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Genre and tension blending across shifting borders: Elia Suleiman's *It Must Be Heaven*

It Must Be Heaven, released in 2019, is the fourth feature film from Palestinian director, Elia Suleiman. The film tells a meta-narrative of Elia Suleiman – played by himself – as he travels the world trying to pitch an upcoming film of his. It debuted in May of 2019 at the Cannes International Film Festival, winning the FIPRESCI Critics' Prize, given to exceptional international films to highlight and encourage underrepresented or new voices in world cinema. The jury was composed of eight critics from different countries, from the US and Israel to France and Bangladesh. *It Must Be Heaven* is a co-production between several production companies across Europe and the Middle East.

During production and upon debut, Suleiman's film is simultaneously the product and subject of international communities' speculation and context. The film's content, then, changes depending on the communities or audiences that interact with it. Audiences' varying interpretations of Suleiman's begin to shift as soon as they read the title: *It Must Be Heaven* in English is different than the original Arabic title, إن شئت كما في السماء, something closer to "If you wish, as if in Heaven." English-speaking audiences are put in a place of questioning what *must* be Heaven, a place of interpreting a fixed message, while Arabic-speakers are positioned as the subject of the title itself, bringing them directly into dialogue with the film.

Both titles are transfigured to have different, albeit still poetic and layered meanings, but it seems like the act of bringing audiences directly into dialogue with the film, making them

active watchers, is the aim of Suleiman, and he achieves this by incorporating a Protagonist (henceforth referred to in the paper as “Protagonist” to distinguish between Suleiman the director of the film and Suleiman the character) that barely speaks in this comedy that critics have described as droll, dry, and elusive. As the Protagonist travels from his hometown of Nazareth to Paris, New York, and back to Nazareth, the humor comes from episodes of visual absurdity and deadpan reactions within often uncomfortably long takes or wide shots that force the audience to sit with the situations in the film, shot by cinematographer Sofian El-Fani. These situations create space for Suleiman (and the audience, by extension) to ruminate on surveillance, policing, and authoritarian practices in different parts of the world. Rather than presenting Palestine only through direct images of violence or explicit political commentary, Suleiman transforms Palestinian circumstances into a way of life that isn’t completely detached from what the Protagonist encounters in other places or cultures.

This artistic endeavor, however, is already portrayed as having a different outcome based on the community when a French film producer tells the Protagonist that the film he’s trying to make isn’t “Palestinian enough” and that it could take place anywhere. He says this in spite of the studio allegedly being “for the Palestinian cause”. In this and several other scenarios, *It Must Be Heaven* becomes useful for thinking through questions of circulation, genre, and interpretation. Using Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of speech genres and dialogism alongside Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli’s ideas about public forms, *It Must Be Heaven* can be understood as a text whose meaning changes as it moves through different audiences, while still retaining a distinctly Palestinian point of departure, contrary to what the French film producer may think.

The circulation of *It Must Be Heaven* is an interesting one, as Palestinian national cinema, tending to elude Western audiences' theaters, typically finds a home in the international art cinema market, and Suleiman's film is no different, circulating through festival networks, arthouse theaters, streaming platforms, critics' circles, and university classrooms. This matters because circulation is never neutral. As Gaonkar and Povinelli argue, public forms generate publics through their movement; texts call communities into being as they circulate. Suleiman's film therefore does not encounter one audience but many. Palestinian viewers may recognize the film's understated references to dispossession, restricted mobility, and the exhaustion of representing suffering aligned with outsiders' ideas of Palestine. Arab audiences may read the film within a broader history of colonialism, exile, and regional authoritarianism. Western audiences may focus more heavily on its aesthetic style, reading it as a clever continuation of silent comedy traditions or as a universal meditation on modern absurdity. These differing perspectives create a tension between the film as specifically Palestinian and the film as broadly humanist. Some may praise Suleiman for making Palestine legible for outside audiences, while others may worry that the film and its circulation turns Palestinian struggle into digestible media to be consumed by those same audiences. This tension reveals how meaning is produced socially rather than residing inside the text alone.

Turning towards Bakhtin, the film's blending of genres, from political satire to road trip movie and silent film comedy, make his concept of speech genres helpful. He argues that genres are not rigid containers but historically developed forms of communication shaped by recurring situations and expectations. Suleiman works within this framework, as he calls back to classic film genres to then put them in conversation with political satire and absurdism. The nomadic Protagonist calls back to the road film, but his travels reveal repetition and similarities

everywhere, rather than new discoveries. Suleiman's borrowing of silent comedy through choreography and physical humor are used not just for slapstick comedy, but to glance at police militarization, surveillance, and bureaucratic absurdity.

Bakhtin also insists that every utterance responds to previous utterances and anticipates future responses. In that sense, *It Must Be Heaven* is deeply dialogic. It speaks to earlier traditions of Palestinian cinema, much of which has been shaped by documentary urgency, revolutionary struggle, or testimonial realism. Suleiman does not reject those traditions, but rather, he responds to them through a cinematic resistance, in which he replaces the expected images – checkpoints, rubble, tragedy – with contemporary conditions of everyday life in Nazareth.

Additionally, Bakhtin notes that even apparently monological works contain “dialogic overtones,” traces of argument with other voices. Suleiman's film is full of such overtones, as it argues with media stereotypes and the demand that Palestinian art always perform trauma. This is emphasized in moments like the American cab-driver's wide-eyed surprise at the fact that from his perspective was such a seemingly “normal” guy like the Protagonist was from Nazareth, Palestine and the French producer's assertion that the Protagonist's film pitch wasn't “Palestinian enough”.

As an event of narration, the film draws from several ideological and political fields. It emerges from the history of settler colonialism in Palestine, where mobility is consistently fraught and restricted. It also draws from broader globalization in which cities increasingly resemble one another through policing and cultural practices. The movement from Nazareth to Paris to New York initially suggests contrast – there's a long montage showcasing how people dress differently in Paris than in Nazareth – but the film gradually reveals continuity. There are

prevalent encounters with police and military in both Paris and New York, with the militarization even extending itself to the hands of everyday people in New York. The surveillance continues anywhere the Protagonist travels, as alluded to with his encounter with TSA. Nazareth then becomes the interpretive center from which these cities are viewed. Rather than treating Palestine as an exception, Suleiman suggests that issues visible there have become global.

The narrated events we follow in the movie, in turn, are episodic with a typically passive Protagonist. Suleiman moves through spaces, watches people, attempts to pitch a film, and encounters surreal scenes of social order breaking into absurdity. Through this slower pace and lack of apparent urgency, narrative action is placed onto observation. Suleiman asks viewers to notice gestures, routines, architecture, and public behavior through El-Fani's long and wide shots. Everyday scenes become strange once framed through the Protagonist's gaze. His character's near-silence intensifies this effect, as he does not explain the world, and viewers must confront it directly. Silence becomes a form of speech, as noted in Bakhtin's broader claim that meaning arises in relation rather than isolation helps here.

Silence in *It Must Be Heaven* also emphasizes the moments of loudness or verbal speech in regards to the main character. In the aforementioned taxi cab scene, the Protagonist's affirmation that he is from Nazareth is the only moment throughout the entire film in which audiences actually see and hear him speaking. The breaking of his silence has the effect of putting the audience in the mind of the taxi driver. Though we may not agree or understand his shock that one of his riders is Palestinian, the shock is expressed to the audience through the action of hearing the Protagonist speak. The sense of shock in regards to where Suleiman is from is touched on throughout the film, as seen in this scene as well as in the encounter with the well-known Mexican actor Gael García Bernal. In it, García Bernal is on the phone with

someone talking about his friend, Elia Suleiman when he expresses a sense of surprise or wonder when saying Suleiman isn't a "Palestinian from Israel, he's a Palestinian-Palestinian".

Calling to the idea of international cinema in shifting contexts, during the same phone conversation featuring García Bernal, the actor complains about Americans wanting him to star in a movie about the Mexican Revolution. He said he would decline the offer, as the Americans wanted the film to be in English to be more suited for American audiences. Though perhaps acceptable in the context of Hollywood, Mexican audiences would immediately read the proposed film as an inauthentic portrayal and betrayal of the story.

Likewise, *It Must Be Heaven* also transforms as it enters new contexts. In Europe, it may be received more strongly as a story of migration and the outsider's gaze upon metropolitan order. In the United States, it may resonate with debates around social issues like gun control and political tension. In academic contexts, the film becomes a text for discussing postcolonial aesthetics, transnational cinema, or the politics of genre. Suleiman posits academia as its own world even within international contexts, as seen when the Protagonist is interviewed as a guest speaker at a university in New York. None of these readings fully cancels the others, as circulation multiplies meaning, as alluded to by Gaonkar and Povinelli. *It Must Be Heaven* remains recognizably Suleiman's film, yet each new audience activates a different version of it. Even its genre is fluid, depending on who watches it.

Two scenes that come near the end of the film compliment each other to create a sense of hope amidst what could be interpreted as a pessimistic film due to the depiction of constant surveillance and militarization spread across the world. In the first, around 10 minutes before the film's close, the Protagonist goes to a New York tarot card reader who tells him that Palestine will one day be free, but neither he nor the Protagonist will live to see it. After this, the

Protagonist leaves the US and travels back to his hometown of Nazareth, where he goes to get a drink at a club filled with young people dancing and shouting along the lyrics of Lebanese artist Yuri Mrakadi's "Arabiyon Ana".

Taking these scenes as different events of narration within the larger context of the movie and putting them in conversation with one another reveals the optimism Suleiman puts into the film. The Palestinian struggle is one filled with tragedy that, according to the card reader, will go on for decades, but Suleiman chooses to turn the audience's gaze to a generation younger than him, singing joyously about an Arab sense of pride. This sense of endurance is the note that the film ends on and hopes audiences take away, which is perhaps why he refuses to remain trapped within the stereotypical representational boundaries often imposed on Palestinian art. Through deadpan humor, visual precision, and strategic silence, Suleiman constructs a film that has international appeal while still remaining directly aligned with its Palestinian origin. As Bakhtin's theories show how the film responds to prior discourses while anticipating new audiences, Gaonkar and Povinelli show how those audiences are formed through circulation itself.

Like the film's stylistic and narrative choices, the title of the film also leaves audiences with a sense of self-actualization that tells them the choice to be optimistic is left to their interpretation and the ways in which they interact with the film or its events. Regardless of where viewers come from, depending on where they look, the place they find themselves in has the potential to be Heaven, if they wish.

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