

Protesting from Within: The *Nakba* Film Festival and the Explosive Archive

By Neta Alexander

Throughout his encyclopedic project, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Iranian scholar Hamid Naficy demonstrates how filmmakers who occupy a “liminal, interstitial space” in their new temporary “homes” are able to translate feelings of loneliness, invisibility, and longing into “accented films” in which the marginalized subject occupies the center of the frame. Analyzing myriad works made by filmmakers who left their homelands for various reasons, Naficy shows how vernacular experiences and “non-events” (such as typing on the computer’s keyboard or sending a fax in Elia Suleiman’s 1991 experimental work, *Homage by Assassination*), provide the building blocks for self-reflexive and fragmented works that deconstruct language, biography, history and nationality, as well as the cinematic medium itself.¹

Naficy’s expansive research can be used as a starting point for a discussion of the first-ever “International Film Festival on Nakba and Return,” which was initiated by the Israeli NGO *Zochrot* and took place in Tel-Aviv Cinematheque and al-Saraya Theater in Jaffa on November 2013. *Zochrot* (Hebrew: זוכרות; “Remembering”. Arabic: ذكارات; “Memories”), established in 2002, defines its goal as “challenging the Israeli Jewish public’s preconceptions and promote awareness, political and cultural change within it to create the conditions for the Return of Palestinian Refugees and a shared life in this country.”² Israeli

governmental agencies do not support this NGO, and its budget relies on donations, mostly from private, non-Israeli donors. Aside from the festival, other activities initiated by Zochrot include lectures; guided tours about the Nakba—the depopulation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the months leading up to and following the establishment of the State of Israel; and a new mobile app named “iNakba,” locating Palestinian villages destroyed since 1948. The interactive app was launched on May 2014, to coincide with Israel’s Independence Day.³

In late 2012, Zochrot declared that the first-ever “International Film Festival on Nakba and Return” would be launched in November 2013. The chosen dates—November 28-30—were not accidental. As explained on the NGO’s official website:

The festival takes place around November 29th, marking the 66th anniversary of the 1947 UN Resolution on the Partition of Palestine [...] The festival seeks to creatively challenge the partition concept of separation between Jews and Arabs and suggest new pathways for just and equitable life for all of this divided country’s present inhabitants and refugees.⁴

The film festival initiated and funded by the NGO can therefore be described as a form of “cultural activism,”⁵ as well as a call for “media jujitsu,” a mode defined by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam as “generating a space of negotiation outside the binaries of domination and subordination, and in ways that convey specific cultural and even autobiographical inflections.”⁶ More specifically, a festival held in Tel Aviv in order to commemorate the Nakba opens up a unique communal space for interrogating the taken-for-granted aspects of material worlds that are haunted by contested political histories of Israel/Palestine. This uncanny effect can be achieved in cultural works that relate to domestic spaces and vernacular locales as specters of an “untold history,” a team that can be found, for example, in Amos Gitai’s *House* from 1980—the story of a house in West-Jerusalem abandoned during the 1948 war by its owner, a Palestinian doctor, or in Simone Bitton’s 2004 film *Mur*, a meditation on the separation fence built in Israel-Palestine.⁷

In the Israeli context, the word “Nakba” itself is highly loaded. Taken from the Arabic word “al-Nakbah” (النكبة), it literally means “disaster,” “catastrophe,” or “cataclysm,” and can also be referred to as “the Palestinian Exodus.” This explosive term embodies the conflicting narratives controlling the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict for decades. On the one hand, official history textbooks written in Hebrew and used in the Israeli public school system describe the 1948 fights as “The War of Independence;” on the other hand, textbooks taught in Arabic in the occupied territories use the terms “Nakba” or “the 1948 Palestinian War.”

In July 2009, the Israeli Education Minister Gideon Sa’ar decided to remove the word Nakba from Arab textbooks, explaining that

What Israeli Arabs experienced during the 1948 War of Independence was certainly a tragedy, but the word “Nakba,” whose meaning is similar to “Holocaust” in this context, will no longer be used. The creation of the State of Israel cannot be referred to as a tragedy, and the education system in the Arab sector will revise its studies regarding this in elementary schools.⁸

Thus, solely by naming a new annual showcase “the International Film Festival on Nakba and Return,” Zochrot has forced both filmmakers and viewers to problematize the Israeli dominant political discourse. Apart from the loaded title, the festival’s unique “space of protest” was based on recognizing conflicting narratives, testimonies and historical interpretations. By curating three days of screenings and events, the festival’s consisted of seven feature films and five short works made by Palestinian, Moroccan, American, South African, and Israeli filmmakers.⁹

The opening night celebrated the world première of five short films commissioned by Zochrot, among them is *Mirror Image* by Israeli filmmaker Danielle Schwartz. This event, held in the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, was the culmination of a selection process that lasted several months. With a minuscule budget of 3,000 NIS (around 800 US dollars) given to each filmmaker, these shorts can be read and contextualized within the rich history of alternative esthetics, from Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor cinema,” to Teshome Gabriel’s “nomadic esthetics” and Kobena Mercer’s “diaspora esthetics.”¹⁰

Due to the limited scope of this essay, I will focus solely on Schwartz’s work. While an isolated work cannot represent the festival as a whole, a close reading of this award-winning film, which recently won the “Best Short Documentary” award in the 2013 Jerusalem Film Festival and screened in

DOC NYC and Palm Springs International Film Festival, can offer us a better understanding of the formalistic and moral dilemmas Israeli and Palestinians filmmakers have to face when encountering the explosive archive of the 1948 war.

Like many of the “accented films” explored by Naficy, Schwartz’s *Mirror Image* is an intergenerational exploration of biography, history, and language during which the filmmaker functions as a “non-actor” and performs different roles: granddaughter, interviewer, historian, filmmaker, and—in several significant moments—prosecutor in a trial that never took place.

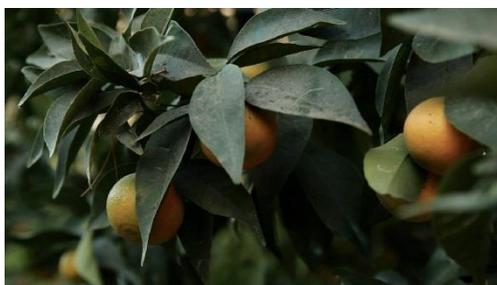


Figure 1 *Mirror Image*

Aside from a 8-second opening shot of a peaceful orange orchard, the film mainly consists of a conversation between Schwartz and her grandparents, who are sitting in their tranquil, specious living room. As described by Schwartz in the film’s official synopsis, “In this short conversation, my grandparents and I

negotiate the words to tell the untold history, as we see it, and as we would like it to reflect on us. Our dialog exposes the soft spots of Zionist discourse, its system of justifications, its anxieties and fears.”¹¹

In other words, *Mirror Image* positions itself as an oppositional work that offers an alternative to the dominant Zionist terminology and historical narrative. Based on its commitment to explore an “untold history,” this work can be described as part of what historian Ann Laura Stoler calls “the archival turn.”¹² In her book, *Along the Archival Grain*, Stoler writes that, “among historians, literary critics and anthropologists, archives have been elevated to new analytic status with distinct billing, worthy of scrutiny on their own.” Following the publication of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* in 1995, “this move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject gained currency across the richly undisciplined space of critical history and in a range of fields energized by that reformulation.”¹³



Figure 2 *Mirror Image*

However, Schwartz's work is not located in an archive in the narrow sense of the word—a place where valuable historical documents are being kept by a sovereign power; rather, it adopts a broader definition of the “archive” and the “document,” one which turns a trivial object—an “innocent-looking” crystal mirror—into the locus of attention. Schwartz's obsession with the mirror, which creates tension between herself and her family, expresses her commitment to what Hayden White called “factual storytelling”: history as a juxtaposition of facts and narration.¹⁴

But “facts” are never just facts; they are experience mediated through language. Or, to use Gaston Bachelard's words, “facts are fabricated”.¹⁵ In *Mirror Image*, which studies this act of “fabrication,” every word is a grenade threatening to explode at any moment despite—and possibly because of—the intimate and loving nature of the conversation and the warm emotions between the film's three “protagonists.” This underlying tension reaches its peak when Schwartz insists that the wall-size mirror, which was given to her grandfather by his father, was in fact “plundered” from the Arab village Zarnuqa in the aftermath of the 1948 war. Appalled by this accusation, Schwartz's grandparents ask her to choose a different, “not as harsh,” verb to describe how the mirror ended up in their hands.¹⁶



Figure 3 *Mirror Image*

Later, Schwartz's grandmother wishes to distance herself from the historical narrative of atrocities and immoral behavior, and states, “Now, it has nothing to do with us... We have it because that's what happened to the mirror, not to us.” Again, it can be useful to invoke Stoler's work, which focuses on “the unwritten”

and “untold” histories of colonial regimes, specifically the Dutch Indies during the 19th century. Coining the term the “politics of disregard,” Stoler describes “the psychological and political machinations it takes to look away for those who live off and in the empire”.¹⁷

The grandmother's insistence that “we are not like that” and “we are different” (from people who steal), as well as her tendency to “humanize” the mirror (“that what happened to ‘her,’ not to us”) enable her to look away and distance herself from the uncomfortable narrative her granddaughter is so

eager to explore. In this sense, the conversation simultaneously contains two different layers: the factual inquiry (whether the mirror was plundered from a Palestinian family during the war, or was bought and paid for after 1948), and the emotional/psychological accusation (how could her grandparents—who are loving parents and law-abiding citizens—declare an object taken by force as their own?).

While Schwartz is posing these questions in a polite and careful manner, other questions are being ignored. The elephant in the room is the ongoing occupation of Palestine. Within the historical framework of the Nakba, the question of whether a single mirror has been “plundered,” “taken,” or “bought” seems naive and somewhat childish. Even if the mirror was “plundered”—as Schwartz insists—this is but one trivial and meaningless fact in a recent history that consists of more than six decades of occupation.



Figure 4 Mirror Image

At the same time, Schwartz’s deliberate choice not to confront her grandparents with the broader implications of the story as it unfolds—namely that of the conquest, demolition and re-population of the Arab village Zarnuqa by the Israeli *Givati* unit—provides the film with its unique and “accented” structure. Writing about “postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers,” Naficy distinguishes between them and exilic and diasporic filmmakers. While exilic cinema focuses on “the there and then in the homeland,” “identity cinema” offers an exploration of “the here and now in the country in which the filmmakers reside.”¹⁸ This, however, does not make it any less “accented”; in fact, the accent “permeates the film’s deep structure: its narrative, visual style, characters, subject matter, theme, and plot.”¹⁹

In a similar manner to Jonas Mekas’ *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) or Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory* (1991), Schwartz incorporates on-screen typography in the form of a printed page on which she marks by pen the many changes, erasures, and corrections that her grandparents dictate. As Naficy writes, filmmakers who shift the focus from the visual to the oral create a sense of “calligraphic accent” which confronts the viewers with a text in a language they cannot read, and a voice-over they cannot understand without subtitles.

Furthermore, *Mirror Image* can be described as an “accented film” due to its “interstitial production mode” which consists of a micro-budget, a tiny crew (Schwartz and her cameraman, Emmanuelle Mayer) and an “accented” aesthetic, based on “provisionality, experimentation, and imperfection.”²⁰ Finally, in the tradition of exilic cinema, “a small object becomes a potent synecdoche for house, home, or even the homeland, feeding the memories and narratives of placement and displacement.”²¹

In other words, *Mirror Image* can be seen as a classic example of Naficy’s category. In terms of style, subject matter, aesthetic, and distribution (via an independent film festival that is not supported or funded by governmental agencies)—it can be easily recognized as an “accented” work. However, a closer look can serve to problematize not only Schwartz’s work, but also Naficy’s categorization, and specifically his third category of the “ethnic and identity filmmaker.”

Unlike Elia Suleiman, Mona Hatoum, or other Palestinian artists, Schwartz is an Israeli-born Jewish filmmaker. In that sense, she represents the sovereign rather than the subaltern. While questioning her grandparents about the history of Zarnuka, she takes upon herself the role of an historian who tries to shed a light not only on the narrative as told from the winners’ perspective, but also on the story of those who have been defeated. This, however, might raise the question as to why a specialized film festival about the Nakba commissions works from Israeli filmmakers and artists, instead of solely limiting itself to Palestinian contributors?

In other words, one central question *Mirror Image* avoids is whether the sovereign can speak on behalf of the subaltern. Read in a broader historical context, it can be seen as part of the dilemma that haunts Indigenous media and “minor cinema” since their inception. What model should filmmakers and cultural activists adopt in a post-colonial world? Possible answers are self-reflexive films made by Western directors (such as *Mirror Image*) or collaborative filmmaking that turns the “informants” into active participants in the creative process.

While bearing these different models in mind, I would like to argue that Schwartz’s self-reflexive resistance to the Zionist narrative is realized by committing to the trivial and the seemingly marginal. By focusing on a single object, a crystal mirror, Schwartz foregrounds the fragmented nature of the history she is trying to expose. The stakes are almost-comically low: Even if

the mirror was plundered, no one will be sent to prison or face a trial. It is no more than an anecdote, but the fact that the mirror's history is being questioned and denied turns it into "a potent synecdoche for house, home, or even the homeland," to use Naficy's words.

By turning the marginal into the center of attention, Schwartz metaphorically—and temporarily—puts herself in the shoes of the subaltern. She shows how her beloved grandparents took part in an historical narrative that includes numerous stories of displacement and looting, while concurrently excluding the words and terminology that can best describe them (from the loaded Arabic word *Nakba* to the Hebrew biblical verb *Nebzeza*, "plundered"). By actively resisting to provide her viewers with answers to her questions ("all is fair in war," "the mirror was bought at the market," etc.), Schwartz exiles herself from the suffocating embrace of the Zionist discourse. While making a documentary in her own land and using her native language, Schwartz's "accented" choices enable her to defamiliarize vernacular experiences, her family and the historical narrative on which she had been raised.

Schwartz's work leaves us with a provocative set of questions: how are "the politics of disregard" being translated into the daily experience of Jewish Israelis? How can a filmmaker still living in her homeland actively turn herself into an "accented filmmaker"? What can filmmakers and viewers learn when the marginal occupies a more central place? And finally, how can Israelis and Palestinians create new ways to speak about both past and present? The International Film Festival of Nakba and Return, whose second edition took place in November 2014 in Tel Aviv and Jaffa, provides several answers to these questions by opening up a space of protest in a public climate mostly based on an Orwellian "newspeak."²² With its accented aesthetic and what can be seen as a surprising choice of topic, *Mirror Image* teaches us that these counter-spaces can also be occupied by "accented filmmakers" who were born and raised in Israel. It is indeed a "minor film"; but if there is one thing we can learn from *Mirror Image*, it is that the marginal often deserves a more central place.

Notes

- 1 Hamid Naficy. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- 2 For more information on *Zochrot* and the Nakba Film Festival see: <http://zochrot.org/en/menu/>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (eds.) *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (California: UC Press, 2002).
- 6 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 331.
- 7 I wish to thank Prof. Faye Ginsburg for introducing me to these films, as well as for her feedback and useful comments on early drafts of this essay.
- 8 Abe Selig, "Sa'ar drops 'Nakba' from Arab Textbooks," Jerusalem Post, July 22, 2009.
- 9 The festival included the world premiere of Lia Tarachansky's documentary *On The Side of The Road*, described in the official synopsis as "a story of those who fought to erase Palestine and created an Israeli landscape of denial and of those who fight to reveal it"; Mark J Kaplan's *The Village Under The Forest*, which explores the hidden remains of the destroyed Palestinian village of Lubyia; and Annemarie Jacir's feature film *When I Saw you* which takes place in Jordan in 1967, when tens of thousands of refugees pour across the border from Palestine and were placed in "temporary" refugee camps. For the full festival program in English see <http://zochrot.org/en/content/48-mm-1st-international-film-festival-nakba-and-return>
- 10 Shohat and Stam, 328.
- 11 For the full synopsis see: <http://vimeo.com/album/2724521>.
- 12 Ann Laura Stoler. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 44.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 White famously asserted that, "one cannot historicize without narrativizing, because it is only by narrativizing that a series of events

can be transformed into a sequence, divided into periods, and represented as a process..." See Hayden White, *Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2010), p. xxiii.

- 15 qtd. in Bruno Latour. *We Have Never Been Modern*. trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 18.
- 16 In Hebrew, Schwartz is using the biblical verb Nevzeza (נבזזה), while her grandmother asks her to use the much more common verb NelKecha (נלקחה), which can mean either "taken" or "borrowed." This linguistic argument is significant, since Nevzeza is normally attributed to biblical stories in which the Israelites were plundered by their enemies. See, for example, Judges 2, 13: "In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them."
- 17 Stoler, 51.
- 18 Naficy, 2001, 15
- 19 Ibid, 23
- 20 Ibid, 31.
- 21 Ibid, 169.
- 22 George Orwell developed the term 'newspeak' in his seminal novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In the novel's appendix, titled "The Principles of Newspeak," Orwell states, "its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meaning and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meaning whatever." In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).