

**LAS FIRMAS AUTORALES Y EL LENGUAJE CINEMATOGRAFICO DE ELIA SULEIMAN
COMO AUTOR EN EL CINE PALESTINO CONTEMPORÁNEO**

**ELIA SULEIMAN'S SIGNATURES AND CINEMATIC LANGUAGE AS AN AUTEUR IN
CONTEMPORARY PALESTINIAN CINEMA**

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Resumen

Suleiman es un cineasta palestino de renombre internacional cuyas películas han cautivado a audiencias internacionalmente y se han vuelto universales. Ha recibido elogios de numerosos críticos de todo el mundo y ha sido nominado para múltiples premios en festivales de cine internacionales, ganando varios de ellos. *Divine Intervention*, dirigida por Suleiman, ganó el Premio Elección del Jurado en el Festival de Cine de Cannes 2002, considerado como el segundo honor más significativo después de la Palma de Oro. Además, se convirtió en el primer director palestino en ganar un premio de la Academia de Cine Europea. A través del análisis del lenguaje cinematográfico y de los elementos recurrentes

en el cine de Elia Suleiman bajo la teoría del autor, se puede argumentar que Suleiman es un verdadero autor cuyo cine exhibe muchas firmas autorales: comedia negra, no linealidad y repetición, un estilo de edición distintivo, una cámara fija, silencio, autorreflexividad y un encuadre simétrico. Además, el tema principal de sus obras es la representación de las circunstancias sociopolíticas que rodean problemas de identidad y desplazamiento.

Abstract

Through an analysis of the cinematic language and recurring elements of Elia Suleiman's cinema under the auteur theory, it can be argued that Suleiman is a true auteur whose cinema exhibits many authorial signatures: black comedy, nonlinearity and repetition, a distinctive editing style, a fixed camera, silence, Self-reflexivity and a symmetrical frame. Furthermore, the primary theme of his works is the portrayal of socio-political circumstances surrounding issues of identity and displacement. Suleiman is a Palestinian filmmaker of international renown whose films have captivated audiences internationally and become universal. He has received critical acclaim from numerous worldwide critics and has been nominated for multiple awards at international film festivals, winning several of them. *Divine Intervention*, directed by Suleiman, won the Judges' Choice Award at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, which is regarded as the second-most significant honor after the Golden Palm. Furthermore, he became the first Palestinian director to win an honor from the European Film Academy.

Palabras clave

Elia Suleiman; Teoría de autor; Firmas autorales; Películas; Análisis.

Keywords

Elia Suleiman; Auteur theory; Authorial Signatures; Films; Analysis.

1. Introduction

Elia Suleiman's films turn everyday moments into powerful stories, using each well-chosen scene to convey without saying much. Suleiman's films transform daily events into potent dramas. His films, rich in humor, portray the realities of Palestinian life. Suleiman's work emphasizes the core elements of the auteur theory by also adopting approaches such as symmetric shots and stationary cameras, therefore highlighting his unique filmmaking technique.

The *politique de auteurs*, also referred to as the auteur theory, holds that the filmmaker is the *author* and that a film reflects his own aesthetic vision and style approach. American cinema critic Andrew Sarris is well known for having stated this concept. Consequently, a filmmaker's work shows a coherent artistic identity marked by recurrent motifs, visual components and procedures that help to differentiate the director's style (Sarris, 1963: 561).

In their book *A Companion to Film Theory*, Miller and Stam also explored the auteur concept, in which a filmmaker with a personal style and artistic vision infuses their work. Particularly connected with the French New Wave and the reviewers of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the concept of auteurism evolved as an artistic philosophy or movement (Miller & Stam, 2004: 10-11). Like a book reflects its author, auteurists hold that a film captures the director's creative vision. Emphasizing the director's influence on every element of the film—including mise-en-scène, character gestures, language and camera movements—this perspective stresses treating cinema as an art form driven by individual expression and the movement tried to erase the barriers between film criticism and filmmaking, stressing the director's artistic impact (Miller & Stam, 2004: 10-11).

François Truffaut's 1954 essay *A Certain Tendency in French Cinema*, introduced the groundbreaking perspective that the filmmaker is the true creator of a film. This viewpoint had already gained significant influence in the film culture by then. Moreover, Truffaut posited that a film made by an auteur is inherently superior to one created by a non-auteur. He also held the belief that quality is linked to the personality of the director:

Well – I do not believe in the peaceful co-existence of the «Tradition of Quality» and an «auteur's cinema». Basically, Yves Allegret and Delannoy are only caricatures of Clouzot,

of Bresson. It is not the desire to create a scandal that leads me to depreciate a cinema so praised elsewhere. I rest convinced that the exaggeratedly prolonged existence of psychological realism is the cause of the lack of public comprehension when faced with such new works. (Truffaut, 1954, p. 16)

Peter Wollen, a film theorist and filmmaker, lauded in his essay *The Auteur Theory* those filmmakers whose styles are distinctive yet not superficial (Wollen, 2018: 80). Going back to Sarris, who suggested three fundamental criteria for a director to attain the status of an auteur in his publication *Note on the Auteur Theory*: (1) technical proficiency; (2) a distinctive aesthetic approach; (3) interior meaning that emerges from the interplay between the director's personality and the material. From an auteurist perspective, a key condition to attaining auteur status is to possess the required directorial qualifications, implying that an auteur must possess the fundamental aptitude to employ cinematic techniques. Furthermore, it is imperative for an auteur to maintain coherence throughout their works. This means that an auteur possesses a distinct refined approach to organizing and presenting various cinematic elements on screen, commonly referred to as *mise-en-scène*. The third and final criterion for identifying an auteur is the expression of the filmmaker's ideologies and personal preoccupations that emerge from the conflict between their personality and the given material (Sarris, 1963: 562).

Suleiman, who was born in 1960 in Nazareth (Shilina, 2013: 4), is a perfect fit for these three criteria of Sarris' auteur theory. Like other film auteurs, the Palestinian filmmaker's cinema can be recognized by its distinctive features. While Suleiman was in exile, he began experimenting with filmmaking, developing his signature style of *complicatedly simple* layering of static frames, synchronized action, minimal conversation, and nonlinear plots (Sulieman, 2003: 67). When he returned home, and after his arrival in Nazareth, Suleiman started an independent study of film by collecting literature from his sibling, who was employed at Haifa University during that period. Through his self-education, he initiated the development of his distinctive style in the field of cinema (Hudson, 2017: 86). He states: «I started to read Godard, for example, and suddenly I felt that I was not a lonely voice, that I belonged to a sect of people who were rebellious against narrative structure as such, and that they were there in force and that I could belong and I could nourish myself» (Dabashi, 2006: 149). Additionally, his early efforts in exile prepared the ground for his three lengthy

works of fiction: *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, *Divine Intervention*, and *The Time That Remains* (Gugler, 2015: 78). Due to the fact that he discovered film mainly through self-education, his film style and its evolution were more significantly personal than aesthetic or intellectual (Hudson, 2017: 87).

Suleiman began his film career by making short films. His first short film, *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), co-directed with Jayce Salloum, was a critical examination of the stereotypical portrayal of Palestinians in Western media. In the Atlanta Film Festival, Suleiman received the award for best experimental film (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 41). This experimental film showcased Suleiman's talent for visual storytelling and his ability to critique political issues through the lens of humor.

In 1991, Suleiman directed his second short film, *Homage by Assassination*, which further explored the themes of identity and belonging. The film received critical acclaim and solidified his reputation as a rising talent in Palestinian cinema, thus served as an introduction to his silent works and visual persona (Gugler, 2015: 78). His first long feature film, *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, released in 1996, put the style Suleiman explored in the film *Homage by Assassination*. The outcome was a combination of vignettes with episodic sequences and an untraditional portrayal of the Palestinian dream of return. The artistic structure of the film influenced Suleiman's later works (Gugler, 2015: 78). The film was awarded the Best First Film Prize at the 1996 Venice Film Festival (Shilina, 2013: 4). He directed a pair of short films between the release of *Chronicle* and his second feature film, *Divine Intervention*, in 2002, including *The Arab Dream*, which examines themes of home, identity, and exile (Gugler, 2015: 78).

Suleiman created new narrative and aesthetic forms that challenged the dominant cinematic hegemony. Using silence, abstraction, and the multiplicity of metaphors, he created a resistant cinema that rethinks both political and aesthetic discourse. In this approach, the artistic form itself becomes a tool of resistance (Bessi, 2016: 30-31). His work also, according to Vargas, aim to present an alternative to the dominant Israeli discourse on the conflict (Vargas, 2021: 53). His style has made him an internationally acclaimed director and an important voice in contemporary cinema, a voice that raises awareness of the Palestinian cause (Van de Peer & Davies Hayon 2024: 254).

This article aims to:

1. Examine how Suleiman's cinema aligns with the auteur theory, highlighting his cinematic language and recurring elements which define his authorial signature.
2. Explore the socio-political themes in Suleiman's works, focusing on identity, exile, displacement, and the Palestinian issue and its history.
3. Assess Suleiman's influence on contemporary cinema, considering his international recognition and the evolution of his filmmaking style from exile to global prominence.

The analysis, in this article, will cover the narrative, themes, and formal aspects of his films, starting with black comedy, moving on to silence and Self-reflexivity, discussing the use of a stationary camera and symmetrical framing and finally addressing nonlinearity before concluding.

2. Black comedy

Suleiman states, «My life makes me laugh» (Indiana, 1997: 27), a feeling he expresses in his use of black comedy throughout his films. Emphasizing the tragicomic character of his society, André Breton originally used the phrase *Black Comedy* to characterize the way human suffering was portrayed as humorous rather than tragic (Breton, 1997: 7). While Plunka emphasizes its capacity to show society's absurdities as both comedic and terrible (Plunka, 2001: 23), Walker also observes that black comedy involves a gloomy, yet humorous, outlook on life (Walker, 1998: 56).

Suleiman is especially well known for using comedy to confront topics like war and identity by means of a serious political viewpoint. This strategy emphasizes the ridiculousness of what Palestinians go through and their limitations. He challenges viewers to scrutinize the social conventions and systems sustaining war by means of satire. Playwright John Guare advocates this approach, claiming that humor is a tool for delivering important information as laughing may calm audiences and let them open themselves to new perspectives (Plunka, 2001: 19). Also, it engages the viewers on a deeper level by combining both comedy and pain, therefore eliciting a spectrum of emotions from laughter to despair and anger. This involvement invites viewers to consider their own

viewpoints, therefore promoting intercultural communication (Lionis, 2013: 209). Aiming to provide happiness even while tackling serious issues, Suleiman believes in the universal and transforming power of movies (Hudson, 2017: 88). His movies challenge conventional expectations by including scenes of humor. This approach facilitates a forum for political sensitive topic discussion, so comedy becomes a useful weapon for dispelling misunderstandings and advancing knowledge (Lionis, 2013: 209).

The Time That Remains 2009 examines the Nakba and many decades of Palestinian history. Although the movie employs comedy, it approaches the events surrounding 1948 with greater gravity. First scenes show Israeli soldiers attacking Suleiman's hometown, Nazareth. A low-flying jet threatens the mayor's vehicle trip, combining comedy with horror. His effort at surrender by raising a white flag almost causes his car to crash. Then the sequence when he signs the conditions of capitulation in a room split between calm Israeli officials and agitated Palestinians catches the ridiculousness and shame of the circumstances. Though first humorous, the camera's change to the Palestinians' point of view emphasizes the humiliation as the photographer's backside is aimed at them.

Comedy keeps underlining the ridiculousness of the Palestinian situation all through the movie. Irony is added by scenes of Israeli troops invading Nazareth houses and listening to vintage Arabic music on a seized phonograph. The film underlines the unfairness of the circumstances by including the humorous antics of the troops among major events.

His films *Divine Intervention* and *Chronicle of a Disappearance* likewise deftly merge reality with surreal revenge dreams and use humor to highlight the daily tensions in Nazareth (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 171). In *Divine Intervention*, Suleiman challenges mainstream conflict narratives and offers emotional relief via laughing, therefore augmenting his social and political criticisms using dark humor which lets viewers face pent-up feelings, therefore making good use of comedy as a tool for emotional release (Carpio, 2008: 229).

Through delightfully ridiculous characters like an old crazy person wrecking a road, a heart patient smoking throughout treatment and a man dumping trash into a neighbor's garden while requesting politeness when they talk to him and

throw his trash back, these strange actions expose the ridiculousness of living and question society's standards. For Hamid Dabashi, a postcolonial scholar, such use of black humor results from deep-seated rage transformed into laughter that questions cultural and political system (Dabashi, 2006: 135).

In a scene that symbolizes buried anger from political system, Suleiman is casually eating an apricot in a moving car in a fantasy sequence and then tosses the apricot stone out the window to demolish an Israeli tank followed by images showing normal conflicts among Palestinian neighbors in Nazareth. The move from little conflicts to the spectacular tank demolition offers a cathartic release of tension by combining threat with dark humor to highlight the yearning for change under repressive conditions (Chamarette, 2014: 24).

Fantasy and parody in these scenes communicate the multiple stories of Palestinian identity, occupation and resistance (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 173). A powerful example is a scene where a blindfolded Palestinian prisoner successfully guides a lost tourist, highlighting the Palestinians' inherent connection to their land, suggesting a geographic awareness than their Israeli rulers (Suleiman, 2011).

Suleiman also employs personal narratives, such as the love story between him and his girlfriend at Al-Ram checkpoint, symbolizing geopolitical conflict. Their interactions, marked by humor and emotional intensity, illustrate Palestinian resilience, with Suleiman noting that even a light-hearted moment is a form of resistance against oppression (Shilina, 2013: 14).

Elia Suleiman's 1996 film *Chronicle of a Disappearance* similarly employs humor to depict the lives and challenges of Palestinians. The narrative follows Suleiman's return from self-exile, when he reconnects with relatives and friends in Nazareth and resides in Jerusalem. The film captures Suleiman's search for identity as both a filmmaker and a person, reflecting the tension faced by Palestinians. It portrays everyday life in Nazareth, blending paradoxes with serious imagery, depicting the city as a ghetto where residents, confined by circumstances, express their frustrations on each other (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 173).

Mixing anger, boredom and humor, Suleiman's films depict ordinary events and capture people's emotions, using sarcastic portrayals, such as scenes of inaction and conflicts that symbolize emotional struggles. Humor is also evident in scenes

like a fisherman laughing, highlighting how Israelis perceive Palestinians and the tense relationship between them. A notable scene shows Israeli security invading Suleiman's apartment, focusing on his belongings rather than his presence, adding a comedic layer to the depiction of life under occupation by portraying Israelis as puppet-like figures (Gugler, 2015: 91; Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 185).

«Let me present you to my very good friend Elia Suleiman; he is a Palestinian filmmaker, but he makes funny films», these are the words of Gael, a filmmaker, when he introduces Elia Suleiman to a production company head in one of the scenes of the *It Must Be Heaven* 2019 film by Elia Suleiman. The conversation continues, Gael: «He's making a comedy about peace in the Middle East». Producer: «That's already funny».

In *It Must Be Heaven* Suleiman continues the storyline he started with his previous works, *Chronicle of Disappearance*, *Divine Intervention* and *The Time That Remains*. Playing a version of himself, the movie shows Suleiman traveling from Nazareth to Paris and New York City. His use of irony in the film highlights the absurdity of global political and social issues, emphasizing the widespread sense of control and restriction that exists worldwide and serving as a political tool, prompting reflections on these complex issues (Halabi, 2021: 9–13).

Back to Nazareth in the film there is a scene when a neighbor steals lemons from Suleiman's yard, defending his behavior by asserting he knocked but no one responded. With Suleiman standing in for the Palestinians and the neighbor standing in for the invading military, this scenario might be seen as a satirical critique on land conflict. Suggesting a criticism of the arguments often offered by people claiming Palestinian territory, this funny yet moving portrayal highlights the complexities of the Palestinian reality (Halabi, 2021: 9–13).

Dark humor continues to combine with his political critique across the whole movie. One scene where police officers change sunglasses as a blindfolded female waits in the back of their cruiser gently refers to *blind justice*. Peacock (2022: 9) claims that this method of employing humor to make criticisms more acceptable is typical in satirical works, therefore giving escape from daily living and a strong message.

Elia Suleiman creates a great way of communication by touching the psychology of his audience via dark humor. His works capture the audience in

laughter and tears, pleasure and sorrow, therefore reflecting the hardships and suffering of his people. Lionis claims that the laughing of non-Palestinian viewers in reaction to Suleiman's humorous expressions shows a connection and awareness with the common tragedy. This laughing shows that one understands the upsetting subjects Palestinian art and film address as well as a feeling of connection with the Palestinian fight against injustice (Lionis, 2013: 208, 212).

From *Chronicle of a Disappearance* to *It Must Be Heaven*, Suleiman's masterpieces of dark humor go beyond his own country to locations like Paris and New York. Here he emphasizes the invisible pain of the Palestinian people while exploring a world as tense, strange and terrible as his own. In *It Must Be Heaven*, Suleiman explores the concept of a 'citizen of the world,' posing questions about what it means to belong to multiple identities. His Israeli passport, but Palestinian cultural identity, exemplifies the tension he feels and portrays through the film (Vargas, 2021: 54). Suleiman uses cinema as his tool of protest, resisting oppression with laughter and sarcasm via these four worldwide works of art exploitation (Lionis, 2013: 208, 212).

In conclusion, Elia Suleiman uses black comedy in a powerful way to talk about serious issues like war, displacement, and identity, especially in the context of Palestinian life. His films blend humor and sadness, making the struggles of everyday life under occupation both funny and heartbreaking. Through satire, he challenges the political and social systems that keep people trapped. Suleiman's ability to mix dark humor with important messages helps audiences connect emotionally, making them think more deeply about the Palestinian experience. His films, from *Chronicle of a Disappearance* to *It Must Be Heaven*, go beyond just telling Palestinian stories, they speak to global issues of control and resistance, showing how humor can be a form of protest and a way to deal with difficult realities.

3. Silence and Self-reflexivity through Suleiman's silent character

Chronicle's opening scene shows the main character's aunt entering a stationary shot, sitting on a sofa in the center of the frame and starts speaking directly to the camera. During her monologue, she proceeds to disparage her neighbors, even though she is going to offer her condolences to them. She ends her speech

ironically: «It's better if one stays silent and doesn't say anything»). Her last words hint to the silence in the rest of the film.

This use of silence is not limited to *Chronicle* but is a consistent feature of Suleiman's filmography, as he himself acknowledges. In an interview, Suleiman states, «All of my films have something to do with the language of silence or with the language of the image and not so much with verbal language» (Halabi, 2021: 13). This comment highlights the key part silence plays in Suleiman's work as it implies he gives visual storytelling where visuals express emotions and transmit meaning with less dependence on spoken words.

As Shilina contends (2013: 3), Suleiman use of silence in his films is considered as a means for investigating reality and emotions. Gertz and Khleifi agree with this perspective as Suleiman's silent method highlights the power differences and control one side uses over the other, stressing the marginalizing of Palestinians under control (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 176). The silence in his films enables the expression of complex sentiments and concepts that are difficult to convey through words alone (Gertz and Khleifi: 176).

Comparatively to the literary realm, movies have the ability to inspire ideas and allow a variety of interpretations (Pamerleau, 2009: 40). Like poetry, the parallel is best shown by Suleiman's work as, like with a difficult piece of poetry, his poetic filmmaking technique invites viewers to participate in a personal interpretation of the subject. Mokdad underlines that the lack of verbal interaction in Suleiman's films tests viewers to understand the visual language on a more introspective level, upsetting their expectations (Mokdad, 2012: 197). By doing this, he involves the audience and permits a more comprehensive knowledge by emphasizing silence (Shilina, 2013: 3; Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 181). Beyond language and cultural obstacles, this focus on visual depiction over verbal communication promotes inclusion and increases the audience's connection to his work. Suleiman's method therefore increases the emotional and conceptual effect of his films as well as their general accessibility (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 176).

Silence also enhances observational skills and awareness of his character, thereby portraying him as a *defiant witness* who absorbs events and the surroundings despite his passive attitude and lack of vocal reply (Van de Peer & Davies Hayon 2024: 253; Dabashi, 2006: 158; Gugler, 2015: 90). This silent person

shows discontent and a condition of absence in which he can only observe without acting notably. Shilina finds this silence as a kind of negative mimesis, meaning it is ideological opposition and another form of expression (Shilina, 2013: 3, 14). Suleiman affirms this perspective stating that his silence is a deliberate act of resistance with the capacity to challenge power structures (White, 2010: 44).

Mostly depending on facial expressions and body language, Suleiman's character uses silence as a form of communication. This method reminds one of the gesture-based language of early silent films. A renowned film scholar Noël Burch emphasizes how performers from that age could transmit meaning by subdued gestures and attitudes, therefore strengthening the link between Suleiman's nonverbal communication and silent film traditions (Elsaesser, 1991: 224).

Bresheeth's study clarifies Suleiman's communication approach even further. Suleiman typically speaks via «passes of expressive silence» instead of physical acts (Bresheeth, 2007: 176). This emphasizes Suleiman's reliance on nonverbal signals to express his ideas and feelings. Gertz and Khleifi underline even more the importance of Suleiman's nonverbal communication as his significant silence speaks more than words. They underline that his personality improves the strength of implicit communication, in line with Burch and Bresheeth's observations on the power of little movements and expressions (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 181).

His silent character in his movies further reflects his own experiences and self-portrait that is carefully constructed by his choice of shots, actions, scenes, and situations (Nashef, 2023: 75). Though he never had any acting education and chose to act last-minute, he thinks that performing oneself offers a more realistic cinematic interpretation of these personal stories. He relies on the physical aspects of his performance, emphasizing honesty and vulnerability (White, 2010: 42).

According to postcolonial film scholar Hamid Naficy, Suleiman is a diegetic filmmaker who goes to his hometown to offer personal and autobiographical insights on exile and cinema (Naficy, 2001: 116). Naficy's term of *accented cinema* refers to films created by displaced filmmakers that include unique cultural discourses and their tensions (Naficy, 2001: 4-6). This genre emphasizes border awareness, with directors such as Suleiman negotiating numerous views

and conflicting identities. Their films are based on their personal crossover experiences, adding to the legacy of accented cinema (Naficy, 2001: 31-32).

Here we can notice that Self-reflexivity, through Suleiman's silent character, is a crucial element of his films, which closely links to silence through his silent persona, where he simultaneously assumes the roles of both a character and a director, blurring the boundaries between his roles (Van de Peer & Davies Hayon 2024: 254). This approach is evident in early films like *Homage* and *Chronicle of Disappearance*, where he portrays himself in situations related to his filmmaking (Gugler, 2015: 86). This technique enhances the meta-cinematic quality of his work, which, as Wilkins notes in *American Eccentric Cinema*, allows audiences to understand better the film's intertextuality and self-referential nature (Wilkins, 2019: 75). Such methods highlight the filmmaking process or the constructed nature of the narrative, revealing the director's role and making the film self-aware (Fuery, 2017: 14). In *Divine Intervention*, Suleiman uses sequences of his silent character with sticky notes in his house to remind viewers of his involvement in the film, even when indirectly acknowledging his role. This blurring of boundaries between Suleiman as filmmaker and character emphasizes the constructed nature of the narrative and the subjective perception of reality (Gugler, 2015: 86, 89).

The Time That Remains also exemplifies Suleiman's approach, which integrates personal and family history with the broader Palestinian narrative. The film spans three periods, commencing in 1948, shifting to his boyhood and later maturity, as he returns to provide care for his ailing mother. In *Divine Intervention*, Suleiman recounts a love story amid conflict at the Al-Ram checkpoint, as this autobiographical approach proceeds, including *Chronicle of a Disappearance* and *It Must Be Heaven*, in which he appears in silent prominent roles.

It is worth noting that Suleiman interrupts his customary silence in *It Must Be Heaven* by uttering the word *Palestine*, combining personal reflections with political commentary (Halabi, 2021: 6). He strategically employs silence to maintain a minimalist reflective style, while thoroughly exploring personal and collective identities in his films.

Suleiman creates a unique world by weaving together his experiences with stories from his family and country. Nazareth, where he was born, and his family

history are very important to his work because they give him a sense of closeness and self-exploration. Suleiman puts his stories in the context of his life by using his family as actors and filming scenes in their real houses. Some of the sources used in *The Time That Remains* are Suleiman's notebook, his father's memories, and his mother's letters (Gugler, 2015: 79). His father is shown as a figure of Palestinian identity and defiance. In the same movie, his mother is shown at different points in her life, which reflects the experience of many Palestinians with memory, loss, and longing (Gertz and Khleifi, 2008: 147).

Suleiman's use of silence and expressing himself through his silent character and personal experience in his films produces a meditative environment that enables audiences to really interact with the visual and emotional themes. Silence also a powerful tool to critique the power structures that affect Palestinians. This approach, like early silent films, crosses cultural and language barriers, allowing people to connect with his films. This basis of silent observation fits well his use of a fixed camera and symmetric framing. These formal devices improve the thematic depth of his works even more, therefore supporting the representation of Palestinian stagnant existence and the immutable reality they live with.

4. Stationary camera and Symmetrical frame

The employment of a stationary camera by Suleiman is another distinguishing aspect of his works, therefore greatly enhancing thematic and narrative complexity of each. Suleiman underlines in an interview the need of authenticity in his filmmaking, especially with reference to the stationary camera. He explains, «I gradually reduce narrative elements and adopt a more static camera to depict semiautobiographical experiences in the most comfortable way for me, reflecting how I see things» (Khader, 2015: 22).

For him, making sure that his work reflects his vision is very critical. His creative style, which emphasizes presenting a stationary life, clearly shows this commitment to authenticity. The absence of transforming shifts in his films emphasizes the restricted capacity of his characters to negotiate their surroundings with simplicity (Shilina, 2013: 3).

According to Nichols (1985: 330), a stationary camera envelops the audience in the world of the character, therefore producing stillness and essentially bringing

them into the experience. When used in Suleiman's films, this method accentuates his portrayal of a still life, therefore improving the understanding of the Palestinian experience among viewers. Starting with the 1948 invasion of Palestine and covering events like the passage of time, his father's death, President Gamal Abdel Nasser's death, the Intifadas and other major events in Palestine, Suleiman's films span several historical eras. The occupation continues despite time, defined by checkpoints, conflicts and an insecure way of life since 1948.

The stationary camera, according to Garritano and Harrow (2019: 128), lets the viewers interact with the action as if they were physically there, thus preserving a balance between active participation and passive viewing. Keeping the camera motionless helps viewers concentrate on the scene, free from camera movement distractions. This method catches the activity in a manner that seems seen rather than directed (Jones, 2021: 37). This technique lets spectators actively engage in the movie by interpreting events and characters from their own points of view. His deliberate use of a wide-angle lens and off-screen music, together with his stationary framing farther, challenges viewers to investigate the limits of the frame and generate different interpretations (Hudson, 2017: 91).

Apart from the use of stationary frames, Suleiman's films stand out for their symmetrical compositions. According to Weyl (1952: 3), *symmetry* has two meanings: one in which components are balanced and proportional, and another in which many portions cooperate harmonically to form a coherent whole. Symmetry also is the essence of beauty (Weyl, 1952: 3). Like the accuracy of a designer, every shot in Suleiman's films is painstakingly planned and constructed.

Symmetry also serves as both a visually pleasing and thematically rich cinematic tool. In *The Time That Remains*, non-linearly between 1948 and the present, symmetry is used to link historical events with the protagonist's personal experiences. Stasis and consistency among the shifting story are created in the film via motionless, broad views with centrally placed characters.

Furthermore, clearly Suleiman's conscious use of symmetry in *Divine Intervention*, particularly in sequences at a checkpoint when the visual symmetry between Suleiman and his partner indicates their separation resulting from the Israeli

occupation. In *It Must Be Heaven* well-balanced images express common human experiences by means of symmetry, therefore exploring global tensions and the ridiculousness of everyday existence.

These symmetric and static compositions serve not just to maintain visual equilibrium but also to emphasize contrasts and conflicts, particularly those stemming from the Israeli occupation. Suleiman's consistent use of these techniques across his films highlights not only the repetitive nature of daily life under occupation but also serves as a powerful commentary on displacement and Palestinian identity. His unique use of symmetry and stationary cameras in his films combines with his non-linear narrative structure to provide a coherent and deep inquiry into Palestinian experience. Reflecting the complicated character of Palestinian history, the next sections will explore further how these fractured and non-sequential narrative frames add to the feeling of disorientation and complexity.

5. Nonlinearity

Suleiman explains to Dabashi his method of filming which does not start with a set story. Rather, he begins by taking notes and then constructs a narrative around them, therefore producing separate pictures in freestanding tableaux. Suleiman tells Dabashi: «I never really come to a film through the structure. I simply write down notes and build a story around them. Then I compose tableaux. When I get a tableau that stands by itself, it becomes an image» (Dabashi, 2006: 135).

His creative style is distinguished using nonlinearity. This approach which involves fragmented and non-sequential tales that cause confusion and instability in the audience owing to their lack of obvious structure (Dancyger and Rush, 2013: 197). This could be confusing for viewers attempting to follow the film's plot, as Hayes (2017: 46) notes, but it is a distinguishing quality of Suleiman's cinematic technique.

The disparate scenes, however, eventually coalesce into a unified tableau, creating a coherent or meaningful whole that tells a comprehensible story (Mathews et al., 2009: 86). The arrangement of these scenes and vignettes does not necessarily follow a linear progression. Consequently, the audience's involvement is more derived from the way the characters are portrayed and the

emotional depth of every scene than from the sequential development of the plot (Dancyger and Rush, 2013: 196). This concept is underlined even more in Suleiman's works by his recurrent main character role, which runs over the developing events. Encouragement of viewers to use their imaginations and investigate many interpretations by this technique of arrangement usually generates more questions than it answers (Hudson, 2017: 88; Johnson, 2013: 125; Dancyger and Rush, 2013: 193).

Starting with his early short films such as *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990) and *Homage by Assassination* (1991), nonlinearity is a recurring element in all of Suleiman's work. His feature films also employ this approach: *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, *Divine Intervention*, *The Time That Remains*, and *It Must Be Heaven*. His cinematic approach was shaped by his independent film studies and experiences in Nazareth, which helped him to avoid conventional, straight stories (Hudson, 2017: 86). Through reading, Suleiman tells Butler he came to see nonlinearity as an option and found others shared his dissatisfaction with traditional forms of communication. This strategy let him investigate the possibilities of movies by challenging the image instead of presenting a clear message (Suleiman, 2003: 66).

He mentions in another interview that the non-linear and open-ended structure of *Chronicle of a Disappearance* prompts viewers to reflect on its portrayal of Palestine, reducing the likelihood of resorting to stereotypes and passing judgment on the film (Kaufman, 1997).

Using nonlinearity in his films is intended to depict the broken and chaotic aspect of Palestinian existence, as nonlinear narrative reflects the unexpected and linked experiences of reality, providing a more accurate picture of the Palestinian plight (Shilina, 2013: 3). His films feature a dispersed narrative structure, reflecting his belief in the historical and geographical exclusion of Palestinians. This method disrupts the typical linearity of narrative, which is consistent with his intention to depict the intricacies of Palestinian reality (Suleiman, 2000: 97).

Moreover, many characters are usually included in his films instead of a single, goal-driven protagonist in accordance with this nonlinear style. This approach stresses an experienced and episodic style of narrative and challenges conventional narrative assumptions. Dancyger and Rush (2013) claim that

nonlinear stories often negotiate many characters who can lack a clear, dramatic arc, emphasizing instead on the emotional depth and varied experiences of the characters (195). This approach helps Suleiman to investigate a wider spectrum of ideas and viewpoints, therefore strengthening his cinematic representation.

The Time That Remains, where the tale transcends the path of a single individual, clearly shows Suleiman's storytelling technique. Rather, it is a sequence of four vignettes covering four distinct eras of Suleiman's life, providing a thorough picture of Nazareth life from 1948 to the present. Without following a conventional dramatic arc, each section emphasizes different individuals and their interactions.

This narrative technique is also used in *Divine Intervention* and *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, where individuals are introduced and subsequently phased out without resolving their individual storylines, thereby avoiding the conventional dramatic structure. In *It Must Be Heaven*, Suleiman expands on this theme by writing about people and places in Nazareth, Paris, and New York, among others. In these movies, Suleiman's creative use of nonlinear storytelling is shown through the participation of many heroes and a break from clear goals or traditional story arcs.

Another nonlinear technique that Suleiman uses in his films is the very first sequence in each one of them. Though they do not immediately relate to the main story, Suleiman uses a distinctive storytelling style in his films, usually starting with sequences that create the tone and provide thematic background. These beginning sequences function as prologues, establishing ideas that will be relevant all through the movie, for instance, *Chronicle of Disappearance* opens with Suleiman's aunt recounting social tales, therefore establishing ideas but not reappearing in the narrative. Though *It Must Be Heaven* starts with a priest and a barred door and *The Time That Remains* starts with an odd storm and an Israeli cab driver's thoughtful query, *Divine Intervention* opens with youngsters pursuing Santa Claus, triggering a flashback to 1948. These opening sequences are very important as they fit the framework of the movie and hint to upcoming events like the storm suggesting the tragic 1948 events and the wounded Santa Claus signifying a lack of peace in *Divine Intervention*.

Elia Suleiman explained to Guernica: «I have a tendency to initiate all of my narratives with a scene that launches the narrative but in itself does not belong to the narrative... It fits the structure to start the film with an anecdote» (Suleiman, 2011).

Suleiman acknowledges that he sometimes struggles with scenes that disrupt the intended rhythm and admits the challenges of his storytelling technique. When a scene doesn't flow naturally, however, he finds it difficult yet necessary to choose how to go forward as certain sites or objects may not always line up exactly with his vision (Ackuzu, 2011: 2).

This challenging nonlinear storytelling seeks to enable attention on many subjects. Suleiman discussed in an interview his attempt to create a "decentered" picture, meant to construct a story without a clear focal point. His aim is to decentralize viewpoint, perception and narrative for Palestinian tales, thereby transcending a single perspective (Suleiman, 2000: 97).

His filmmaking blends coherence through with the open-endedness of a nonlinear structure, fostering both connection and contemplation for his audience. He explains: «I want to open the way to multiple spaces that lend themselves to different readings» (Suleiman, 2000: 98). He further elaborates: «I want to make my films as embedded and layered as possible for the spectator to have the democracy of viewing this image aesthetically and not linearly. I don't want to feed the spectator» (Gugler, 2015: 89).

Mokdad argues that Suleiman's approach reflects his aim to minimize traditional narratives and stray from standard Palestinian storytelling techniques by means of nonlinearity (Mokdad, 2012: 201) and adds that Suleiman wants to turn attention from the tale itself to underlying concepts and ideas.

The use of nonlinearity in Suleiman's films is another key signature that serves to emphasize specific themes or motifs, making them more significant and memorable for the audience. These techniques foster a sense of familiarity as viewers recognize patterns and anticipate developments, strengthening their connection to the story and enhancing engagement. By illustrating the cyclical nature of life, especially within the Palestinian context, Suleiman underscores the idea that people are often trapped in continuous cycles of conflict, daily

routines, and societal norms. This approach critiques societal structures, political systems, and cultural norms that perpetuate these ongoing issues.

6. Conclusion

The distinctive cinematic language and recurring elements in Elia Suleiman's films, as analyzed through the lens of auteur theory, unequivocally establish him as a true auteur. His unique aesthetic vision and stylistic approach are consistently reflected in his films, which are characterized by black comedy, nonlinearity, especially through multiple protagonists and varying narratives, a fixed camera, silence, and themes of identity and displacement. These authorial signatures not only distinguish Suleiman's work but also contribute to its depth.

Suleiman's films provide spaces for political criticism and creative expression in addition to means of narrative. For example, his creative use of symmetry and stationary frames enhances the visual attractiveness of his films and supports their thematic depth, therefore serving both aesthetic and narrative functions.

His use of self-reflexivity in his films also emphasizes his own involvement in his work. He underlines the subjective and personal quality of his narrative by portraying himself as both a character within his movies and the director behind their production. This method improves the visual story as well as the thematic investigation of memory, nostalgia, and the underlying feeling of separation in the Palestinian experience.

Suleiman has stayed unwavering in his dedication to narrating the Palestinian story via his own lens, despite obstacles he has encountered over his career—including charges of treason and the ban of his film in all Arab countries. Celebrated for their originality, wit, and provocative investigation of history, politics, and identity, his work is evidence of the ability of movies to be a tool for social and political commentary, and his unique authorial marks have surely changed the scene of world cinema.

From the perspective of the auteur theory, Elia Suleiman's involvement in the film industry is basically noteworthy and long-lasting. Although his films are strongly anchored in the Palestinian story, they bridge national and cultural barriers and engage viewers all around, therefore increasing a more total knowledge of the human experience. Suleiman's works therefore provide a strong voice in the

ongoing discussion on identity, displacement and resistance as well as a lighthouse of artistic integrity. He is clearly an auteur and his influence on movies globally is truly remarkable.

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