate that his reading of what he sees as an extant state of equality can yield revolutionary and emancipatory consequences for Palestine when the same notion of equality is currently used by Israel to further Palestinian suffering and oppression.

This theoretical distortion is also evident in Burris' (mis)reading of Said's argument regarding "the Palestinian Idea." Burris frames Said's *Idea* as an enthusiastic welcoming of cooperation and coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis rooted in multiculturalism. He writes that Said "conceived the Palestinian Idea as 'a vision of the future" – one "based not on exclusivism and rejection, but upon coexistence, mutuality, sharing and vision'" (Burris 2019, p.17). However, Said insists that the *Idea* is a simultaneous acceptance of the reality that Palestinians and Israelis will have to live together and a firm rejection of Israeli and U.S. despotism. Said states that the message of the Palestinians, "as they understand and live it, is that, 'we will not go away, we will not submit to tyranny, we will resist, but we will do so in terms of a vision of the future – the Palestinian idea – based not on exclusivism and rejection, but upon coexistence, mutuality, sharing and vision'" (Said 1989, p.177).

Finally, Burris' *The Palestinian Idea* employs psychoanalytic theory to illuminate the relationship between fantasy and media in the Palestinian–Israeli context. He invokes the Lacanian Imaginary-Symbolic-Real triad and Freud's decentering of identity in *Moses and Monotheism* in his reading of Palestinian media but fails to apply the notion of fantasy to what he deems to be evidence of the existing enactment of equality in Palestine.

Throughout *The Palestinian Idea*, Burris reads scenes from Palestinian reality and media as evidence of the extant state of equality in Palestine. However, these readings emphasize a purely Imaginary (in the psychoanalytic sense) reading of these scenes. For example, the beach scene with which he opens the book aims to show that Arabs, Palestinians, and Jews can coexist and that Zionism (particularly, its effort to separate the two) has failed (Burris 2019, p.xi). Similarly, the scene from *Wedding in Galilee*, in which the soldiers and the Palestinians have to work together to get the sheep out of the minefield, allegedly demonstrates that "for a fleeting moment, their hierarchies and divisions begin to dissolve, and we see the traces of another reality, a reality not of colonization but of cooperation" (Burris 2019, p.xii). Or the scene from *Ticket to Jerusalem*, in which the protagonist projects the film onto the side of an occupied building, suggests that the onlooking settlers "are helpless" and unable to prevent the

Palestinians from momentarily stealing back their own land. Burris states, "it dissolves the Zionist stronghold on reality and brings the Palestinian community together in collective unity as they effectively perform a radical act of decolonization, temporarily disrupting the logic and status quo and reoccupying a Palestinian space located at the heart of the Old City" (Burris 2019, p.7).

It is tempting to celebrate how the first two examples prove that non-violent Palestinian-Israeli interactions can exist, while read the third as an example of true enactment of equality, but none of these examples have any significant effect on the symbolic and hierarchical orders present in all three scenes. In the first scene, Burris simply does not see the inherent systematic inequality that differentiates the status of Arabs/Jews/Palestinians on the beach in Israel: he falls into the Zionist attempts at washing over its racist and apartheid system with claims of democracy and the accommodation of all of Israel's citizens. In the second example, he sees this instance of cooperation as having a sort of an equalizing or neutralizing effect where both groups work together to achieve the same goal. However, cooperation or even kindness is an everyday occurrence between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians, but these occurrences have yet to undermine the power of the occupation in any significant way. Finally, in the third example, despite Burris' argument about the "Zionist stronghold on reality," Palestinians are still living the makeshift existence to which Israel has relegated them since the Nakba. Again, a psychoanalytic critique of Burris' examples would show that such rhetoric of the Imaginary proves unable to impact the symbolic order of the Palestinian-Israeli context.

Finally, Burris celebrates the emancipatory potential of fantasy.[2] However, one immediately recognizes that the notion of fantasy that he is working with in this book is relegated to a very limited and uncritical notion of fantasy: "fantasy" as in fictitious or not based in reality or the current state of things. However, fantasy is also a fundamental psychoanalytic concept that not only gives us a lens into the repressed, but also in what is desired. In the Freudian sense, a fantasy arises when a thought process bypasses the reality-principle, and therefore goes unchecked against reality (Freud 2008, pp. 4-8). However, this bypassing action occurs by the unconscious in an effort to pursue what is pleasurable and unpainful, and thus enables the subject to avoid pain and displeasure. Thus, as Burris states, fantasy is very much characterized by a sense of fiction; however, this fiction cannot be discussed in alienation from what it helps the subject to repress, as well as what it identifies as its desire. Slavoj Žizek also recognizes fantasy's ability to teach us how to desire in his *The Plague of Fantasies* (Žizek 2008, p. 7). To illustrate the importance of this psychoanalytic interpretation of fantasy, I will draw on an example of a fantasy that appears in a film that Burris studies in the second chapter of this book: Annemarie Jacir's *Salt of this Sea*. In this movie, the protagonist, Soraya, who is a Palestinian-American Brooklynite and a descendant of grandparents exiled as a result of the 1948 Nakba, returns to Palestine. At one point in the movie, Soraya is criticized by a character named Imad for her unrealistic romanticization and reduction of Palestine to "just oranges" – a reference here to the Palestinian orange groves of Haifa and Jaffa that were stolen by Israel in the Nakba – that makes her blind to the harsh realities of the occupation. As a result, a discussion of the implications of such *unchecked* versions of Palestine evoked by Soraya that appeal to a pre-catastrophic Palestine-Israel is needed to enhance, as well as complicate, Burris' discussion of how fantasy is used to

materialize "the Palestinian Idea." Hopefully, future studies can extend this discussion of fantasy to the utopian impulse that can help traverse the fantasy and guarantee freedom for all.

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1. I am indebted to Clint Burnham for this observation.
2. In her 1996 *States of Fantasy*, Jacqueline Rose correctly identifies the critical role of the Freudian notions of fantasy and desire in constituting group, ethical, and ideological attachments in relation to nation-building, especially in regard to Israel.

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