

How does Basma Alsharif introduce  
a new discourse to Palestinian Cinema  
by using Video Essays?

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Figure 1. Collage of *Our Small Houses* ( 1974) by Kassem Hawal

Source: *Our Small Houses* (1974)



Figure 2. Cover page of *O Persecuted* (2014) by Basma Alsharif

Source: *O Persecuted* (2014)

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

## JÜRİ VE ENSTİTÜ ONAYI

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# Abstract

Frustrations with the nationalist discourse seen in Palestinian cinema motivated the research in this study. This thesis took four videos of Palestinian filmmaker and artist Basma Alsharif and discussed that they belong to the video essay genre. The videos were: *We Began By Measuring Distance* (2009), *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011), *Farther than the Eye Can See* (2012), and *Home Movies Gaza* (2013). We proposed that Alsharif's video essays give space to an emerging post-colonial and post-structuralist approach to Palestinian filmmaking. This paper introduces that Basma Alsharif's films offer a new cinematic language, thus adding a new dimension to Palestinian cinema. Her films shift away from the dogmatic nationalist discourse to a more personal, subjective and self-reflexive one. It is suggested that Alsharif, through her video essays, opened up the potential to provide a different and unfamiliar approach to the audio-visual experience of Palestinians writing (visually) about the Palestinian struggle.

Keywords: Palestinian cinema, video essays, essay film, Basma Alsharif, Gaza.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Problem

My first encounter with the essay-film was during the final semester of my Master's studies at Anadolu University. Our documentary cinema professor assigned a video to the class and asked us to write a paper. The assigned film is a video essay called *Passing Drama* (1999) by Angela Melitopoulos. It tells the story of Melitopoulos's Greek family, and their traumatic displacement(s) that began as a result of the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922-1925, and the ripple effects it had decades later. The video 'writes' this historical event with an unusual set of audio-visual narratives and techniques that are deeply thoughtful, wittedly weaved together, subjectively constructed, self-reflexive, and capable of causing visceral, emotional and physical bodily effects on its viewers. The video was strange to say the least. It was hard to understand and to watch, shocking emotions would surface that needed plenty of brainworks to research and decipher. It challenged us, our knowledge, and the way we, as spectators, viewed cinema. It was interesting to watch a video that was composed in a way that demanded viewer's steady participation. I knew at that point that I would pursue this genre for the coming years.

The resemblances and intersections of the central issues in *Passing Drama* (1999) and the Palestinian struggle are striking: displacement, forced exile, atrocities, the longing for home, the yearning for justice and freedom. It made me realize that the potential this film form has in 'writing' about the 'Palestinian question' is vast. The video-essay as a genre situated between documentary and art has the potential to provide a different and unfamiliar approach to the audio-visual narration of Palestinians' writing (visually) about the Palestinian struggle.

The 1930s saw the start of Palestinian experimentation with filmmaking. However, researchers are still trying to find some of this archival material as it got lost or destroyed during the 1948 mass exodus of Palestinians. The *Nakba* (Arabic for catastrophe) of 1948 constitutes a turning point in Palestinian history, whereby the Zionist project takes over Palestine and establishes the Jewish state of Israel. The *Nakba* is a traumatic event in Palestinian history and

memory that culminated into the wiping out of more than 350 Palestinian villages and neighborhoods. More than 75% of the Palestinian population were forced out of their homes to become refugees in countries like Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and other Arab countries around the world. “The experience of exile, both on a personal level and as a national tragedy, overshadows everything else in the eyes of the *Nakba* generation living through it” (Kimberling and Migdal, 1993).

The 1967 war against Israel, called the *Naksa* (meaning defeat in Arabic) saw another turning point in Palestinian history and filmmaking. It is also considered a traumatic event in the modern history of the Arab nations, where the dream of “Arab unity” falls apart. Only after the 1967 *Naksa* that an official Palestinian cinema comes into existence and focuses on the advancement of the Palestinian struggle, created solely outside of Palestine’s borders in the diaspora. The films of that period are mostly in documentary style and are characterized by being critical of the enemy and to instigating the Palestinian and/or Arab viewer (Massad, 2006). The films of that period are nationalistic and militant working the Palestinian revolution towards liberation. These films are equally frustrating and sad. On the one hand, they carry clear messages of resistance and activism with the promise that things will change, that freedom will arrive, and that Palestine will be reclaimed. But watching them from a retrospective position tells us, on the other hand, there is the reality that we live in today, in the year 2019, and nothing has brought Palestinians any closer to liberation and remains instead a faraway dream. This nationalist vision remains as a mere naive sentiment of the past, and only survives in these propaganda films.

The distinction of the video essay genre from other film forms (documentary, feature, experimental) and the perspective it holds for a visual ‘writing’ of historical, political, even futuristic discourse, inspired me to explore this style in more depth and to search for video essays made about the Palestinian struggle. Initially, I came across non-Palestinian video essayists and filmmakers who created impactful works about Palestine, like Ursula Biemann’s *X-Mission* (2009) and Judy Price’s *White Oil* (2014). However, as the form derives its content from the personal *essai* (meaning ‘to try’ in French), I find it more pertinent to see Palestinians themselves write about their own history and narrative from the vantage point of having lived through it themselves.

While I have not lived through these wars, the oral history passed down through the generations makes it so we, as Palestinians, live a collective trauma relative to the past, and we live the collective trauma and humiliation of our daily realities under occupation in the present. It is that reason I became more interested in finding Palestinian filmmakers and artists who visually ‘write’ about Palestine and their Palestinian-ness, and it is through this search that I discovered Palestinian filmmaker and artist Basma Alsharif.

I first came across her work *O, persecuted* (2014) and felt it accurately matched and reflected my thoughts and frustrations with the nationalist discourse seen in Palestinian cinema and Palestinian national discourse more generally. In *O, Persecuted*, Alsharif contrasts the Palestinian national movement’s romantic vision of the past with the present day reality. She is assigned to deal with the propaganda film *Our Small Houses* (1974) by Kassem Hawal who was commissioned to produce this film by the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Alsharif chooses parts of Hawal’s film and conceals it by a soundtrack that resembles the sounds of war. She then shows herself spreading black paint over a screen projecting the film *Our Small Houses*. The film is played in reverse giving the impression that Alsharif is digging out the film which then shows a montage of Israeli nightclub commercials, featuring women at parties dressed in bikinis dancing to electronic music. Here she tries to describe that despite this propaganda nationalist discourse lecturing the Zionist army of burning down our houses and livelihoods, that we and they are so beyond that narrative and Israelis are instead living a denial while enjoying nightclubs and the weather. The archival parts of Hawal’s film that Alsharif uses in the video is sped up. When asked why she chose to speed up that section in the film, a supposed “artifact of the past” Valluri (2016), she answers, “I feel it has more to do with a current impatience with that material, the desire to deal with it swiftly so as to not ... have to deal with it anymore” (Alsharif, 2016). Alsharif thinks that despite a huge effort to restore these films, they should instead be buried, “a lot of those films are propaganda and for me, the way they speak is problematic. I wanted it to seem like I’m taking a corpse out of the ground, we’re digging up this thing that says, ‘Look, we were so great!’ But we weren’t ... if we were, we’d be free” (Alsharif, 2017).

After watching *O persecuted*, I explored Alsharif's other works like, *Everywhere was the Same* (2007), *We Began By Measuring Distance* (2009), *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011), *Ouroboros* (2017), among a myriad of other art installations, films, and videos. I am astonished to see the level of like-mindedness between us having lived through similar realities. Both of us are granddaughters of the *Nakba* generation, both of us have spent most of our lives in exile out of Palestine, and share a similar affinity and criticism to the concept of 'homeland'. I find Basma a mirror of myself, asking the same questions, reflecting on the same issues: not only of how we think about Palestine, but also about its history and its interconnectedness, as well as its multi-layered and non-linear dimensions. We can no longer live in the patriotic dream of liberation, and our generation is in the precarious position and luxury of asking questions to those who rule us and negotiate on our behalf.

As a Palestinian myself and emerging from the position that Palestinian cinema needs to reconsider the model of filmmaking, I am motivated to bring the essay film genre forward in practice and discourse in Palestinian cinema. This thesis investigates Palestinian cinema by analyzing Palestinian filmmaker and artist Basma Alsharif's videos, and places a selection of her films as video-essays. This paper asks "how does Basma Alsharif bring a new discourse to Palestinian filmmaking by using video essays?" To answer this question, we use four of her videos as a basis of analysis and are proposed as video-essays: *We Began by Measuring Distance* (2009), *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011), *Farther than the Eye Can See* (2012), and *Home Movies Gaza* (2013). To reaffirm Ursula Biemann's position, it is argued that video-essays are a suitable genre to "bring fragments into a loose assemblage of topics that can be narrated and commented on without having to argue for a particular position, which documentaries often do. Postcolonial artists have been very good video-makers for this reason, their past is a splintered reality" (Biemann, 2019). This thesis argues that Alsharif uses the video essay genre to (re)write and (re)consider representations and projections of the Palestinian image within audio-visual productions.

The first section of this thesis comprises the literature review which delves into the historical and contemporary background of Palestinian cinema in its four phases, the transition

from national to experimental cinema, as well as the literature encompassing the essay film/video-essay genre. The second section comprises the findings and discussion. The findings present an analysis of Alsharif's videos using Phillip Lopate's 'five qualities' for defining video-essays, while the discussion highlights thematic, technical, and critical aspects of the analyzed videos relating to the research question, how does Basma Alsharif bring a new discourse to Palestinian filmmaking by using video essays? The thesis asks: are Basma Alsharif's videos considered video-essays according to the five qualities of Phillip Lopate and other theorists? Can we, through the video-essay approach, understand the Palestinian 'question' with a totally new language of filmmaking, where text and visuals interweave to enfold information, unfold unexpected discourse, creating new meanings, new fantasies, and cause visceral and bodily effects? Does the video-essay approach diversify Palestinian cinema and contribute to moving away from nationalist discourse into a more individualistic video (essayistic) activism?

A final note on structure: this paper uses terms like 'Palestinian cinema', 'Palestinian filmmaking', 'audio-visual production' interchangeably. The same applies to 'essay film' and 'video-essay'. When using 'Palestinian filmmaking', it suggests films and videos produced by artists and filmmakers of Palestinian origin.

## 1.2 Goal

The larger goal is to introduce the video-essay genre as a potentially new discourse to Palestinian filmmaking. The main aim of this thesis is to draw on the importance of the video-essay practice in Palestinian filmmaking which offers a different model for an audio-visual practice and takes an alternative approach to representation of 'Palestinianess' altogether. Drawing upon the works of Palestinian filmmaker and artist Basma Alsharif as the primary example to analyse and reflect upon, we ask whether she gives Palestinian filmmaking the opportunity to embrace video-essays as an alternative practice to the existing way of self-representation.

### 1.3 Importance

This study is important because it sheds light on video-essays as a practice which challenges former ways of representation by making radical diversions, transgressions, unexpected ways of narration. Video essays not only question critical thinking, but question the very act of thinking itself, of shaping memory, and finally in the way it unfolds into new meanings and understandings, that are relevant to Palestinian filmmaking practices. The video-essay genre is situated between documentary and art (Biemann, 2003). It opens up the potential for the production of thoughtful and highly innovative videos, especially suited to address post-structuralist and post-colonial perspectives. In discussing video-essays in relation to Palestinian filmmaking, we can refer to Biemann (2003) as she states, “[t]here are good reasons why postcolonial artists are such outstanding essayists. Their videos raise the question of how an increasingly ambivalent experience of place, nation, and belonging lived by so many cultural producers today has prompted them to develop an artistic language that corresponds to the essayists voice, a voice that speaks from a position of placelessness.”

Finally, while researching this paper, there have not been any academic studies into Palestinian essay films. Therefore, I believe this thesis is unique and useful to contribute to and create the relationship for future academic discourses on the subject of video-essays and Palestine. By defining the video-essay practice and setting the criteria for its analysis, it makes this genre more approachable, and thus contributes to advancing the agenda of Palestinian filmmaking and encouraging more essayist Palestinian videos to be produced. This study is unique because it takes the essay film/video as a paradigm among Palestinian experimental filmmaking, and particularly discusses it through the works of Palestinian filmmaker/artist Basma Alsharif. While researching this paper, there have not been any academic studies of Palestinian essay films. I believe this medium can add value to film and video discourses related to Palestinian films and filmmaking.

## 1.4 Assumptions

1. The videos of Basma Alsharif which are chosen for this thesis are related to the video essay genre.
2. The video essays of Basma Alsharif testify to creating a new language in Palestinian filmmaking.
3. The video essay genre as used by Basma Alsharif diversifies Palestinian cinema and contributes to moving away from nationalist discourse into a more individualistic video (essayist) activism.

## 1.5 Delimitations

This study is limited to the video essay practice, with a particular focus on Palestinian filmmaker and artist Basma Alsharif and four of her videos: *We Began By Measuring Distance* (2009), *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011), *Farther than the Eye Can See* (2012), and *Home Movies Gaza* (2013). These works are chosen for analysis using the ‘five qualities’ set Phillip Lopate in his essay: *In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film* (1992). Out of 12 video works of Basma Alsharif, these four videos are chosen for the following reasons:

- The videos include text as the primary material and can therefore be argued as video essays. Her other film/video works have been produced as part of installations and can be more suited in the realm of experimental video art.
- The videos are produced in the years (2009, 2011, 2012, 2013), meaning we are digging deeper into Alsharif’s mindframe for a specific period.
- To place further context, Israel waged wars on Gaza in 2008 and 2012. A brutal way which continues to have repercussions to this day. We follow Alsharif’s thoughts and reflections in the years following those wars. Two videos focus on the Gaza wars, one of them deals with Gaza (less obviously) and Palestine more generally, while the fourth deals with the mass exodus of Palestinians from Jerusalem.

While there are other Palestinian filmmakers artists whose works can be argued as video essays such as Basel and Ruanne, Kamal Aljafari, Jumana Manna, a critical reason for choosing

to focus on Basma Alsharif is derived from the direct, moving, and emotional impact that her work have on the spectator. The effect they generate challenges conceptions, knowledge, representations. She confuses things, making us doubt what we think we already know. This technique is very honest and crucial especially in the context of essay films and Palestinian cinema emerging from this generation. Her films/videos have not yet been considered as essay-films in the academic realm, and this is an opportunity to perceive her work using this lens.

## 1.6 Terminologies

- *Abdel Halim Hafez*: was an Egyptian singer and actor. He was also the mouthpiece of the pan-Arab nationalism movement and a major supporter of Gamal Abdel Nasser.
- *Fatah*: refers to the former Palestinian National Liberation Movement.
- *Nahda*: (Arabic for cultural renaissance) refers to a period in which an era of political openness and cultural progressiveness takes place in the Arab world.
- *Nakba*: (Arabic for catastrophe) refers to the war in which the Zionist project takes over Palestine and establishes the Jewish state of Israel in 14th May 1948, wiping out more than 350 villages and forcing 75% of Palestinians into exile. The *Nakba* affects the collective memory of Palestinians until today.
- *Naksa*: (Arabic for defeat) refers to the Arab defeat against Israel that takes place on 5th June 1967. As a result, Israel takes control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
- *Oslo Accords*: refers to the Oslo Accords, a chain of peace negotiations to end the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Oslo I takes place in 1993 while Oslo II takes place in 1995.
- *Pan-Arabism*: refers to the concept that all Arabs be united in one Arab state.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter revisits the evolution of Palestinian cinema by looking briefly into the history and motivations influencing its development. By visiting the four main periods of Palestinian cinema; the first (1935-1948); the second (1948 and 1967); the third (1968-1982); and fourth (1980s-1990s) . Then we will discuss contemporary Palestinian filmmaking (1990s-to date), so we can arrive at a better understanding of where we can situate the video essay practice in the Palestinian cinematic scene and its importance in providing a more relevant audio-visual narrative and critique, and one that is aligned with the present day political and technological contexts. We begin by tracing back to the late 19th century and reach to present day cinema.

### 2.1. Historical Background: Palestinian Filmmaking

Palestine has been a cinematic attraction as early as 1896, the Lumiere Brothers silent film ‘*Palestine 1896*’<sup>1</sup> being the first to feature Palestine. Styled like a travelogue, the film shows Palestinians having a diversity of faiths – Christians, Jews and Muslims– as they live and pray together. A short section of the Lumiere film is extracted and narrated by Simone Bittonto in *Palestine: Story of a Land*<sup>2</sup>. Bittonto provides depth to what life looked in the Lumiere film. He narrates:

*“By the end of the 19th century, Palestine has 500,000 inhabitants, of whom 30,000 live in Jerusalem. A veiled woman, a Sunni Muslim, one of the majority. An orthodox Jew. He too turns away from the camera. Here we have an Armenian pope. Each of the Christian denominations has its church here in the holy city. The holy places of the three religions are scattered across a few hundred square meters. The Great Mosque is close to Christ’s tomb. Further along at the foot of the wailing wall, a Jew is*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=lumiere+brothers+1896+Palestine](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=lumiere+brothers+1896+Palestine)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vaIK8wlAl0>

*reciting a prayer. He is wearing a Turkish tarboush, and although he prays in Hebrew his everyday language is Arabic. Jews form half the population of Jerusalem, but in the country as a whole they make up less than 5% of the total. Christians account for 10% and Muslims 85%. All of them are subjects of the Sultan of Constantinople. There are no frontiers in the Ottoman Empire. There are administrative divisions in which, in this immense territory, Palestine occupies a mere 27,000 square kilometers, made up of three small districts, in the south of the province of Damascus.”*

After the Lumiere Brothers’ period, cinema produced in Palestine was overtaken by the Zionist movement’s filmmakers. It was propaganda predominantly in documentary form, leading audiences to believe that what they saw on the screen was true. One of these films produced in 1911 by Murray Rosenberg (member of the Zionist movement) titled *The First Movie of Palestine 1911*<sup>3</sup> is a 20-minute film divided into two parts: the first is about Jerusalem, and the second about the rest of the country. This film becomes a central and a very successful film throughout the Jewish world before the First World War (Tzimerman, 2001).

In these films, the Palestinian population are treated as an integral part of the landscape. Their living conditions are depicted on film, but we do not hear their own perspectives, as “no one voice articulated their thoughts or presented their opinions” (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008). In many of these films, Palestinians are “portrayed as a backward and poverty-stricken population, while the Jewish settlements are credited for bringing culture to the ‘deserted’ land” (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). By the Second World War, Hollywood starts depicting Palestine in support with the Nazis (Tzimerman, 2001).

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdulwYd4i\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdulwYd4i_s), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0zpbDGjHAE>

Palestinians are first introduced to cinema in the 1920s (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). Researchers concerned with the history of Palestinian cinema, or let us say cinema that is made by Palestinians - agree on four distinct periods: the first (1935-1948), second (1948-1967), third (1968-1982), and fourth (1980s-1990s). Since the periods tend to extend and intercut, “the years marking their beginning and end are fluid and by no means indicate clear-cut boundaries” (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008).

### 2.1.1. First period: early beginnings (1935-1948)

The first Palestinian film known to scholars is a short documentary made by filmmaker Ibrahim Hasan Sirhan in 1935 (Dabashi, 2006). Sirhan records a 20 minute movie documenting the Saudi Prince’s visit to Jerusalem and Jaffa, in which he is escorted by the Mufti of Palestine, Haj Amin Al-Husseini (ibid). This event constitutes the starting point of Palestinian cinema (Mdanat, 1993). Jamal al-Asphar, the film’s cinematographer, continues to work with Sirhan and together produced a 45-minute film called *Realized Dreams* (1937) to promote the orphan’s cause (Abu Gh’nima, 1981).

In 1945, Sirhan founds a production studio called *Studio Palestine* and is later joined by Ahmad Hilmi al-Kilani, a Palestinian who studied film in Cairo and returned to Palestine in 1945 (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008). Together they found the *Arab Film Company Production* studio, which soon starts producing films, documentaries and features, such as: *Holiday Eve and A Storm at Home* (Abu Gh’nima, 1981). The studio collaborates with other filmmakers like local Jaffa journalist Zoheir as-Saka, and Muhammad Saleh Kayali, who studied film in Italy and owned a photography studio (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008). The films produced in this period were lost in 1948 with the outbreak of the war. Sirhan fled Jaffa to Beirut, al-Kilani to Kuwait, and Kayali for Cairo (ibid).

### 2.1.2. Second period: the epoch of silence (1948 and 1967)

This period is known as: “The epoch of silence”, mainly because almost no films are produced in this period (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). As a result of the 1948 *Nakba* (catastrophe), the Arab Palestinian community stop existing as a social and political entity, and this event constitutes

a turning point of Palestinian history (Kimberling and Migdal, 1993). While this period witnesses an emerging voice by different intellectuals, writers, and poets, including authors like Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish, Tawfiq Zayyad, Samih Al Qassem, cinematic endeavors nearly ceased to exist for more than two decades (ibid). Filmmaking requires money, infrastructure, professional crews and the displacement of the already established structure couldn't exist in the same capacity in these two decades while in exile (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008).

### 2.1.3. Third period: revolutionary period (1968-1982)

In 1967 another war takes place in which Israel successfully occupies the West Bank and Gaza, resulting in the so-called *Naksa*, the Arab defeat. This period is known as the revolutionary period, the Palestinian revolution pays attention to cinema as a resource to mobilize the revolution while in exile, and it is in 1967 that a Palestinian cinema officially starts to exist (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). The first Palestinian film unit is founded in 1968 under the auspices of the political organization Fatah, and other Palestinian groups establish their own units in the early 1970s to produce their own films, such as 'Palestinian Cinema Group' in 1973 and 'The Palestinian Cinema Organization,' (later under the auspices of the Palestinian Liberation Organization) (ibid).

The films produced by the Palestinian political organizations deal with the beginnings of the armed struggle against "the Zionist enemy... [and] highlighted the historical and contemporary dimensions of the Palestinian-Zionist struggle and the Arab-Zionist struggle", as pointed by (Abdel Fattah, 2000). Palestinian film production focuses on addressing 'public opinion' and introducing the details of the Palestinian problem from the Palestinian perspective, and is, as a result, intended to be used "as an instrument for the promotion of the Palestinian national cause, and the documentation of revolutionary events related to the Palestinian resistance" (ibid). They started to document military actions as well as how life was in the refugee camps. Virtually, all production at that time was "devoted to news and documentary films – a situation common in societies struggling for political recognition" (Shohat & Stam, 1990). This Palestinian cinema was "created in exile with practically no cinematic development within the Occupied Territories" (Tawil-Souri, 2005).

Important filmmakers of this period include Mustafa Abu Ali, Sulafa Jadallah, and Hani Jawhariya. Others are Khadija Abu Ali, Rafiq Hijjar, Ismael Shammout, Nabiha Lutfi, Fuad Zentut, Samir Nimr and Jean Chamoun (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). Photographer Salafa Mirsal forms her first photography club after completing her studies from the Higher Cinema School in Cairo. She takes photos that shows Palestinian life and Palestinian martyrs and, as a result, there arises the need to create an archive that documented the Palestinian struggle (ibid).

Palestinian cinematic activities abroad come to a total halt with the Israeli raid of Beirut in 1982, of which a great part of the Palestinian cinema archive completely disappeared (ibid). The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) moves to Tunis where its cinema department greatly decreases its production. Irrespective of the aesthetic and artistic quality of these films produced in Beirut and Tunis, which underwent extremely challenging conditions and employed basic technical equipment, their value was immense to the cause (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). Given that they began when they did in 1967, many of the early Palestinian films are exemplary of the third wave and militant cinema perspectives of filmmaking. One of the important films of this period is *Our Small Houses* (1974), a propaganda film directed by Iraqi director Kassem Hawal who produces work for the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The film reflects on the Palestinian national movement's utopian vision of liberation (Meador, 2017).

#### 2.1.4. Fourth period: the return home (1980s-1990s)

The Israeli occupation and Israeli settlements continue to expand in Palestine. In 1987, the First *Intifada* breaks out in Gaza and the West Bank. Mass demonstrations and uprisings make it to the streets in revolt. Hundreds are killed. A following peace process, known as the Oslo Peace Accords, is undertaken to end the continuing violence. The first Oslo Accord (Oslo I) (1993) created a timetable for a Middle East peace process and a plan for an interim Palestinian government in parts of Gaza and the West Bank. The agreement is signed in 1993 and witnessed by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. In 1995, Oslo II calls for a complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from parts of the West Bank and other areas (Editors, 2018). In 2000, another *Intifada* takes place. It aggravates the conditions of the Palestinian society in the Occupied Territories, increases the divide within Palestinian society, and brings out the militant voices in the Israeli society who opposed any peace agreement with the

Palestinians (Gertz & Khleifi 2008). The ongoing killing, distress, and closures resulted in renewed negotiations.

While the people are struggling economically and nationally, Palestinian cinema gets pushed to the margins of the national struggle's agenda. Nevertheless, Palestinian cinematic efforts do not stop. It was in the 1980s that independent Palestinian filmmakers started to take different 'artistic' and 'political' turns in their films, and address Palestinian perspectives beyond solely nationalistic perspective and struggle (Tawil, 2005). Most of these directors produced films on little budgets and were forced to use foreign funding and faced considerable technical and Israeli censorship obstacles (ibid).

In the 1980s, Michel Khleifi is prominent in the new Palestinian cinema. Khleifi had just returned to Nazareth after spending most of his life in Belgium. Michel Khleifi becomes a symbol of the renaissance of Palestinian cinema, "combining two structures, that of the traumatic and everyday life, his films sustain different levels of reality at the same time: the reality of the distant past, that of the present, and that of the past...submerged with the present...overtly and covertly" (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008). Khleifi is followed by major directors of Palestinian cinema, like Rashid Masharawi's *Passport* (1986), *The Magician* (1992), *Rabab* (1997); Elia Suleiman's *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), *Chronicles of a Disappearance* (1996), and *Divine Intervention* (2002); Nizar Hassan's *Independence* (1994), *Cut* (2000); Hani Abu Assad; Mai Masri; Subhi Al Zobaidi; Azza Al Hasan; Liana Badr; and others (ibid).

The central trauma of Palestine, the *Nakba*, as the defining moment of Palestinian cinema constructed the "remembrance of the lost homeland that Palestinian filmmakers chose to articulate their aesthetic cosmovision," (Dabashi, 2006) and "what ultimately defines what we may call a Palestinian cinema is the mutation of that repressed anger into an aestheticized violence-the aesthetic presence of a political absence" (ibid).

## 2.2. Experimental Cinema of the 1900s onwards

The previous chapter revisited the evolution of Palestinian cinema and the political events that have considerably contributed to shaping its activities. This chapter will demonstrate the regional context under which the political, conceptual, and technological shifts evoked some Palestinian and Arab filmmakers and artists to experiment and produce significant experimental cinematic works from the 1990s onwards.

### 2.2.1. Political Turns

The modern Arab world has always been subject to foreign powers: first the Ottoman Empire, then the French and the British. However, the period from the late nineteenth century to World War II witnessed an era of political openness and cultural progressiveness, a period known as the '*Arab Nahda*/ a Cultural Renaissance' (Makhoul, 2013). Arab intellectuals founded movements to democratize the government, advocated for political accountability and the rule of law. They had acquired a Marxist perspective to the Arab situation to emancipate the poor, educate women, and to either secularize the state or to define modern reforms in the Muslim state (ibid). The independence movements of the 1940s, especially in North Africa, and subsequent nationalist movements defined Arab nations to eventually create the pan-Arab movement which subsequently collapsed after Egypt, Jordan and Syria's loss of the 1967 war against Israel. This war ended the *Arab Nahda*.

In 1968, the Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous demonstrates the state of despair that people felt at that time, produced a play that provided a critical creative practice in light of Arab leaders impotency and their prioritization of the national agendas (Marks 2015). Marks (2015) relates this play to the very same challenges that we have faced in the Arab world for decades after this play took place, elaborating in another scene of the same play: "At one point, two of the Spectator characters look into a mirror and see no reflection; one says, "Because we are erased images, images that were erased by the national interest before they had fully formed"(Marks, 2015; Al Saleh, 2013).

Following the end of the Arab *Nahda* and pan-Arab nationalism, a “cascade of extremely bad historical events for the Arab world” took place (Marks, 2005): the killing and displacement of millions of people in Palestine; the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990); the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988); the Algerian civil war (1992); Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990; the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the U.S. and its allies’ opportunistic invasion of Iraq (2003). This is all in addition to the corrupt, unresponsive and dictatorial Arab governments, suppression of freedom of expression that all combines to create an overall state of hopelessness and disempowerment among both Palestinians and Arabs (ibid).

Lebanese writer Samir Kassir (2004) writes:

“Powerlessness to be what you think you should be. Powerless to act to affirm your existence, even merely theoretically, in the face of the Other, who denies your right to exist, despises you and has once again reasserted his domination over you. Powerlessness to suppress the feeling that you are no more than a lowly pawn on the global chessboard even as the game is being played in your backyard. The feeling, it has to be said, has been hard to dispel since the first Iraq war, when Arab land once again came under foreign occupation and the era of independence was relegated to a parenthesis.”

The ‘failure’ of the pan-Arab movement along with the cascade of political events happening across the Arab world and as mentioned earlier created a state of hopelessness and disempowerment among filmmakers and artists, prompting a conceptual transition in the film discourse and narrative of Palestinian and Arab filmmakers and artists starting the early 1990s.

### 2.2.2. Conceptual Experiments & Time-Images

This period of the early 1990s witnesses the birth of new and experimental works in the sphere of cinematic activities. Palestinian and Arab filmmakers and artists leave behind narrative fiction and documentary cinema and begin to work in explicitly experimental ways (Marks, 2015). They start to explore with “film formats to low-end video formats to HD to mobile and online

platforms” (Makhoul, 2013). They venture towards philosophical questioning of themselves, in “epistemology, what we can know; ontology, what is real or true; and phenomenology, what our perceptions can tell us about the world”; and push the envelope in content towards experimental narrative, experimental documentary, and finally the aim of this thesis, essay films (Marks, 2015). “They were deconstructing political systems of naming and practicing new, stuttering kinds of speech; they were establishing new first principles from the givens of sense experience” (ibid).

Some of the experiments which were taking place in Palestine and the Arab world, and which evolved from the aforementioned political circumstances, gave rise to Arab affection-images and Arab time-images.

Marks (2015) explains that these images can be characterized according to the concepts of Gilles Deleuze’s of ‘time-images or images that create within a gap’.

*“The affection-image... occupies the gap between perception and action.... But when action cannot be taken, the affection-image dilates; affection becomes passion, an agitated state of passive activity or active passivity. This moment of suspension can give rise to what Deleuze calls the time-image, images produced in creatively widened circuits of perception, memory, dreams, and imagination, the affection-image suspends qualities that might become the basis for reactive acts and instead makes them vibrate with the potential for new kinds of acts, feelings, or perceptions. The time-image elevates the incapacity to act to a high creative principle that allows any image to connect with any other.”*

The paper argues that there is a relationship between (1) the failure of states and the overall feeling of disenfranchisement and loss of hope among Palestinians and the Arab populations and, (2) the creation of art experiments using time images ‘images that create within a gap’. Moments like these, “press Arab artists to perceive even more keenly, inform themselves even more precisely, plunge into public archives and private memory, dream, fantasize, and invent. Moreover,

when the feeling of incapacity moves through the body—when either the film or the viewer really owns that feeling of powerlessness—reaction and resentment disperse and give way to free acts” (Marks, 2015).

Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman’s *Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal (Introduction to the End of an Argument) Speaking for Oneself...Speaking for Others* (1990)<sup>4</sup> is an example of the use of time-images in Arab cinema. The video deals with the distorted image of Arab culture in the West and of the the Palestinian resistance to Israel’s occupation. Jayce Salloum and Suleiman combine fragments of image and text taken from Hollywood, European and Israeli films, documentaries and news items with material recorded in Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The videotape “mimics the dominant media’s forms of representation, subverting its methodology and construction. A process of displacement and deconstruction is enacted attempting to arrest the imagery and ideology, decolonizing and recontextualizing it to provide a space for a marginalized voice consistently denied expression in the media” (Seid, 1990). What the video reveals is that western media has been for decades bombarded with false images of Arabs and Palestinians which give permission to the unquestionable occupation of Israel over the Palestinians. Lima (1990), “we have allowed ourselves to be brainwashed by the insidious images and news items propagated by our own, prejudiced and superficial media.”

In 1992, in New York, Laura Marks organizes her first film program: *Palestine: The Aesthetics of Exile* to bring together people who are interested in Palestine and Palestinian experimental cinema. She wanted to gather people around a set of rare works such as Mona Hatoum’s recitation of a refugee’s longing *Measures of Distance* (1988), Elia Suleiman and Jayce Salloum’s afore described bracingly accusatory montage of Orientalist movies, *Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal (Introduction to the End of an Argument)* (1990), and Michel Khleifi’s mournful *Canticle of the Stones* (1990), which according to Marks (2015) “challenged representation itself as much as they did the Israeli occupation; they seemed to offer a way of redefining political filmmaking energized by the first intifada of 1987 and upturned by the Lebanese civil war. They were experimenting.” To her amazement, the involved committee wavered to accept the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://vimeo.com/72835443>

experimental films on the merits Marks considered them politically rich, “the disjunctive narrative styles, the intrusion of the filmmaker’s presence, the ambiguity between fiction and documentary, and the pastiche of found footage—diluted their political messages.” She explains that it is not that the Palestinians found the works confusing, but were concerned with the responses of the non-Arab audiences to the films, fearing the external perception to reshape ‘Palestinian-ness’, the image that had been building for decades. The committee explained these films were too difficult and too strange, “not what we need now” (Marks, 2015). The films have been admitted, nevertheless, and were successful in bringing fruitful discussions.

Marks provides insight into this question of “too difficult”, “time-image documentaries are “difficult” not because they intentionally seek to frustrate the viewer, but because they seek to acknowledge the fact that the most important “events” are invisible and unvisualizable. The ethics of time-images, furthermore, is that they allow inconceivable events to remain inconceivable, at the same time insisting that they must be conceived of” (Marks, 2000). Here, it is worth mentioning that video essays use time-images incessantly to create new meanings and discourse.

### 2.2.3 Technological Advances

A final note on the shift towards experimental videos in the Arab world is also emerging from the rapid technological advances in filmmaking. The video technology became available, smaller, portable, and cheap. Internet platforms such as web 2.0, YouTube eased access and exhibition, and created a transnational exhibition platform. These advances meant that Palestinians filmmakers could experiment with much fewer borders and mediators. Marks (2017) reaffirms, “filmmakers who have never taken an interest in analog video also began to turn to digital video, especially as its image quality improved, because it was relatively cheap and easy to edit. “

## 2.3 The Essay-Film/ Video-Essay

### 2.3.1 Introducing Essay-Film

First we must ask ourselves, what is an essay? Founded upon placing the individual in the centre of the text, the essay combines various formulations of the philosophical literary form *to*

*essay*, in French meaning “to try” as well as “to attempt”, thus implying an “open-ended, evaluative search...characterized by the presence of individual subjectivity” (Alter, 2003.)

Unlike an essay, video essays give the author the flexibility and fluidity to be cross-disciplinary and move beyond formal rules and break free of the so-called ‘clear narrative trajectory’, distinguishing itself, as Biemann (2003) writes, “by a non-linear and non-logical movement of thought that draws on many different sources of knowledge”.

This further magnifies the significance of the video essay as an interesting practice for the introspection of the representation of the current status of Palestine in the media, and the self-reflection of “Palestinian-ness”.

### 2.3.2 Emergence in Film Theory

So as to understand where the concept of the essay-film emerges in cinema, it is important to understand how it emerged in film theory.

Subjectivity expressed through film became possible when some of the French pioneers who were influenced by poetic impressionism, where, Canudo, Delluc, and Epstein, encouraged directors to express their inner-selves and personal dreams in their films. However, it is not until the late 1940s that the “reflection on cinematic subjectivity clearly emerges in European film theory preparing for the formulation of the Nouvelle Vague’s auteur theory of the second half of the 1950s” (Rascaroli, 2008). It is within this context that the theory of an essayistic use of the camera has been introduced (ibid.)

Alexandre Astruc’s famous article (1948) *The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo* speaks about what this new cinema is able to express through a “supple, subtle, and efficient manner” in a likewise manner that happens in literature (Rascaroli, 2008). As cinema is “gradually becoming a language”, “a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or

novel” (Astruc, 1948). Astruc refers to this new period, the age of caméra-stylo, translated to English as “the camera-pen” (ibid).

The first article that examined a film by comparing it to an essay is André Bazin’s (1958) review of Chris Marker’s film *Letter from Siberia* (1957) (Rascaroli, 2007). Bazin remarks that *Letter from Siberia* is like “nothing that we have ever seen before in films with a documentary basis, highlighting the precedence of the written text over the images.” Bazin calls Marker’s work “an essay documented by film” (Bazin, 1958). Bazin (1958) differentiates video-essays from documentaries. While documentaries rely on the image as the primary material of the film, and the filmmaker’s choices are clearly expressed in the edit and the organization of the film translated into a single medium/piece, video essays (such as in Marker’s work) relies on his intelligence, and “that its immediate means of expression is language, and that the image only intervenes in the third position, in reference to this verbal intelligence” (Bazin, 1958)

### 2.3.3 Emerging Scholars Define Video-Essays

Some of the early and more recent scholarly contributions who attempted to define qualities of the essay film are Phillip Lopate, Timothy Corrigan, Michael Renov, and Paul Arthur, Jörg Huber and Atinç Özdemir. Below, I will touch upon these important authors to set the stage for the analysis section.

Phillip Lopate’s famous article *In search of the centaur: The Essay-Film* (1992) defines five principal characteristics of the medium: 1) an essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled or intertitled; 2) The text must represent a single voice; 3) The text must represent a coherent argument; 4) The text must have a strong personal point of view, not simply informative; and, 5) The text’s language should be as eloquent, well-written and interesting as possible (Lopate, 1992).

Lopate’s features derive from a comparison with the literary essay with an emphasis on the verbal component rather than on the visuals. Lopate provides example of an essay-film of the 1990s: Renais’s *Night and Fog* (1995) which he describes “its self-interrogatory voice, like a true

essayist's, dubious, ironical, wheeling and searching for the heart of the subject matter" (Lopate, 1992), constituting Renais's tracking shots as a 'visual analogue' of the searching voice. Lopate focuses on the authorial voice and the verbal text, also on the use of interviews and collage in contrasting between the subjectivity of the voice-over and the predominant objectivity of the camera. Lopate makes an allusion to a feature that is of key importance for the definition of the essay film: as in the written essay, Rascaroli (2008) explains, "readers must feel included in a true conversation, allowed to follow through mental processes of contradiction and digression." This according to Lopate happens through the direct address of the audience.

Timothy Corrigan in *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (1999) elaborates on the literary-filmic relationship. For Corrigan (1999) "the essay film can be traced in a documentary practice that extends back to the Lumiere Brothers, and emerges more distinctly in European cinema after World War II, especially in France." Some of the dominant characteristics he sets for the essay-film are: 1) a short documentary subject; 2) a lack of dominant narrative organization; 3) the interaction of a personal voice or vision, sometimes in the form of a voice over. In the essay film the interaction of the subjective perspective, the reality and the structure of the film, like the literary essay, follows the undermined movement of a dialogue. Corrigan emphasises a personal authorial vision, although the centrality of a text read by a voice-over is less prescriptive than in Lopate (Rascaroli, 2008).

Michael Renov in *The Subject of the Documentary* (2004), Renov questions the borderline status of the essay film and suggests that its subjectivity is not in contrast with its inquisitive attitude but is indeed its marker (Rascaroli, 2008). "Descriptive and reflexive modalities are coupled; the representation of the historical real is consciously filtered through the flux of subjectivity" (Renov, 2004). For Renov, the essay film encompasses all the functions that documentaries have displayed from the start, "to record, reveal and preserve; to persuade or promote; to express; and to analyze or interrogate." However, for Renov, "subjectivity and reflexivity are the staples of the essay film" (Rascaroli, 2008).

Paul Arthur, in his article *Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore* (2003) Arthur attempts to define the essay-film and observes "[t]he binding aspect of personal

commentary is typically constituted by voiceover narration enhanced by musical selections, editorial as well as factual intertitles, and is often reinforced by compositional devices” (Rascaroli, 2008). Arthur goes on to explain that when the spoken narration is not present or restrained, then the author substitutes by using another medium (i.e., visually) to replace the direct speech (ibid).

Jörg Huber, in his paper *Video-Essayism, On the Theory-Practice of the Transitional* (2003) “proposes a theory of transitionality, in which he traces and interprets the mediating feature of video-essayism and its ability to make the very process of perception visible” (Biemann, 2003). According to Huber (2003), the video essayistic mode underlines:

*“the relations between text and image, between discursivity and perception; the fact that these relations cannot be organized unambiguously (into ‘image = apprehension’ and ‘text = discursivity’); the subjective positioning of any utterance and/or perception, and thus its directionality or perspective character, and hence the significance of authorship as a process of positioning; the significance of perception and thus of mediation between apprehension and cognition; reflection as an integral part of the method and the approach, and thus their process character and interminability; the preliminary character of claims and arguments, and thus the performative quality of thinking, writing and imaging; the experimental quality of cognition and perception, playing with terms and images, venturing inventions, making unconventional transfers; the commitment to what it engages in while simultaneously insisting on distance.”*

For Huber, images used in the video essayistic context expand the possibilities of perception and representation. What is more important than what images are showing “is how they show something as images and how they show this as images” (Huber, 2003).

In the essayist context, Huber (2003) explains:

*“We shift from the vertical orientation of images indicating a world outside the images towards a horizontal orientation, moving the*

*focus away from the “meaning” of these images to the fact that they have been produced for specific uses. The images contain or are themselves traces of their origins. The traces mark their origin as something that set them in motion and at the same time as that which sets them in motion in the context of their use in the essay,...,this “intericonicity” sets in motion a process of connections, transitions, constructions, re-contextualizations by means of shifts, grafts, hybridizations, overlaps, and creations of synapses. The signified becomes the signifier, which again becomes the signified: the bringing forth of images is a movement of iteration and differentiation, which is the principle of the essayism.”*

Ati Özdemir, in his PhD dissertation *Bir Düşünce Makinesi: Harun Farocki Sineması Ve Video-Deneme Pratiđi* 2015 (trans. *A Thinking Machine: Harun Farocki’s Cinema and Video Essay Practice*) develops a unique method for identifying and analyzing video essays by using algorithms, mixing RGB colors, using light as an intensive force (according to Deleuzian concepts and of immanency), setting up columns, and changing power to geometry. Özdemir explains: “It is exactly like a woven carpet or kilim” (Özdemir, 2018).

Özdemir researches the theories of Bergson, Pierce and Foucault, and more significantly ‘movement-image and time-image theories of Gilles Deleuze, on which he establishes his own method. “Video essays contain two main materials, one is visual and the other is verbal, literal” Ozdemir (2018) explains, “however, there would be no video-essay without transformations of Deleuzian image categories and literal arguments containing a spiral montage.”

According to Özdemir (2015), the following characteristics must be present in order to qualify a film/video as a video essay/ essay film:

1. Argumentation in the form of text or voice.
2. Decontex-Recontex. There needs to be some sequences that leave their meanings and get new sequences as recontextualizations. For example: if the visual material

is a perception image (movement-image) the text should mention about something else to recall an association. Özdemir (2018) explains: “In farocki for example, we see an image many times containing new meanings again and again. This is what I call image transformation from perception image (movement-image) to mental image (time-image). In other words, this means “thinking”, another way of defining the thinking process.”

3. Spiral montage containing perception image (movement-image) transformation to mental image (time-image). That means there needs to exist perception images (movement-image category) at first glance, then upon sequences of decontextualisation and recontextualization, they will become mental images (time-image category). By doing this repetitively, Özdemir (2018) explains: “as we bring them together, we will have a whole containing both arguments and time-images that leads to a spiral montage so that the movie leaves narration and becomes a mind in itself (self-reflexivity) which is very important. This is what video essay is beyond representation.”

An important thing according to Özdemir, is the use of image and literal expressions which are used separately sometimes in video essays. One image shows something but the words and sentences say something else. They are connected virtually in spite of them actually being together there (Özdemir 2018).

If there is a lack of any of the aforementioned features in a video/film, then they become more like a narration, clip, or something else, but not a video-essay/essay film. “They become linear “powerpoint” not like “prezi” which is definitely schematic! Like the brain or thought or memory itself,” Özdemir (2018) asserts.

After having discussed Palestinian cinema and its relationship to the historical events that shaped Palestinian collective memory, as well as the essay-film/video-essay genre, the coming sections will discuss this thesis’s methodology and reasoning, and subsequently delve into findings and discussion.

### 3. Methodology

#### Research's Question and Subquestions

The research question of this study is: How does Basma Alsharif bring a new discourse to Palestinian filmmaking by using video essays?

Sub-questions:

- Can Basma Alsharif's videos *We Began By Measuring Distance*, *The Story of Milk and Honey*, *Farther than the Eye Can See* and *Gaza Home Movies* be considered as video-essays according to the five criteria method of Phillip Lopate and other theorists.
- Can we understand through the video-essay approach the Palestinian 'question' with a totally new language of filmmaking, where text and visuals inter-weave together to enfold information, unfold unexpected discourse, creating new meanings, new fantasies, and cause visceral and bodily effects?
- Does the video-essay approach diversify Palestinian cinema and contribute to moving away from nationalist discourse into a more individualistic video (essayistic) activism?

#### Research Design

The research design of this study is composed of two main sections. The findings are sought using a textual qualitative analysis to analyze four of videos created by Basma Alsharif. The findings as per Lopate's method creates the basis of my thesis question that enables a clear classification of Alsharif's videos as part of the video essay genre. This qualitative approach mainly uses Phillip Lopate's five criteria method in classifying essay-films which are: words must be present in the form of a text, the text must represent a single voice, a coherent argument, and strong personal point of view and its language should be as eloquent, well-written and interesting as possible. A critique of his method is that he is too focused on text-based analysis of cinematic works (Rascaroli, 2008). At times the analysis also includes other theorists who have discussed

the video essay approach from both text and visual context to further my point that Alsharif's style is part of the video-essay genre.

## Role of the Researcher

This research is conducted in order to fulfill the requirements of my Master's degree as part of the *Cinema and Television* program at Anadolu University.

The motivation behind taking Palestinian filmmaker/artist Basma Alsharif's videos as a paradigm for my study involves several cross-cutting factors: both of us are Palestinian, both of us are women, both of us are grandchildren of the 1948 *Nakba*, and both of us spent most of our childhood and adult life in the diaspora. This puts me in a good position to discuss her works.

Direct contact via e-mail has been established with Basma Alsharif and other authors in the film arena (who focus on Palestine, Palestinian artists, and Basma Alsharif in their written work) such as Laura Marks, Bashir Makhoul, Ursula Biemann, and others. Neither myself nor any of my contacted subjects have been paid for the work done in this study.

## Research Methods

Various research methods used in this study are based on:

- Qualitative research, deploying both primary and secondary resources.
- Discourse analysis, historical revision, and theoretical study of literature around Palestinian cinema, video essay practice, and their association with ideological inclinations. "The essay, to cite Adorno, is "the critical form par excellence; as immanent critique of intellectual constructions, as a confrontation of what they are with their concept, it is critique of ideology" (Alter, 2008)
- Data collection and videos' analysis.

## Data Collection Methods

Both archival data and research generated the empirical material and was necessary for making choices to structure the thesis thematically and chronologically.

1- Archival material: Literature, exhibitions' catalogues, Alsharif's portfolios, her public talks, online interviews, online newspaper and magazine interviews.

2- Interviews' material: Around 20 direct email conversations were initiated with Alsharif to clarify questions about her use of certain techniques in some of her videos and to acquire further materials to support my thesis. Furthermore, around ten direct email conversations took place with other writers and academics to acquire access to their books, articles, and other academic materials.

3- Films/video material: Four videos are considered according to the following criteria:

- Primary empirical material to support my argument and statements.
- Considered in terms of their themes, techniques, and aesthetic nuances.
- Develop a visual narrative and historical account of transitions in visual representation in Palestinian cinema and its parameters.

## Data Analysis

The selected videos are primarily analyzed according to Phillip Lopate's five qualities as elaborated in his essay *In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film* (1992) which is seminal to the world of video essays. Occasionally, other theorists on video essays are sought to reinforce the thesis question.

## Study Limitations

There are few resources written on the video essay genre in general which means that I had to select a few number of authors in this thesis. The field is more recently emerging and is not a deeply studied subject, so I had to rely on the resources that existed in English or that had been translated into English. Furthermore, there aren't many books on Palestinian cinema and video production itself, and none that discuss whether video essays exist as a genre within Palestinian

cinema. For money and time considerations, I could not travel to meet with Basma Alsharif personally, so I relied on email conversations which sometimes took time and caused delays.

## Ethical Considerations

Alsharif and Palestinian and Arab cinema theorist Marks were interviewed and consulted in their professional capacity. The subject of the emails and for which purpose were explained. They provided access to papers, their academic research, and portfolio, among others. Subjects are all referenced and cited according to academic principles. The study does not include their opinions.

## 4. Findings & Discussion

### 4.1 Findings

*“The more thinking on a subject that can be discerned in a video, the more it can qualify as a video essay”* (Lee, 2016)

This analysis section will start by introducing Basma Alsharif to contextualize her as a person to better understand her work, and the meaning she tries to convey to the audience. The literature review already provided an historical frame of reference of Palestinian cinema and an overview of video essays, the analysis will therefore situate Alsharif’s work within both contexts using Lopate’s five qualities for defining video-essays.

Basma Alsharif is an artist and filmmaker born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents. She spent the first years of her life in France and the United States, and spent summers in the Gaza Strip where the majority of her extended family remained until 2009 after a catastrophic war on the territory in 2008. Palestine solidarity was a common theme in Alsharif’s household, her parents, and relatives all working against Israel’s occupation of the territories. She works with film, video, photography, drawing and installations centered on, “the human condition in relation to shifting geopolitical landscapes and natural environments and...invested in challenging neocolonialism, confronting the future, and questioning how we define humanity in the modern age” (Alsharif, 2019).

Phillip Lopate, an American cinephile and essayist, said in 1992 it was his personal “itch to see these two interests wed, via essays on celluloid” (Lopate, 1992). As discussed in the literature review, Lopate was driven by this interest and wrote a groundbreaking article on the essay-film entitled *In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film*, setting the groundwork to “define, describe, survey, and celebrate a genre that barely exists” (ibid). He started searching for a logic in merging essays, a personal perspective in the form of an argument, and films, as the medium. Through substantial viewing of many cinematic works, he defines criteria that make a film ‘essayistic’. In his trial, Lopate sets ‘five qualities’ that must be present in a film/video for it to be

classified as an 'essay-film' and/or a 'video-essay'. The 'five qualities' according to Lopate (1992) are:

- 1) An essay-film must have words, in the form of a text either spoken, subtitled or intertitled;
- 2) The text must represent a single voice;
- 3) The text must represent a coherent argument;
- 4) The text must have a strong personal point of view, not simply informative; and,
- 5) The text's language should be as eloquent, well-written and interesting as possible.

Lopate's five qualities focuses primarily on the analysis of text in order to examine what makes a video 'essayistic', a further question poses itself: what to do with the visuals? Albeit secondary for Lopate (for classification purposes) of what makes a video essayistic, Lopate still tackles this question in the procedures taken for the making of essay films. Lopate, (1992) suggests:

- "1) to write or borrow a text and go out and find images for it. I don't necessarily mean "illustrations," which casts the visual component in a subordinate position. The images and spoken text can have a contrapuntal or even contradictory relation to each other.
- 2) The filmmaker can shoot or compile previously shot footage and then write a text which is a meditation on the assembled images. This is often Chris Marker's approach.
- 3) The filmmaker can write a little, shoot a little, write a bit more, and so on - the one process interacting with the other throughout."

This paper argues that a category of Basma Alsharif's videos all produced within a specific period of time, questioning events related to her distant home, Gaza, can be categorized as essay-films and make clear use of Lopate's five aforementioned qualities. The videos are: *From Here We Measure Distance* (2009), *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011), *Farther than the Eye Can See* (2012), and *Home Movies Gaza* (2013). The five qualities are interwoven to each of these videos and elaborated to decipher whether the videos can be accepted (or rejected) as video essays. This

paper also analyzes the images added to the text (included in the first criterion) in order to convey how Alsharif ascribes images to her texts. Rather than repeating where Lopate's qualities are found throughout Alsharif's work, this paper instead finds it more useful to supplement the analysis with other authors that are renowned in the video-essay field, such as Ursula Biemman, Laura Rascaroli, and Andre Bazin.

## Videos' Analysis

WE BEGAN BY MEASURING DISTANCE (2009)

SD video - 2009 - duration 19:00

Translation: Lana Mushtaq

Voice-over narration: Anas El Tayeb

Selected footage from Ramattan News Agency & Media Service Archives, Gaza City Palestine

Virgin forest text *Ecological Characteristics of Old Growth, Douglas-Fir Forests* US Department of Agriculture

Music: Qareyet El Fengan *The Fortune Teller*, Abdel Halim Hafez

Produced by: The 9th Sharjah Biennial Production Programme

Awards: Jury Prize: Sharjah Biennial 9, and Marion MacMahon Awards: Images Festival

## SYNOPSIS

As a process-based artist, Alsharif starts her art work by, “searching for something I don't know I am searching for, until I find it” (Studio, 2015). While Alsharif was in Cairo working for Ramattan News Agency, the December 2008 war on Gaza (dubbed Operation Cast Lead) began. She started working on a film prior to the war, but as the Operation Cast Lead started, both she and her work shifted according to the current event. Her geographic and personal proximity to the war made her feel like she was creating this piece from “the inside”.

In the artist's own words, this film “uses long still frames, text, language, and sound weaved together to unfold the narrative of an anonymous group who fill their time by measuring

distance. Innocent measurements transition into political ones, examining how image and sound communicate history. *We Began by Measuring Distance* explores an ultimate disenchantment with facts when the visual fails to communicate the tragic” (Alsharif, 2009).

[HYSTERICAL SCREAMS & SIRENS]



[FATHER]

[FATHER]

[FATHER]

[MY FATHER]

SHOOT HIM, SHOOT HIM] (as in film him)



[VOICE-OVER NARRATOR]

[BIRDS CHIRPING]

ON A DAY AS ANY OTHER DAY  
ALL OF OUR MEMORIES WOULD BECOME SIGNIFICANT,  
ONLY IN RETROSPECT

OUR FIRST MEMORY WAS MARKED BY THE DAY SETTING OFF TO A START  
WITH THE WORST OF ALL EVILS

BOREDOM



TO PASS THE TIME  
WE INDULGED IN A BOOK MEMORIALIZING OUR HOMELAND



[SPEECH]

OUR HOMELAND TRULY IS

A HISTORY THAT IS NO LONGER WITHIN REACH



WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE EVENING  
THE WARMTH OF THE SUMMER WAS EXCHANGED FOR A BLACK CLOUD  
THAT DESCENDED OVER THE ENTIRETY OF THE MILE HIGH CITY  
AND SURROUNDED US FROM THE 28TH FLOOR  
AND THE DAYS PASSED

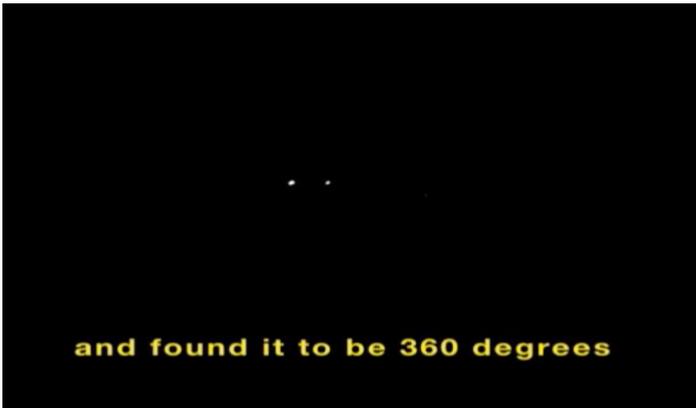


WE SWITCHED OFF THE AIR CONDITIONING  
AND STOOD WITNESS BEHIND OUR WINDOW  
AS A DENSE FOG SETTLED ACROSS THE BODY OF WATER BELOW US  
WHEN IT CLEARED  
WE FOUND THAT OUR SURROUNDINGS HAD FROZEN OVER  
AND WE GREW MORE AND MORE  
MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE  
AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE AND MORE  
AND MORE



UNSETTLED

SO WE INVENTED A GAME OF MEASUREMENTS  
WE MEASURED A 360 DEGREE CIRCLE  
AND FOUND IT TO BE 360 DEGREES



WE MEASURED ONE FOOT  
AND CAME UP WITH 30.48  
WE MEASURED A SHAPE  
AND CAME UP WITH A TRIANGLE  
WE MEASURED AN APPLE  
AND CAME UP WITH ORANGE  
AND WHEN IT WAS DAYBREAK  
THE ICE HAD MELTED  
WE TOOK OUR MEASUREMENTS ELSEWHERE  
TO FIND A DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO POINTS

TO FIX OUR TEXT TO



[YES  
THAT'S RIGHT  
THE DISTANCE IS A BIT SHORT  
BUT IT WILL DO FOR NOW]

WE CONTINUED OUR MEASUREMENTS  
BUT WITH ISSUES MORE CHALLENGING AND IMPORTANT TO US  
WE BEGAN BY MEASURING DISTANCE



WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM ROME TO GENEVA  
695 KM  
WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM MADRID TO OSLO  
2391 KM  
WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM SHARM EL SHEIKH TO GAZA  
405 KM

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
78 KM

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
78 KM

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
78 KM

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
78 KM

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM

[NO NO NOT LIKE THAT]

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
67

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
67

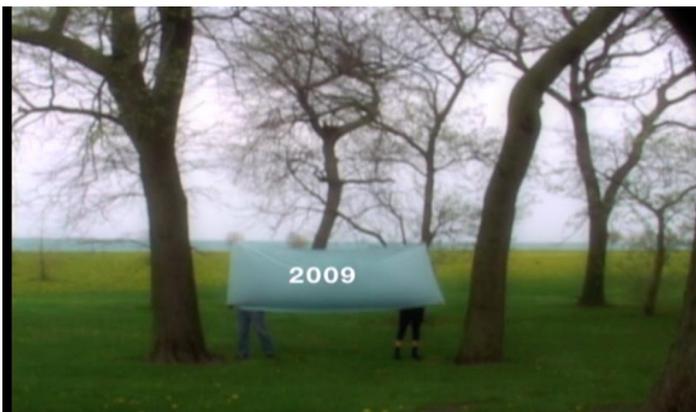
WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
48

WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM GAZA TO JERUSALEM  
17

48

67

1971-2009 (Timer)



WHEN WE FOUND OURSELVES EMPTY HANDED  
WE MEASURED THE DISTANCE FROM PALESTINE TO ISRAEL

AND FOUND THAT ROME WAS NOT BUILT IN A DAY

OUR MEASUREMENTS HAD LEFT US MELANCHOLY

WE ELECTED TO GO TO A PLACE WE HAD SEEN ONLY IN BOOKS

WHERE WE COULD REST OUR EYES AND EASE OUR MINDS



THE VIRGIN FOREST

SOME GENERAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE VIRGIN FOREST

ARE APPARENT TO AN OBSERVER WITH EVEN A MODERATE BACKGROUND

IN NATURAL HISTORY

TREES TYPICALLY VARY IN SPECIES AND SIZE

THE MULTI LAYER CANOPY PRODUCES A HEAVILY FILTERED LIGHT

AND THE FEELING OF SHADE IS ACCENTUATED BY SUNLIGHT ON CLEAR DAYS

THE UNDERSTORY OF SHRUBS, HERBS AND TREE SEEDLINGS IS OFTEN MODERATE

AND IS ALMOST ALWAYS PATCHY IN DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

NUMEROUS LOGS, OFTEN LARGE AND IN VARIOUS STAGES OF DECAY

LITTER THE FOREST FLOOR

CREATING SOME TRAVEL ROUTES FOR WILDLIFE

AND BLOCKING OTHERS

STANDING DEAD TREES, SNAGS, AND ROTTED STUBS ARE COMMON

ALTHOUGH A VISITOR GAZING TOWARD THE GROUND

WILL OFTEN MISTAKE DEAD TREES IN EARLY STAGES OF DECAY

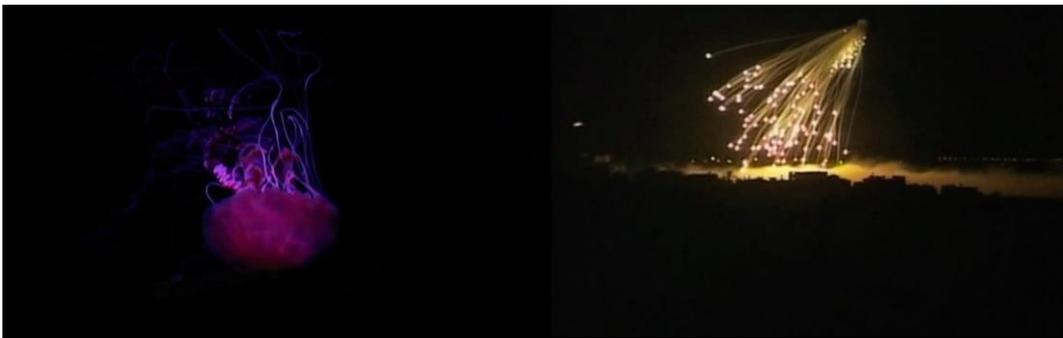
FOR LIVE TREES.

IT IS QUIET;

FEW BIRDS OR MAMMALS ARE SEEN OR HEARD.



[WALTZ MUSIC]



[WALTZ MUSIC GOES ON]





[THE MUSIC PLAYER PLAYING THE WALTZ GETS STUCK ALONG WITH THE IMAGES]



(VERY SLOW MOTION)

WE BEGAN TO HAVE THE DISTINCT FEELING THAT  
WE HAD BEEN LIED TO



THAT WE  
UNFORTUNATELY  
HAD NOT RESTED AT ALL



AND THAT OUR MEASUREMENTS HAD LEFT US EMPTY HANDED

[HYSTERICAL SCREAMS]

[FOR WHOM ARE YOU SHOOTING US]



#### ANALYZING *WE BEGAN BY MEASURING DISTANCE*

*We Began by Measuring Distance* responds to the war that Israel waged on Gaza in 2008 and the riposte that Alsharif felt at the ‘helplessness’ she felt she was forcibly reduced to: a mere witness to an indescribable plunder. Alsharif was living in Cairo working at Ramattan News Agency as the war broke out and eventually moved to Denver, USA, (i.e., “the mile high city”), a place so far away from Gaza and the Middle East, contributing to her feeling of numbness at witnessing these (now past) events. The film opens with Gaza City landscape and the sound of war, a woman wailing over a violent incident (we imagine), and she (confusingly) screams, “shoot him, shoot him!” Which in Arabic we understand is literally ‘film him, film him!’ The text is narrated by a lyrical male-voiceover speaking in an Egyptian dialect. Its content is subjective, reflective, emotional, on thoughts, feelings and carries a debate, creating interest and evoking the viewer’s curiosity. The text implies an internal process. “We” recounted in the first person plural, ‘we’ as an anonymous group of people, ‘we’ symobilizing Palestinians generally or ‘we’ Palestinian refugees. ‘We’ begin to experience boredom, restlessness, melancholy, helplessness. ‘We’ start to make “meaningless measurements”: a circle, a foot, an apple that becomes an orange, and then, measures of distances “more challenging and important to us”. Alsharif questions the validity and trustworthiness of these measurements taken. Measurements are extended between important cities that have marked the peace process negotiations, most famously the Oslo Accords<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/oslo-accords>

negotiations took, in cities like Rome, Geneva, Oslo, Sharm El Sheikh. Egypt was critical in this process, which also explains the dominant male voice narrating the film is led by an Egyptian. He symbolizes the years of futile negotiation by the increasing distance of the cities where they were carried out. She pauses on loop of the shortest distance, between Gaza and Jerusalem. These distances get shorter and shorter as she names the important dates marking Palestinian consciousness: (19)67, (19)48, and (19)17, until it leads us back to 2008 (the year of the war) and 2009, the year this film was made.

Laura Mark's review (2015) of *We Began by Measuring Distance* reiterates this point and states, “[i]t appears that “we” the Palestinians, were in a druglike state, lulled by hope of negotiations, unable to seize on the right things to measure, what’s important.” The film leaves the war behind and goes to books of nature, ”disorientingly, the “virgin forest” where “we” go to rest is not a forest at all but an aquarium; though the description of the forest—“A visitor gazing toward the ground will often mistake dead trees in early stages of decay for live trees”—might be a metaphor for the condition of occupied Palestine” (Marks, 2015). For a moment the audience forgets about the war to basque in the beauty of the images and the soothing sound of the male narrator describing decay and death of a virgin forest (that is being reborn), until we remember that this is a video describing war and destruction.

Alsharif creates discomfort through the lul-like state the spectator finds her/himself in. The use of contradictory images: some of nature and coral reefs juxtaposed against the Gaza raid, while in the background we hear “a grotesque-sounding waltz by ‘Abdel-Halim Hafiz, they seem to mock any idea of taking comfort in images” (Marks, 2015). The frame moves in and out of the distant hum of the sea and into the white noise of the bombs dropping on Gaza. This transience denoting the, “mockery sharpens as the aquarium video gives way to a deadly slow-motion ballet of bombs falling on a city at night, resembling jellyfish in the extension of their tentacles, and the clouds of glowing smoke rising from the explosions” (ibid). As we navigate through the video’s sequences, we can surmise that Alsharif is trying to give the viewer a lens into her perspective on the war’s events. Her skepticism of Arab leaders and the peace deals resonates in moments where she names the various years of war and peace, or when she boldly states, “we had the distinct feeling that we had been lied to.” The male voice-over likely represents Alsharif as she, a

Palestinian, sitting with her friends and/or family, debilitated and immobile as they are witnessing the war's events, and we are similarly struck while watching one woman's inconsolable suffering from the injustice of war. Then this time in the form of a question, "for who are you shooting us?" as if asking a videographer watching through his lens the destruction, relating us back to the beginning of "shoot him, shoot him!". Only in the credits do we understand that this footage is from Ramattan News Agency.

Text is rich with information, has a clear and strong opinion. The texts reflect and communicate a sequence of personal events in Alsharif's life. The emotions, impressions, domestic environment, music, conveyed in the film and the way they interact with factual information and history, such as in dates, photos, measurements of shapes and distances, ecology books, natural documentaries, war news, one understands Alsharif's perspective on the war and her state of mind, all the while still maintaining the freedom to criticize our so-called leadership. The text is descriptive and interrelated with a sequence of external events that take place, for example the changing weather, looking at a book, playing a game, reading about the virgin forest. The text responds directly to Lopate's five qualities of an essay film. As we can see the text exists, in a single voice, represents a coherent positionality on the war on Gaza, and is both written and narrated beautifully, eloquently, all the while captivating the audience. Alsharif uses long shots where very little happens: the frozen landscape with the sun slowly rising; a sheet carried from one end of a park in between two trees. While we wait for any action to take place, we are forced to pay attention to the words either written on the text, or to pay attention to the narration. This emphasis of the text reminds us of the importance of what she is trying to convey in the lyricism of the written word and makes us reflect on the meaning. She engages us to not pay too much attention to the image but to the written text. Similarly to Marker, Alsharif does not give importance to the sequence of the shots, but uses shots that allow us to refocus onto the words used, "Marker brings to his films an absolutely new notion of montage that I will call "horizontal," as opposed to traditional montage that plays with the sense of duration through the relationship of shot to shot. Here, a given image doesn't refer to the one that preceded it, or the one that will follow, but rather it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said." (Bazin, 1958).

## THE STORY OF MILK AND HONEY (2011)

SD video - 2011 - duration 9:54

Translation and voice-over narration: Mahmoud Chrieh

Music: *The Greatest Homeland*, Abdel Halim Hafez

Music: *Love Stories*, Najat Al Sagheera

Produced with the Fundacion Marcellino Botin, Grant for Visual Arts Fund

### SYNOPSIS

Basma Alsharif spends time in Beirut producing this film in the midst of an art residency. *The Story of Milk & Honey* is primarily an installation of a much larger project comprised of “photographic images, reproduced texts, pencil drawings and a video narrated by an anonymous man who details a failure at attempting to write a love story in Beirut, Lebanon” (Alsharif, 2011). Alsharif wanted to create a piece that had a bit darker humor than her previous film, *We Began by Measuring Distance*. The details of the film are documented as a collection of “66 individual photographs that were secretly shot on Beirut’s Corniche, faces erased from family albums, and re-drawn natural history illustrations that lack the word “Plant.” The larger art installation displays the images in a gallery transformed by wall-to-wall AstroTurf along with real and fake plants scattered across the space” (ibid). The artist explains that “[t]hrough a delicate weaving of fact and fiction, a tale of defeat transforms into a multi-layered journey exploring how we collect information, perceive facts and recreate history to serve our own desires” (ibid).

### VIDEO

A VIDEO TITLED

MILK AND HONEY

THIS STORY BEGINS AND ENDS WITH US

WHO WITNESSED THE INCONSOLABLE GRIEF OF A WOMAN

WHO SUFFERED FROM A POWERFUL LOVE

SHE LIVED IN A WELL KEPT HOME

SIMULTANEOUSLY FACING THE RISING AND SETTING OF THE SUN

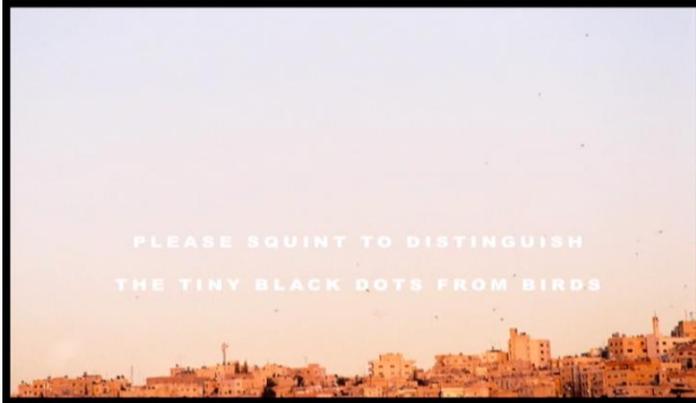
MIDWAY BETWEEN THE COAST AND THE MOUNTAIN’S PEAK

OUR STORY, WHICH IS HERS

DOES NOT BEGIN FROM HERE

THE ORIGINS ARE SET IN A TOWN OF THE OUTSKIRTS OF BUHAYRA (lake)  
ON THE DUSK OF A DAY WHEN THE SKY WAS FULL OF KITES  
LINING THE HORIZONS

PLEASE SQUINT TO DISTINGUISH THE TINY BLACK DOTS FROM BIRDS



FROM UNDER HER WINDOWS  
ALWAYS FLOODED WITH SUN  
SHE APPEARED TO US  
ONLY IN SILHOUETTE  
DRAWN BY HER VOICE  
AS IT SPILLED ONTO OUR STREETS  
WE ALL AGREED  
THAT IT HAD BEEN HEAVY  
WITH A FEELING WE ALL SHARED  
WE WILL NEVER REALLY KNOW  
HOW THEY INTERACTED  
IN THEIR FIRST INSTANCES TOGETHER  
WE REPLAY IT IN MEMORY  
TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE EVENTS  
THAT WOULD FOLLOW UNFOLDED



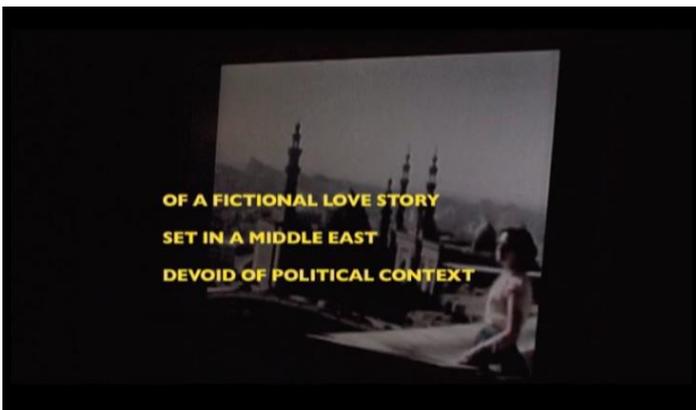
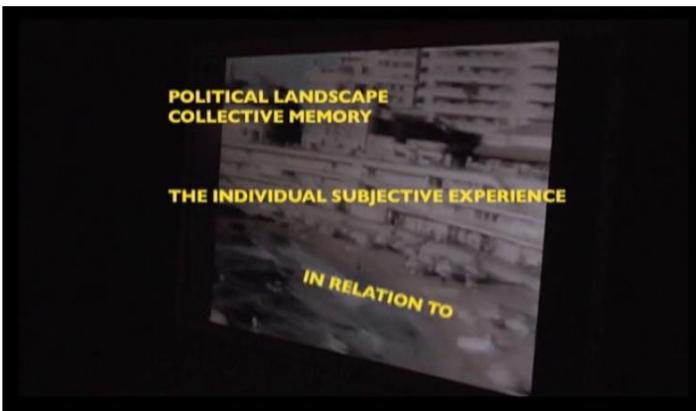
HELLO.

I MOVED TO BEIRUT, LEBANON  
TO PRODUCE A SET OF INTER-RELATED PROJECTS  
MAINLY FILM, PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND TEXT  
THE PROJECTS ALL DEAL WITH THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY  
IN RELATION TO THE INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

I WILL TRY TO EXPLAIN  
WITH AS MANY UNNECESSARY DETAILS  
AS POSSIBLE

I WANTED TO PLAY WITH SOUND AND LANGUAGE  
THROUGH THE COLLECTIVE TELLING OF A FICTIONAL LOVE STORY  
SET IN THE MIDDLE EAST  
DEVOID OF POLITICAL CONTEXT

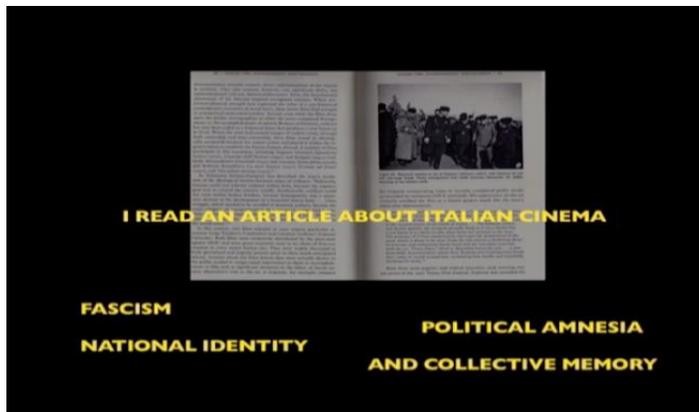
IT WAS MEANT TO BE AN EXPERIMENT  
WITH DETAILS ALLUDING TO SITES, HISTORIES, AND FACTUAL CHARACTERISTICS  
DESCRIBING THE VARIOUS REGIONS OF THE LEVANT  
VAGUELY WEAVING IN RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES



THE UNDERLYING ELEMENT OF THE PROJECT LAY  
IN CONFUSING  
LOVE BETWEEN TWO HUMAN BEINGS  
AND A HUMAN BEING'S LOVE FOR HIS NATION

(SOUND: SONG, THE GREATEST HOMELAND) <sup>6</sup>

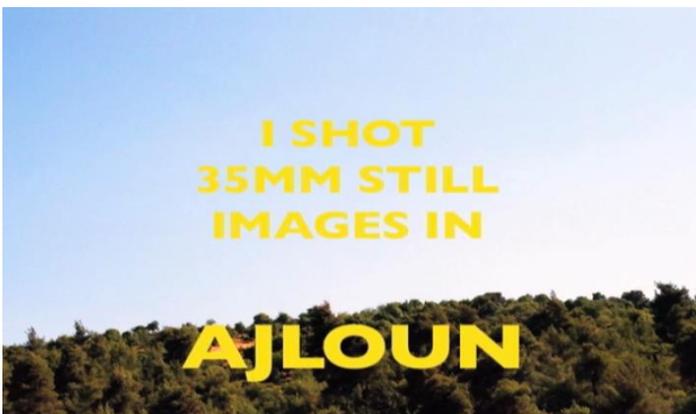
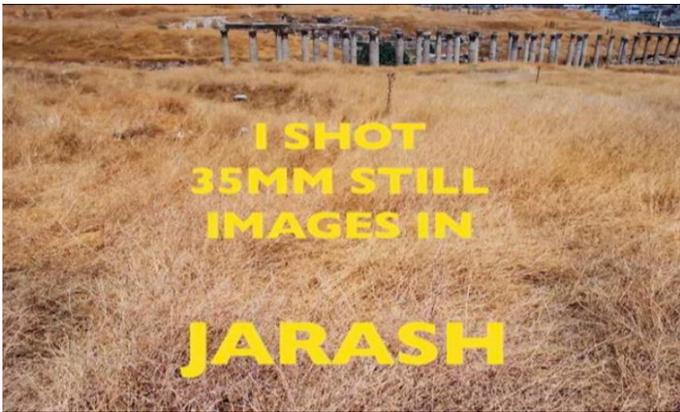
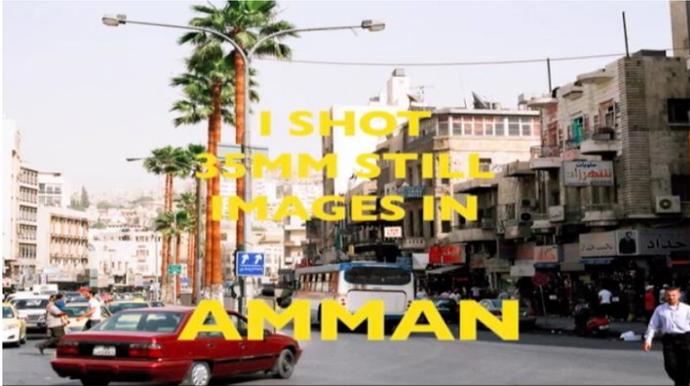
I LOOKED AT PRE-ISLAMIC HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EAST,  
TRADE ROUTES ACROSS THE LEVANT,  
PRE-COLONIAL MAPS AND COLONIAL MAPS,  
WHERE THE FIRST INHABITANTS TO PALESTINE SETTLED  
AND WHO THEY WERE,  
I COMPILED OLD ARABIC LOVE SONGS AND PATRIOTIC ANTHEMS,  
I READ AN ARTICLE ABOUT ITALIAN CINEMA, FASCISM, POLITICAL AMNESIA, NATIONAL  
IDENTITY, AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY



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<sup>6</sup>**Al-Watan Al-Akbar** (Arabic: الوطن الأكبر, translated **The Greatest Homeland**) was an **Arab Nationalist** song composed by the Egyptian **Mohammed Abdel Wahab** in 1960.  
Song: <https://vimeo.com/108696974>

I SHOT 35 MM STILL IMAGES IN AMMAN, JARASH, AJLOUN



I WROTE A LOVE STORY  
THAT PARTIALLY PLAGIARIZES  
THE SONG OF SONGS,  
I TRANSLATED THE SCRIPT TO ARABIC

AND EVENTUALLY REALIZED  
THAT I COULD NOT KEEP TRACK OF MY RESEARCH  
OR WHAT TO DO WITH THE MATERIALS I HAD COLLECTED

(SOUND: SONG, LOVE STORIES )



EVERY TIME I WANTED TO DESCRIBE MY PROJECT  
I WOULD LIE.  
SOMETIMES, I WOULD DESCRIBE THE LOVE AFFAIR  
AS SUCCESSFUL  
THAT PALESTINIAN REFUGEES WOULD  
UNITE TO  
SING A LOVE SONG TOGETHER  
AT THE END OF THE STORY

OTHER TIMES,  
I WOULD SAY THAT THE LOVE AFFAIR HAD FAILED  
THAT IT ENDED WITH  
BETRAYAL AND DEGRADATION  
WHICH WOULD ACTUALLY BE  
A CONCISE DESCRIPTION OF GAZA

AFTER ISRAEL'S ATTACKS

I IMAGINED EROTIC SCENES

OF LANDSCAPES

ACCOMPANIED BY TEXT THAT SAID THINGS LIKE

*"AS2AST WRA2 SHAJARAK", "TIL7EEM JISRAK", "MUDA3ABET TRABAK"*



WHAT I WAS LEFT WITH

WAS A VIDEO THAT HAD NO IMAGES

A LOVE STORY THAT WAS NOT GENUINE

UNCLEAR QUESTIONS ABOUT NATIONALISM

I DECIDED TO EXPLORE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ENDLESS TRAVEL,

ISOLATION

AND ESCAPISM

I DISCOVERED A LETTER WITH NO ENVELOPE OR ADDRESS

SENT FROM EUROPE

LOST BETWEEN TWO PILES OF FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

IN THE LETTER WAS WRITTEN

(IN FRENCH, TRANSLATED):

WE REALLY HOPE THAT YOUR FAMILY WAS NOT DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY THE RECENT EVENTS

WE PRAY THAT THE SITUATION CALMS SOON

AFTER THE TERRIBLE PERIOD THAT YOUR COUNTRY HAS PASSED THROUGH

I FOUND THAT AN ALTERNATE SPELLING HAD BEEN RECOMMENDED

BY THE FRENCH

FOR THE WORD:

ÉVÈNEMENT,

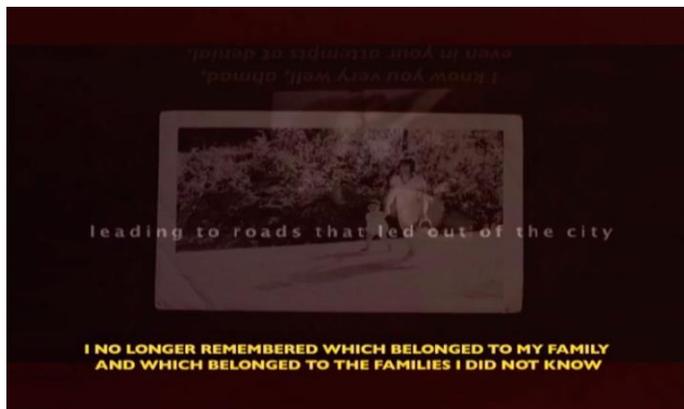
IN 1990 OF THE ACCENT AIGU ON THE SECOND E TO BE CHANGED TO ACCENT GRAVE



I ERASED THE FACES FROM OLD FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS. AND THEN I ERASED THE FACES FROM  
OLD PHOTOGRAPHS OF FAMILIES I DID NOT KNOW

ONCE ALL THE FACES HAD BEEN ERASED

I NO LONGER REMEMBERED WHICH BELONGED TO MY FAMILY AND WHICH BELONGED TO THE  
FAMILIES THAT I DID NOT KNOW



I ALSO ERASED ALL WORDS RELATING TO PLANTS

FROM NATURE BOOKS DESCRIBING PLANTS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT



AND REDREW THE ILLUSTRATIONS

AND FINALLY, I SECRETLY PHOTOGRAPHED PEOPLE ON THE CORNICHE IN BEIRUT ON SUNDAYS

EVENTUALLY,

THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO WRITE

THERE WAS NO RESEARCH TO UNCOVER

THERE WERE NO PHOTOGRAPHS TO TAKE

THERE WERE NO SONGS TO DISCOVER

ALL THAT REMAINED WAS

**A FAILED LOVE STORY**

**FAMILIES WITHOUT FACES**

**AGRICULTURAL BOOKS MISSING PLANTS**

**ANONYMOUS PEOPLE ON BEIRUT'S CORNICHE**

BUT THEN I REMEMBERED, THAT THE LOVE STORY WAS A PRETENSE FOR THE STORY OF MILK

AND HONEY



#### ANALYZING *THE STORY OF MILK AND HONEY*

*The Story of Milk and Honey* can be seen as forming a single perspective. At first this is confused, as the narrator is about to tell us the love story of a woman (which is also our story) but soon the same narrator starts speaking in the first person singular 'I'. This is when we understand that this is Alsharif, a woman, a Palestinian, telling us her story as she undergoes her research that is part of the projects she went to produce in Beirut. Here it is argued that Alsharif abandons the use of the general "we" as Palestinians, and relates her personal story in the first person, such as Arthur's (2003) theory that video essays "confound the perception of untroubled authority or comprehensive knowledge that a singular mode of address projects onto a topic", and recognizes that in this case, Alsharif's argument "proceed[s] from one person's set of assumptions, a particular framework of consciousness, rather than from a transparent, collective 'we'." Alsharif had wanted to weave a love story devoid of political content, one that strictly depicts her personal quest. But it was deemed a failure as she could not separate the political from the personal. Both personal and political have become one. "I WANTED TO PLAY WITH SOUND AND LANGUAGE, THROUGH THE COLLECTIVE TELLING OF A FICTIONAL LOVE STORY, SET IN THE MIDDLE EAST, DEVOID OF POLITICAL CONTEXT."

In *The Story of Milk and Honey*, Alsharif is working through a problem, alluding to several types of intersected narratives: “I WROTE A LOVE STORY, THAT PARTIALLY PLAGIARIZES, THE SONG OF SONGS”. One is the Jews’ love of the Promised Land<sup>7</sup> which is often referred to as *The Land of Milk and Honey*’ according to the Old Testament. *The Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon)* also comes from the Old Testament, a love story interpreted as a poem speaking of the relationship between a people and a nation: “your lips, my bride, drip like the honeycomb. Honey and milk are under your tongue. The smell of your garments is like the smell of Lebanon” (Siriex, 2014). The love story Alsharif is also referencing the Palestinian love and attachment to Palestine, the so-called *Right of Return* to a land they had been so brutally forced out of, by the very same people to whom the land had been “promised” to, the Arab nations in the heat of the pan-Arab movement.

The video plays the Arabic song “*The Greatest Homeland*” (*Al Watan Al Akbar*)<sup>8</sup> implying a third narrative Basma alludes to: the failed dream of Pan-Arab nationalism that came to a halt in the Six Day War of 1967, as already described in the literature review. There is an embedded cynicism using this song and the one of Najat al Sagheera. Both of these artists were mouth pieces of the regime to encourage a larger pan-Arab movement, a movement Basma questions throughout the piece, claiming it failed and is instead the root of betrayal rather than support for the Palestinian cause. Alsharif tries to reason the feeling of betrayal by other Arab countries, eventually leading to more and more disappointments, the current occupation of Palestine, and the never realized dream of Arab unity. Alsharif tries to follow a reasoned line of thinking to find answers to her questions, which is reflected in the way she constructs her text. She explains her questions, doubts, criticisms, in the very same way that she is thinking about them. Alsharif (2010) explains, “there is so much of it to remember and it’s very eventful. There’s tons of things to constantly keep track of and I think for me it is just about a story that you have to remember and you can’t and you don’t know what’s the truth and what’s not the truth and what that even means to have a Promised Land and to have a Right of Return if you have never been to that region or you have never seen there, so I thought for me that title frames that kind of story-telling that happens in that piece.”

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<sup>7</sup>(Hebrew: הארץ המובטחת, translit.: *ha'aretz hamuvtakhat*; Arabic: أرض الميعاد, translit.: *ard al-mi'ad*; also known as “*The Land of Milk and Honey*”) is the land which, according to the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), was promised and subsequently given by God to Abraham and his descendants, and in modern contexts an image and idea related both to the restored Homeland for the Jewish people and to salvation and liberation is more generally understood.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aF9YHpnw-0>

The deeper need of the conciliation of a human tragedy is often felt in Alsharif's text, insinuating the 'Right of Return': the deep love and longing to go (back) home which is present among Palestinian refugees' collective memory scattered across the world. Alsharif is also referring to her own circumstance of not being able to go back to Palestine. In the introductory exhibition handout written by Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan, Alsharif expresses her distress of not being able to re-enter her ancestral homeland, 'The Promised Land' (Siriex, 2014), and then we started to understand her relationship to the 'love story', "SOMETIMES, I WOULD DESCRIBE THE LOVE AFFAIR AS SUCCESSFUL, THAT PALESTINIAN REFUGEES WOULD UNITE TO SING A LOVE SONG TOGETHER AT THE END OF THE STORY, OTHER TIMES, I WOULD SAY THAT THE LOVE AFFAIR HAD FAILED THAT IT ENDED WITH BETRAYAL AND DEGRADATION WHICH WOULD ACTUALLY BE A CONCISE DESCRIPTION OF GAZA AFTER ISRAEL'S ATTACKS" .

To reiterate Biemann (2003), essayist practice is particularly relevant to the study of "movements, diaspora, dislocation and migration", what makes it a relevant approach used by postcolonial artists (as in the case of Alsharif) to address "their own diasporic and stateless situations and what makes them great essayists as well because their past is a splintered reality". In this case it is a running theme for Alsharif, born as a Palestinian refugee in Kuwait, and living her nomadic life in between the US and France, "*I DECIDED TO EXPLORE THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ENDLESS TRAVEL, ISOLATION AND ESCAPISM.*" Alsharif searches for threads in pre-colonial times: "I LOOKED AT PRE-ISLAMIC HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EAST, TRADE ROUTES ACROSS THE LEVANT, PRE-COLONIAL MAPS AND COLONIAL MAPS, WHERE THE FIRST INHABITANTS TO PALESTINE SETTLED AND WHO THEY WERE." But she found they were futile experiments. In describing photo albums and the erasure of history, the erasure of plants, of what links us to the past suddenly becomes a blur. Similar to the Israeli occupation and the way they systematically work to make Palestinians doubt their history and their roots and whatever makes them indigenous or real. So what if the same were to happen on Beirut's corniche? "I ALSO ERASED ALL WORDS RELATING TO PLANTS FROM NATURE BOOKS DESCRIBING PLANTS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT AND REDREW THE ILLUSTRATIONS EVENTUALLY, THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO WRITE THERE WAS NO RESEARCH TO UNCOVER THERE WERE NO PHOTOGRAPHS TO TAKE THERE WERE NO SONGS TO DISCOVER ALL THAT REMAINED WAS A FAILED LOVED STORY FAMILIES WITHOUT FACES AGRICULTURAL BOOKS MISSING PLANTS ANONYMOUS PEOPLE ON BEIRUT'S CORNICHE". Here, we are reminded that a colonizer is successful to erase history and

people's relationship to the past, to disassociate a people from the love story of their homeland becomes, "THAT THE LOVE STORY WAS A PRETENSE FOR THE STORY OF MILK AND HONEY".

The story is told by a male voice-over, narrating over written text using language that is eloquent, well-written, and interesting. At times it is poetic, melancholic, dramatic, and often contradictory; "forcing things together that don't belong together"(Alsharif, 2013) such as, "SIMULTANEOUSLY FACING THE RISING AND SETTING OF THE SUN, MIDWAY BETWEEN THE COAST AND THE MOUNTAIN'S PEAK, THE INCONSOLABLE GRIEF OF A WOMAN WHO SUFFERED FROM A POWERFUL LOVE, DRAWN BY HER VOICE AS IT SPILLED ONTO OUR STREETS, and such. The reader is hereby invited to find more of those and holds on in excitement throughout the video.

FARTHER THAN THE EYE CAN SEE (2012)

Single Channel video, duration 12:56

Voiceover: Huda Abdel-Shafi +Victor Zazelic

Music: Recuerdos de la Alhambra, Francisco Tarrega, Performed on violin by Joseph Colome San Salvador, El Salvador, Orquesta Nacional de El Salvador 18-10-2007

Quote: Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

CO-produced by: The Sharjah Art Foundation and The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture

## SYNOPSIS

"In a story whose ending is unknown, the tracing of how events unfold is a journey backwards towards a place that no longer exists. *Farther Than the Eye Can See* uses the landscape of the Emirates as an indistinct urban space that appears new, uninhabited, and with a vague promise of something better. It also forms the backdrop for the voice of a woman recounting her story of the *Nakba* (the mass exodus of Palestinians from Jerusalem in 1948) beginning with the arrival and ending with the departure. What lies ahead is beyond the range of vision as what came before is becoming a faded memory" (Alsharif, 2012).

As the text starts to be narrated by two voice-over, I hereby refer to (M) as the male narrating in English, while (W) refers to the woman narrating in Arabic

AND THERE IS A QUOTE  
AFTER YOU TELL ME YOUR STORY FROM THE END  
WE'LL TRAVEL BACKWARDS TOGETHER  
TILL WE REACH ITS BEGINNING

(SOUND: CLAPPING AND THEN CLASSICAL MUSIC)





**START**

**DEBUT**

بداية

OUTSIDE IN THE GARDEN IT WAS PLAYTIME, NAKED IN THE WARM JUNE SUNSHINE, SIX OR SEVEN HUNDRED LITTLE BOYS AND GIRLS WERE RUNNING WITH THRILLED YELLS OVER THE LAWNS, WERE PLAYING WALL GAMES, WERE SQUATTING SILENTLY IN TWOS AND THREES AMONG THE FLOWERING SHRUBS, THE ROSES WERE IN BLOOM, TWO NIGHTINGALES SOLILOQUISE IN THE BOSCAJE, A COUCOU WAS JUST GOING OUT OF TUNE AMONG THE LIME TREES. THE AIR WAS DROWSY WITH THE MURMUR OF BEES AND A HELICOPTER



M: YOU ARE TELLING US A STORY THAT BEGINS IN 1948 IN CAIRO

M: YOUR FAMILY HAD RENTED A HOUSE IN JERUSALEM

AND YOU WAITED FOR YOUR FATHER  
WHO HAD STAYED BEHIND IN JERUSALEM  
ESCAPING AFTER A PERIOD OF TIME, YOU NO LONGER REMEMBER  
IN A CONVOY WITH MANY OTHERS

W: I DO NOT KNOW, I HAVE A VAGUE MEMORY  
AFTER US WITH HOW MANY MONTHS  
THEY OCCUPIED WEST JERUSALEM IN TOTAL  
AND STARTED STRIKING THE OLD CITY  
WE SPENT SEVERAL MONTHS  
MY FATHER IN JERUSALEM

M: YOUR JOURNEY WAS MADE IN A LARGE TAXI  
CARRYING YOUR MOTHER, YOUR GRANDMOTHER  
AND MOTHER'S GRANDMOTHER  
WHO WERE ALL THE TIME READING VERSES FROM THE KORAN  
UNTIL YOU REACHED THE BORDER

W: WHAT I CAN REMEMBER IS THAT WE WERE SITTING AND READING THE KORAN  
AND THEY WERE STRIKING,  
THEY WERE ALL ARMED  
THEY MAY HAVE HIT US AND THE COLONIES WE WOULD PASS,  
THE DRIVER WAS SAYING THAT

M: ALONG WITH THE FIVE OF YOU  
WHO COULD NOT CARE LESS  
BECAUSE YOU WERE CHILDREN  
YOU REMEMBER OVERHEARING THE DRIVER SAY  
I AM TRAVELING UNDER DANGEROUS CIRCUMSTANCES  
HE SAID THE COLONIES WERE ARMED  
AND CIVILIAN CARS WERE TARGETS  
IT WAS A RENTED CAR  
YOUR FATHER KNEW THE DRIVER

W: PEOPLE OF THE NORTH USED TO GO UP TO LEBANON  
THE NEXT DAY HE PUT US IN THE CAR  
I REALLY REMEMBER, I WAS VERY EXCITED ACTUALLY

WE WERE HAPPY SCHOOL WAS OFF  
AND THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED  
WE FELT VERY SECURE  
BUT WHEN MY FATHER CAME AND TOLD US  
NOT A SINGLE DAY YOU WOULD STAY WITH THE CHILDREN  
THEY SLAUGHTERED THE PEOPLE  
THEY RIPPED OPEN PREGNANT WOMEN'S BELLIES  
MY FATHER CAME TELLING MY MOTHER  
OF COURSE HE DID NOT WANT US TO LISTEN

M: HE HAD COME HOME TREMBLING  
WITH THE NEWS OF THE MASSACRE OF DEIR YASSIN  
THAT WAS WHEN HE TOLD YOUR MOTHER  
THE TIME HAD COME TO LEAVE  
IT WAS NO LONGER SAFE FOR YOU TO STAY  
AND LIVE IN THE OLD CITY  
WHERE YOU FOUND OTHER SCHOOL CHILDREN THAT YOU KNEW  
YOUR FATHER AND SEVERAL OF HIS NEIGHBORS HAD HEARD  
THE CONVENT INSIDE THE WALLS OF THE OLD CITY  
HAD OPENED THEIR DOORS FOR PEOPLE TO COME AND STAY

W: AS CHILDREN THERE WE REJOICED  
AND MY FATHER HAD AGREED WITH HIS NEIGHBORS HIS FRIENDS  
I DO NOT REMEMBER SO WELL  
AND THEY GAVE US ROOMS IN ACCORDANCE WITH OUR NUMBERS  
INSIDE THE OLD CITY WERE CONVENTS  
THEY OPENED THEIR DOORS FOR PEOPLE TO COME AND STAY

M: YOU WERE MAYBE ONE OF THE LAST TO LEAVE  
AS THOUGH YOU WERE GOING FOR A PICNIC WITH TWO SMALL BAGS  
THE KEY OF YOUR HOUSE IN INSIDE YOUR FATHER'S POCKET  
YOUR FRIENDS WERE ALL SLOWLY LEAVING  
YOUR NEIGHBORS WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE  
HAD ALREADY LEFT  
EVERYONE BELIEVED IT WAS ONLY TEMPORARY  
YOU WERE WAITING ON THE ARAB NATIONS

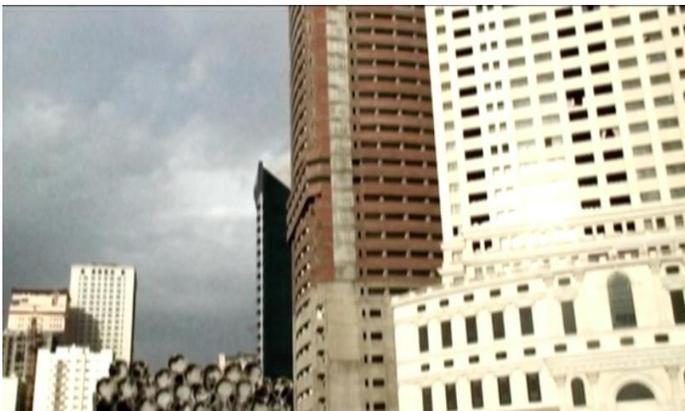
THE SITUATION WAS GROWING MORE AND MORE TENSE  
SLOWLY EVERYONE BEGAN TO FLEE THEIR HOMES  
JERUSALEM WAS DIVIDED INTO ZONES  
GUARDED BY BRITISH SOLDIERS  
AND EVERYTIME YOUR FATHER WANTED TO LEAVE  
HE NEEDED A PERMIT

w: REPEATING ABOVE

M: THERE WERE BATTLES AND THE SITUATION WAS VERY TENSE  
YOU WERE LIVING IN A RESIDENTIAL AREA  
NAMED KATAMON IN WEST JERUSALEM  
WHEN YOU ESCAPED TO EGYPT  
UNTIL YOU WERE TEN YEARS  
YOU WENT TO SCHOOL THAT BELONGED TO NUNS  
IN WEST JERUSALEM  
IT WAS CALLED DAMES DE SION

w:REPEATING ABOVE

M: YOUR FIRST MEMORY IS OF YOUR MOTHER  
SHOWING YOU WHERE YOU WERE BORN IN WEST JERUSALEM  
IN A GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL  
UNDER THE BRITISH MANDATE  
IN 1937 JERUSALEM



## ANALYZING *FATHER THAN THE EYE CAN SEE*

The film starts with a hint to the viewer: we will start from the end, and tell the story backwards. Be prepared for the ride. A lingering applause and cheering. At times you wonder if it will end. Why are they applauding? Who are they cheering for? A male narrator starts reading quoted text from Aldous Huxley's famous dystopian novel *Brave New World*. It sets up the viewer for the next phase: it is a summer June day with hundreds of children playing, birds singing, and the sounds of a helicopter. We are then transferred to the next stage of the film, the *Nakba*, or mass exodus etched in Palestinian collective memory.

The story is narrated more like a live testimony, a live witness of that tragedy, a medium that is often used to retell the stories of the *Nakba* because there is no video footage available of that scene. The *Nakba* lives only in oral history memory as the grandchildren of that tragic event and our larger collective memory as Palestinians, and the video affirms that. We are only left with our imagination of the events transpired as told by our parents and grandparents. Alsharif does not delve into the atypical representation of Palestine and "Palestinian-ness" like her nationalistic predecessors described in the literature review. In fact, she is against representation altogether, "as soon as I record something on celluloid or video it becomes two-dimensional. They become one part of a system of semiotics that betrays their agency" (Alsharif, 2015). At first the story is told in a linear historical way: the female narrator recounting her feeling of being a child, the conversations taking place around her, and the excitement she felt when she heard there wouldn't be school anymore, and suddenly she was moving to Cairo.

The images almost too difficult to watch, we are forced to listen and reflect on the absurdity and naivety of a child witnessing a difficult moment in her people's history without fully comprehending it: watching the destruction and fear, but only understanding that school is out. Then the story repeats itself but in an unstructured way. Where does the story begin, where does it end? Where does the story of the Palestinian narrative begin: pre-1948, during the tragedy of the *Nakba*, or once people were decentralized from their lives and had to restart in another country? Born to parents who were promised freedom, Alsharif is critical of their leadership who instead aided and abetted the Zionist state "EVERYONE BELIEVED IT WAS ONLY TEMPORARY YOU WERE WAITING ON THE ARAB NATIONS". The narrator speaks of the British soldiers standing guard watching the

destruction, and waiting on the Arab nations to react, but it never came. The Palestinians were officially exiled.

Alsharif hints at the viewer to watch the film again from the beginning: “AND THERE IS A QUOTE AFTER YOU TELL ME YOUR STORY FROM THE END WE’LL TRAVEL BACKWARDS TOGETHER TILL WE REACH ITS BEGINNING”. If we are to rewatch the film from the beginning, we will then hear the applause that is stuck at the start but is actually meant to be at the end of the film. Applause to the Zionist leaders that have successfully exiled a people. An applause to the Arab leaders that stood by and did nothing in reaction. An applause to the British soldiers watching over the destruction.

Alsharif’s footage was taken from where she was living at the time. She documents a landscape that looks devoid of people and abandoned. While we know it is a place with a modern city with a hefty skyline (Dubai), we ask ourselves whether this concrete jungle is the space of destruction itself. Arthur (2003) affirms the difference between documentary and essay films, that “while all documentary films retain an interest in some portion of the world out there—recording, and less frequently interrogating, at times with the intent to persuade and with varying degrees of attention to formal issues—the essayist’s gaze is drawn inward with equal intensity”. So to the audience experiences -- the visuals document a space difficult to watch, the voice over documents a history, but Alsharif forces the viewer’s gaze into oneself, listening to the narrative and questioning the meaning. The sequence of the non-linear text, matched with the difficult edit of flashing and interrupted images, the viewer starts to undergo a visceral body experience and forced to just pay attention to the narration or even close your eyes and try just to listen. Video essays use a visual representation of a written essay to present a personal idea or a subjective argument. They combine text with visuals, making reflectivity and subjectivity two characteristics mostly associated with the video essay. Video essays’ “non-linear and non-logical movement of thought” draws on many sources of knowledge to support one’s perspective (Biemann, 2003). They are highly self-reflexive as they are “consciously engaged in the activity of representation itself, their main purpose is not to document reality but goes towards ‘organizing complexities’”(ibid).

HOME MOVIES GAZA (2013)

SD Video - 2013 - duration 24:08

Voices: Huda Abdel Shafi, Osama abu Middain

Voice over script, *Lord of the flies*: William Golding

Girl on cello: Lama al Shurafa

Music: *The love that Was* (Once Upon a Time) Abdel Wahab Doukali

Produced with: Galerie Iman Fares, Paris France

## SYNOPSIS

Alsharif returns to Gaza for the first time in 10 years. *Home Movies Gaza* “introduces us to the Gaza Strip as a microcosm for the failure of civilization. In an attempt to describe the everyday of a place that struggles for basic human rights, this video claims a perspective from within the domestic spaces of a territory that is complicated, derelict, and altogether impossible to separate from its political identity” (Alsharif, 2013).

The video places us in Gaza City/Gaza Strip, observing moving images of the city, its landscape, its walls, buildings, graffiti, streets, passersby, until we arrive to images (shot in reverse) of the sea, as though we are about to be transferred to a story of the past. Later, we get into the exploration of various houses in a sort of ‘home movies’ fashion. We arrive at a house, in which a woman sits with a radio in her hands. We, then listen to her story as she narrates, in her words interwoven by scenes of the waves hitting the rocks, interwoven as well with words of another narrator (a man) who speaks on top of her voice. Into another house, we are now exploring the rooms; moving between guests’ room, kitchen, living room with a TV. The ‘continuity’ of the video is cut abruptly whereby a fly tries to flip back to its front, and from there we are transferred into a natural environment with olive trees and different animals; chicken, turkeys, peacocks, cats, fish, horses. And a meter, counting seconds and minutes. Back again inside a house, this time a young girl playing the cello. From an adjacent neighboring house, we hear a mother hysterically calling her little son to go inside. Another house, this time the backyard, with plants and trees.

The text will follow upon shots taken from a fast-moving car. The text in the video is spoken, subtitled and intertiled.



(SOUNDTRACK *ONCE UPON A TIME*)<sup>9</sup>



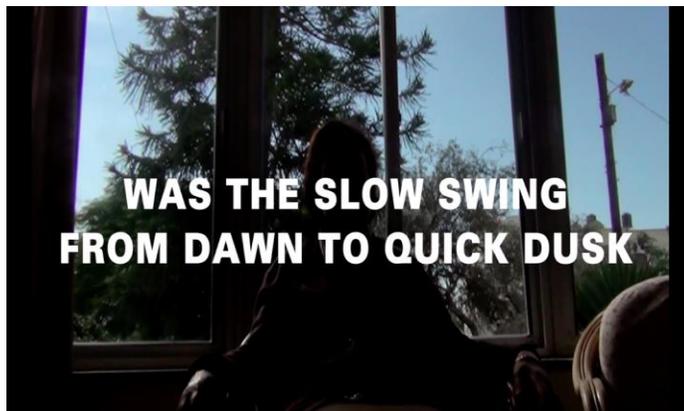
MINISTRY OF HEALTH, GAZA CITY:  
CONCERNING HEALTH CONDITIONS IN RELATION TO HUMAN RIGHTS

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVmu7fZRIwU>



**< MINISTER OF HEALTH, GAZA CITY:  
CONCERNING HEALTH CONDITIONS  
IN RELATION TO HUMAN RIGHTS >**



**WAS THE SLOW SWING  
FROM DAWN TO QUICK DUSK**

THE FIRST RHYTHM THAT THEY BECAME USED TO  
WAS THE SLOW SWING  
FROM DAWN TO QUICK DUSK  
THEY ACCEPTED  
THE PLEASURES OF MORNING

THE BRIGHT SUN  
THE WHELMING SEA  
AND SWEET AIR  
AS A TIME WHEN PLAY WAS GOOD  
AND LIFE SO FULL  
THAT HOPE WAS NOT NECESSARY  
AND THEREFORE FORGOTTEN

TOWARD NOON  
AS THE FLOODS OF LIGHT FELL  
MORE NEARLY TO THE PERPENDICULAR  
THE STARK COLORS OF THE MORNING  
WERE SMOOTHED IN PEARL  
AND OPALESCENCE

(SOUND: VOICE OVER SCRIPT OF A MALE NARRATOR HEARD OVER THE  
WOMAN'S VOICE)



STRANGE THINGS HAPPENED AT MIDDAY  
**STRANGE THINGS HAPPENED AT MIDDAY**

THE GLITTERING SEA ROSE UP  
**THE GLITTERING SEA ROSE UP**

MOVED APART IN PLANES OF BLATANT IMPOSSIBILITY  
**MOVES APART IN PLANES OF BLATANT IMPOSSIBILITY**

THE CORAL REEL

THE CORAL REEF

THE CORAL REEF AND THE FEW STUNTED PALMS

THE CORAL REEF AND THE FEW STUNTED PALMS

THAT CLUNG TO THE MORE ELEVATED PARTS

CLUNG TO THE MORE ELEVATED PARTS

WOULD FLOAT UP TO THE SKY

WOULD QUIVER, BE PLUCKED APART

WOULD QUIVER, BE PLUCKED APART

**WOULD QUIVER, BE PLUCKED APART**

**WOULD QUIVER, BE PLUCKED APART**

RUN LIKE RAINDROPS ON A WIRE

RUN LIKE RAINDROPS ON A WIRE

RUN LIKE RAINDROPS ON A WIRE



(SOUND:NOW ONLY MALE VOICE OVER SCRIPT CONTINUES)



AND SOMETIMES LAND LOOMED  
WHERE THERE WAS NO LAND  
THEY GREW ACCUSTOMED TO THESE MYSTERIES  
AND IGNORED THEM  
JUST AS THEY IGNORED THE MIRACULOUS, THROBBING STARS

**JUST AS THEY IGNORED  
THE MIRACULOUS, THROBING STARS**



THE NORTHERN EUROPEAN TRADITION  
OF WORK AND PLAY AND FOOD RIGHT THROUGH THE DAY  
MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR THEM TO ADJUST THEMSELVES WHOLLY TO THIS NEW RHYTHM  
THEY ATE MOST OF THE DAY  
PICKING FRUIT WHERE THEY COULD REACH IT  
AND NOT PARTICULAR ABOUT THE RIPENESS AND QUALITY  
THEY WERE USED NOW TO STOMACH ACHES  
AND A SORT OF CHRONIC DIARRHEA  
THEY SUFFERED UNTOLD TERRORS IN THE DARK  
AND HUDDLED TOGETHER FOR COMFORT  
(BIHADAF TA7QIQ IL SHAJA3A WEL RA7A IL NAFSIYYA)  
APART FROM FOOD AND SLEEP  
THEY FOUND TIME FOR PLAY  
AIMLESS AND TRIVIAL  
IN THE WHITE SAND BY THE BRIGHT WATER  
THEY CRIED FOR THEIR MOTHERS  
MUCH LESS OFTEN  
THAN MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED  
THEY WERE VERY BROWN  
AND FILTHY DIRTY

(SOUND: BACKGROUND STREET NOISE ONLY)



(SOUND: CHATTER, A HOUSE FULL OF PEOPLE)





(SOUND: TELEVISION)



(SOUNDS: PLANES)



(SOUND: PLANES AND HELICOPTERS AND TURKEYS AND BIRDS)



(SOUND: PLANES AND HELICOPTERS AND RAIN)





(SOUND: CELLO)



CHILD:WHAT?

HE'S HERE. OUTSIDE WITH US

MOTHER: WHY DID YOU GO OUTSIDE MAHMOUD?

DIDN'T I SAY NOT TO GO OUTSIDE?

ARE YOU CRAZY?

CHILD: YES. I'M CRAZY

(SOUND: WE HEAR A MAN REPEATING SLOGANS OF RESISTANCE) (AND THEN WEDDING MUSIC).

#### ANALYZING *HOME MOVIES* GAZA

The title of the film implies we will watch a series of home movies, intercut with people and festivities. But the reality is it is tense and lingering. Again, Alsharif uses text from a dystopian novel, *Lord of the Flies*, a story of children trapped on an uninhabited island. In the book they attempt to govern themselves, but form a sick society of power structures, good and evil, until their parents find them and they revert back to their original selves: crying children. The section Alsharif chooses for the voice-over speaks of a moment in the novel when the children start to accept their reality of hunger, hopelessness and forgotten in a far away place, but life continues as usual. So, we deduct she believes is the story of Gaza: while trapped in a far away and forgotten place, Gazans have no choice but to live life as usual. Children are forced to grow up and face the realities of life too early. In Alsharif's own words, "I felt that Gaza was the island the boys inhabit, but in reality,

one hundred years later” (Alsharif, 2015). The main chunk of text is narrated by two voice-overs: one is male (which we cannot see) and the other female sitting with her back to the sea. Both of them narrate in Arabic, while the text appears on the images in English. Both voice-overs are repeating the same text (with a slight time lapse).

In *Home Movies Gaza*, Alsharif uses a radio slot that questions human rights violations that Palestinians in Gaza are forced to endure while under occupation. Israel has bombed a territory with 1.7 million inhabitants who have been occupied for decades, claiming it is defending itself. Alsharif tries to work out how the population of Gaza continue to live under such tragic and inhumane circumstances and realizes that people live life as usual as survival. To Alsharif (2015), “[t]he big surprise for me came in returning to Gaza after a ten-year absence to realize that people were living not *despite* the horrible circumstances they were being forced into but *beyond* it.” She adds, “[w]hen I was in Gaza, I spent a fair amount of time around people who were riding horses and putting on art exhibitions, and they weren’t doing it as a conscious act of resistance or defiance or proof there was life outside of struggle, but because they were human beings doing what human beings do”.

Then, there is the question of hope. How to hope in a place that is constantly under destruction? And how to even ask people to hope? Alsharif (2015) finds asking people to find hope in the face of so much injustice is insulting. “The population in Gaza had recognized, perhaps subconsciously, that civilization had failed. Even the ruins had been ruined, and people were finding ways not only to survive but to circumvent their impossible situations. I found it had less to do with hope and more about being really clever in finding ways to move past a failed civilization. Life was not just about having food, water, and shelter but also about prospering and being involved in activities that have nothing to do with survival, to continually exist in the moment post-disaster” (Ibid).

There is little narration in the film, only that of *Lord of the Flies* in the beginning, but then we stick to images. Alsharif uses long moving shots: her filming the landscape from a car, the sea,

the chickens and turkeys, the images with the clock. In the background, we hear sounds of the object itself, but also further in the background is the sounds of helicopters of airplanes, making us feel tense. The images we watch are sometimes set to chrome. Arthur (2003) says that when the spoken narration is missing or restrained, the author takes over in another medium (i.e., visually) to replace the direct speech. The editing recalls Adorno's idea of the carpet, in which "thought does not advance in a single direction". The film's point is not to direct, but we understand that *Home Movies Gaza* is neither fun nor reminiscent, but creepy. Alsharif's tale requires no words, in which "the aspects of the argument interweave", allowing the beauty and intelligence of words to transfer also to the visual component: "The montage has been forged from ear to eye" (Rascaroli, 2008).

In conclusion to the analysis conducted on Alsharif's four videos *We Began by Measuring Distance*, *The Story of Milk and Honey*, *Farther than the Eye Can See*, and *Home Movies Gaza*, performed in line with Lopate's five qualities and other theorists, we can testify that the videos qualify as part of the video essay genre.

## 4.2 Discussion

This section ties the findings of Alsharif's video-essays with our initial research question: how does Basma Alsharif's work bring a new discourse to Palestinian filmmaking by using video essays? What language is Basma Alsharif bringing to Palestinian cinema in general, and how is her use of video-essays a medium to help her get there? To answer these questions, we dig deeper into the themes and techniques she uses to convey her work, her relationship to audiences and reactions she invokes in her viewers.

Alsharif's use of video essays as a medium enables her to present and discuss a wide range of complex subjects at once. The narrative in all four films stem from a personal subjective perspective. She speaks of the Palestinian 'question' and all the complexity that surrounds it. She distances herself from the orientalist and nationalist discourse, while still giving herself the space to have an individualistic narrative. As discussed in the literature review, Palestinian filmmakers focus on the group struggle. She gives a distinct voice to the 'Palestinian struggle', a personal voice. She interweaves several conversations starting from her own personal journey, reflecting

back onto the Palestinian question. She tries to liberate herself from the atypical representation of Palestine. She calls herself “post-Palestinian”: waiting for the day Palestine is free so she can be free of her ‘Palestinian-ness’ (Alsharif, 2019).

The video essay genre allows Alsharif to visually and auditorily ‘write’ her complex thoughts as “contradictory, irrational, and fantastic” (Alter, 2002). She uses digital video facilities as new editing technologies make it easier to pile together an unlimited number of images, sound, titles, and running texts and “Stuff it! Distill it! Stratify and compress it! Seem to be the mottos of the digital essayist” (Biemann, 2003). Sivan (2019) writes about Alsharif’s films as, “history and space...represented through their multi-layers, multi-linear dimension. Images are given to see through other images, frames collapse into other frames, the space is familiar and anonymous, urban civilization and wildlife dissolve into each other, and past, present and future compose one timeline. What appears familiar and recognizable quickly unravels and asks our help to make sense of it.” Video essays being subjective, reflective and self-reflexive, remind us that Alsharif uses video essays to enable her space for non-linear thinking and uses this medium to place herself, her ideas and her message directly in the middle of the video-essay. Alsharif does not waste time trying to entertain her viewers. The medium she uses and abuses leaves the viewer with a visceral bodily reaction, through which she invites action from the viewers.

## Themes & Techniques

The themes predominant in Alsharif’s videos deal with some basic concepts: history as it is associated to statelessness, and who gets to own the official narrative; Gaza as the forgotten place, while at war or during peace; and the techniques used to draw the viewer into the film.

Driven by her own statelessness and nomadic experiences, Alsharif questions where is home, what is home, and what is this love for a homeland. The mass exodus of Palestinians in 1948, and the loss of one’s center and the collective memory that is built around that traumatic event: what is history and who narrates it? Being forced into exile creates this feeling that you have been decentralized. One moment you are in your core, and the next you are moved like in the case of *Farther than the Eye Can See*, to Cairo. In *The Story of Milk and Honey* when images and plants

are erased are instances that question control of narrative, and Alsharif moves in and out of the sequence: who recounts this story, and where does it begin and end? Does a people's story restart when you are moved to a new place? Alsharif says she is "interested in who gets to narrate history and how that changes our perception of history. What language is used to relate information, how information is translated, and the gender of speaker all colour the way we understand a story" (Alsharif, 2019). Alsharif suggests that we need to be skeptical about information, as neutrality does not exist but expresses relations of power as in *We Began By Measuring Distance*, "measure an apple and it turns out to be an orange; measure a peace agreement and it turns out to be a capitulation" (Marks, 2015). In Alsharif's own words, "[t]he work is about how, as a Palestinian, you're handed this information about the conflict," Alsharif said. "Numbers stop being numbers, 67 is never just 67... 48 is always the Nakba and 17 is always Balfour, and sometimes these numbers stop having meaning ... they just become images or things that we can't separate emotion from" (Alsharif, 2017). Alsharif further despairs whether images can do any good for Palestinians. "Handsome photographs of lost ways of life are devoid of meaning, mass-media images of Palestinian victims function like pornography, and haptic images are comforting pillows for the dying" (Marks, 2015). That is why Alsharif tries to create a new narrative, like in *Home Movies Gaza*. She breaks free of the typical victimized and tiring images of Palestinians and shows us that despite their feeling of depravity and anxiety (like in the background sounds and women worrying about their sons) people in Gaza are still in fact human, living in a home with televisions, continue to play music. In an interview with Basma Alsharif, she says "the immediacy of the everyday is at the heart of *Home Movies Gaza*. And the focus on day-to-day survival brought your focus to the quotidian space within conflict, where turkeys roam and people watch television and practice violin. Rife with turmoil, of course, but life still has to go on" (Nash, 2015) .

Alsharif's techniques are directly associated with the recurring themes in her video essays. Although she is critical of history, she researches and uses archival material as a reference point to guide the viewer by found footage, old photographs, sound (i.e. applause), patriotic music, and books to support her work. Her videos include text and images and creates relationships with historical references of an event and an old novel. She combines images with sound, weaves fact and fiction, constructs her videos in a manner that are not documentary style, but rather "drawn inward" (Arthur, 2003). She uses strong metaphorical connections like the television scene in

*Home Movies Gaza* from a National Geographic film: an elephant crowded by a group of lions eating on its skin, bleeding him, paralyzing him, fixing him motionless to the ground. The elephant is commonly known for its memory. Alsharif is perhaps making the metaphor of the collective memory of Palestinians represented by the elephant, while the lions are the Zionists, eating away and scarring this memory so brutally and mercilessly. All the while, we are reminded that we are watching TV in Gaza by a fuzzy satellite connection. She demonstrates this material to us in a non-linear way, the way our brains think, and the way in which video-essays are renowned for.

A central theme present in all her videos are the wars Israel waged on Gaza in 2008 and 2012 in which she questions and criticizes fundamental issues. Alsharif is trying to understand how to hope, how to survive in such inhumane conditions where basic human rights do not exist, and how Palestinians in Gaza not only endure, but thrive beyond it to live creatively surpassing their dead-ended political situation.

By borrowing text from William Golding's book *Lord of the Flies*, in *Home Movies Gaza*, Alsharif adheres it to the situation in Gaza. In *We Began by Measuring Distance* where we start and end with the 2008 war on Gaza and "*Shoot him! Shoot him!*" and so too in *Farther than the Eye can See* when the film starts at the end with the applause. The narratives become clear when we reach the end of the film (or restart it from the beginning): our thought process does not always start and end at the same point, but she uses this technique in her film to remind us that in real life, the story on Gaza simply does not end but is in an incessant loop.

The story is narrated in several ways in *Farther than the Eye can See*. Over the woman's narration of her story, Alsharif layers a male voice retelling or translating her story in English. Stults (2013) says "it's...a story told out of order (order in the Godardian sense: When asked whether a story should have a beginning, middle, and end, Jean--Luc Godard -- always quick with an aphorism -answered, "Yes, but not necessarily in that order." The speaker structures the woman's story in reverse, starting with the flight and ending with her birth. Effect and cause. Place out of time."

Plenty of visual effects are applied on almost every piece of footage in all four videos, “loops, things playing in reverse, overlaid images, non-diegetic sound, and chroma-keyed animals” (Alsharif, 2015). The material in *Home Movies Gaza* “was brought together to mimic footage from a home movie. It is meant to feel more straightforward or candid than my other works, where things are highly staged and heavily worked over. It was a strategy I used to show a place tainted by its political circumstance, with the contradiction being that the every day does play out innocently in this inescapable situation” (ibid).

Another theme that is distinguished in Alsharif’s videos is her questioning of the Arab leaders’ and how they betrayed Palestinians in their plight. Their absence in taking action amidst the continuous wars waged on Palestinians by Israel, and the failure of decades long peace-negotiations made on their behalf leading to never ending disappointments and a never ending occupation. Alsharif criticises notions of nationalism by interlacing love songs and patriotic anthems to cynically question the dream of an Arab unity. As a video essayist, this recurring narrative lets us not forget the Arab positionality while Palestinians were and continue to be under attack. Video essays challenge our senses, forcing us to embody the narrative found in the pieces. So too are Alsharif’s videos which continue to remind us of this distant dream of Arab unity -- one that died in our parents generation. She directly challenges their songs, leaders, and speeches: our generation is living through the fruits of your failure.

The effects of the techniques she uses in the images and sounds cause visceral bodily reactions, even directly addressing the viewer, such as when she abruptly asks the viewer to pay attention to some detail, in *The Story of Milk and Honey*: “PLEASE SQUINT TO DISTINGUISH THE TINY BLACK DOTS FROM BIRDS”. “When an image connects us to the information it enfolds, and that information in turn connects us to people and events—when it unfolds what had been hidden—we can receive this unfolding in our bodies, sometimes quite powerfully” (Marks, 2015). A physical reaction also happens in a shocking sequence like in *We Began by Measuring Distance*: just as the audience starts getting comfortable, dazzled and soothed by the contrast of waltz music playing in the background and a scene of the jelly-fish in a dance-like situation, we are overtaken by following footage of explosions. This shock might hit us in a way that we get goosebumps when we understand these are bombs falling onto Gaza in the brutal Israeli bombardment on December

2008. “I think it makes viewers more sensitive to the footage of the weeping, fleeing Gazans, which would not happen if Alsharif only showed images of them, whether haptic or optical” (ibid). These visceral effects can also be sensed in *Farther than the Eye Can See*, where the images are shuttered across the landscape of modern buildings, sped up to a point where you are constantly pausing the scenes. It forces the viewer to close one’s eyes as the images become impossible to follow and we succumb to the mere listening of the story as narrated by the exiled woman telling her story. Stults (2013) confirms that “Alsharif finds ways to scramble our physical and mental responses so that they can never get settled into the moment at hand. A distance always has to be crossed. A conversion always has to be navigated...it uproots viewers. It makes them flee the center. The experiential condition that arises allows for a bodily understanding of the larger political and intellectual issues at play” (ibid). And finally, Alsharif’s use of the camera, how she cuts between frames, how she uses speed, all relate back to video essays. Her technique to use words on a screen, not as subtitles but as a physical part of the film gives leeway for the viewer to not depend on sound, but to also watch the essay unfolds. It becomes a physical experience, requiring the viewer to use different senses to experience it.

Combining both Alsharif’s subject positionality as a “post-Palestinian” with the themes and techniques she uses in her visual, audio, and editing selections, Rascaroli (2008) summarizes that video-essayists “attract attention to the use of found footage and collage, which produces juxtaposition between the past tense of archival images and the present tense of the commentary, and in which the emphasis is on inquiry rather than on nostalgia.” Speaking of Alsharif’s style, we conclude the discussion section with Sivan (2019) description of her work, also befitting to her four works as video-essays:

“A fundamental component of the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle was and in some regards still is the struggle for a Palestinian image. A search for an image emancipated from its orientalist representations and projections. Alsharif is both confronted with a neo-Orientalist social projection and with a self-orientalist projection. This is why the emergency lays no more in the struggle for the recognition of the Palestinian image but rather

in the interrogation of these social and political projections-in the urgent exploration of the nature of the image and representation itself” (Sivan, 2019).

## 5. Conclusion

This thesis deals with the video-essay practice in the works of Palestinian artist and filmmaker Basma Alsharif. By analyzing four of her videos according to video-essay principles and accepting them as video-essays, we are able to introduce and place the video-essay practice in the context of Palestinian filmmaking, thus, diversifying Palestinian cinema, and contributing to a move away from nationalist discourse into individualist, subjective, self-reflexive video (essayistic) activism.

By revisiting the history of Palestinian cinema and examining the conditions under which this cinema came to fruition, what influenced it, and what it comprised, we are better able to understand the importance of introducing the video-essay practice into Palestinian cinema. Furthermore, by introducing the video-essay practice, and discussing some of its definitions, characteristics, and techniques, we are setting the groundwork for and encouraging other Palestinian artists and filmmakers to embark on their video essayistic journeys in addressing the Palestinian struggle.

In this thesis, Basma Alsharif is taken as a paradigm for Palestinian video-essay practice. In her four video essays, she has been able to present the Palestinian struggle through a totally new language of filmmaking. She wittedly inter-weaved text and visuals together in a way that enfolds multi-layered information and unfolds unexpected discourse, thus creating new meanings and understandings to Palestinian representation. By directly addressing her spectators, causing visceral and bodily affects through her techniques, she invites her audience to not be mere witnesses but to be involved, to act, to create, and be active contributors towards change.

While it may be argued that due to the complexity of thought produced in her video-essays and their relative ‘difficulty’ to watch and understand that it is not a cinematic mode that Palestinians need or would want to adopt right now. I assert, however, the opposite. We should not propagate this claim of “it is not what we need right now,” but rather we should embrace it for all its potential for a critical, personal, subjective, and self-reflexive position, as essays, as documents that enter and challenge the dominant historical discourse. I hereby encourage

Palestinian filmmakers to adopt this medium to better situate and question our own narrative, and for academics to conduct further research into Palestinian video essayists and Palestinian cinema as a whole.

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