

The Time That Remains: Elia Suleiman's Policy of Ambiguity

In February of 2010, a Hamas operative was assassinated in a Dubai hotel room by a group of men using stolen identities and forged UK passports. Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service, was strongly suspected of orchestrating the assassination (they have been caught using the stolen identity trick before). However, at a press conference, the Israeli foreign minister refused to confirm or deny their involvement in the killing, citing Israel's official "policy of ambiguity" in these matters.

Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman understands both the horror and the humor of a phrase like "policy of ambiguity". Consider the full title of his semi-autobiographical new film, *The Time That Remains: Chronicles of a Present Absentee*. After seeing the film, the phrase after the colon might sound a bit too self-consciously literary and clever. Progressing through sections set in four distinct eras (1948, 1970, 1980, present day), the film chronicles 60 years in the life of a Palestinian family, the Suleimans, living in Nazareth. It begins before Elia is born, with the 1948 war that resulted in the creation of the state of Israel, and ends with Elia witnessing the death of his elderly mother. With wry humor, and an impressive lack of self-pity, Suleiman depicts the quiet humiliations and frustrations of living as a secondary citizen in one's own country. Suleiman is not a psychologically oriented filmmaker, and he constructs his portrait of the family and of Nazareth visually and aurally rather than through conventional exchanges of dialogue. His characters are rarely shown speaking, never in the case of the Elia character. Since this is perfectly in keeping with Suleiman's aesthetic, underlining the implications of the characters' muteness with "present absentee" might seem unnecessary or forced.

But the phrase is not Suleiman's invention; like "policy of ambiguity", "present absentee" is official Israeli terminology – a category for Palestinians who fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 creation of Israel, but who remained within its borders thereafter. This fact, which is almost never noted in reviews of the film, is indicative of an important aspect of Suleiman's method – the extent to which his distinct aesthetic, for all its absurd humor and surrealism, is rooted in, and is an extension of, a lived reality.

Building on the style developed in Suleiman's previous two features, *The Time That Remains* plays out largely as a series of carefully composed deadpan tableaux, usually revolving around a gag of some sort (the most audacious features a young Palestinian man pacing in front of his house talking about dance music on his cell phone while the gun barrel of an Israeli tank parked a few feet away moves with him, tracking his every move). These are often hilarious, sometimes terrifying, and frequently tinged with melancholy, anger, warmth, bitterness and nostalgia (the range of emotions and tones Suleiman achieves is remarkable). Though Suleiman's rigorous aesthetic appears fairly simple, he touches on a surprisingly diverse range of

cinematic practices. He is most often, and easily, compared to Tati and Keaton for his masterful choreography, and for the silent deadpan character he plays repeatedly in his films, and tonally there is also more than a touch of Chaplin's complex sentimentality present. But Suleiman, who retains a restless and experimental temperament, is up to more than a pastiche of silent comedy. Within his episodic, tableau/gag structure, he often incorporates jarring moments of surrealism that recall Bunuel or Roy Andersson; deadpan moments of observational comedy that bring Jarmusch to mind; quiet moments of durational, naturalistic minimalism that are not unlike Kiarostami; and a sharply ironic sensibility, as well as a preference for bright, precise, visuals, that is reminiscent of Kubrick. (It's characteristic of Suleiman's complex relationship to his own influences, as well as to cinematic history in general, that one of the more Kubrickian moments of satire comes via a mildly unflattering allusion to *Spartacus*, the least Kubrickian of Kubrick films.) However, Suleiman's eclectic, semi-surrealist aesthetic is not simply a game of cinematic posturing and allusions. His films are grounded in personal experience and are politically and historically rooted in ways that enable them to avoid becoming too precious or indulgently hermetic – a risk that other contemporary



filmmakers working with modes of surrealism are not always able to avoid (Roy Andersson, David Lynch, Guy Maddin, etc). Suleiman's use of surrealism returns to the movement's historically grounded, politically charged foundations (the contemporary surrealist closest to Suleiman in approach is probably the Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer).

Suleiman resists being pinned down politically as much as he does stylistically. Though generally praised by critics, Suleiman has been labeled by some as a blatant propagandist for the Palestinian cause, while from the other side he has been criticized for playing to the apolitical tastes of international art-cinema audiences, and for a lack of clear political commitment. Partisan complaints of this sort are probably unavoidable, and while neither charge is exactly meritless, both misunderstand Suleiman's approach. He paints with a wide brush, and this applies to the Palestinian characters as much as the Israeli ones. He doesn't demonize the Israelis that he shows (mostly soldiers, politicians and police), though it's true that they are often portrayed as slightly boorish and buffoonish (as authority figures are in Chaplin). The Palestinian characters (mostly the Suleiman family) are more stoic

and admirable, but there are Palestinian buffoons – such as the Suleiman's drunken neighbor, who perpetually douses himself with gasoline but can never manage to light the match properly – and there is a genuinely tender moment with an Israeli policeman involving a karaoke performance of Celine Dion. Suleiman doesn't really mount much of a political argument – other than to denounce the oppression of Palestinians in the most general way. However, his lack of political nuance is no more grounds for objection than his lack of psychological nuance; they simply fall outside the range of his aesthetic. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Suleiman's aesthetic range is too broad and ambitious to focus on the conventional sorts of political or psychological 'nuance'. The political force of Suleiman's films come from the variety and complexities of the emotions and ideas he creates, rather than any precise position he defines for himself in relation to particular issues or events. Suleiman's mute arrangements of time, space and sound refute the absurd linguistic brutality of phrases like "policy of ambiguity" and "present absentee". In this way, we could say that he reclaims the policy of ambiguity from its nightmarish state-sponsored form and returns it to its natural and productive domain – that of the artist undermining the oppressive realities imposed by ideological forces.

The first half of the title, *The Time That Remains*, seems to hover between two conflicting interpretations – is it a rallying call or a lamentation? But in Suleiman's hands, perhaps these are not mutually exclusive. Although his deft use of cinematic space is the most immediately striking feature of his style, duration is perhaps an even more crucial element of Suleiman's cinema. His many single-shot tableaux frequently heighten our awareness of time passing, while his comedic sensibility constantly reminds us of the extent to which successful comedic timing comes from the literal mastery of time. Indeed, few filmmakers so enthusiastically exploit the elasticity of time with such grace and poise. *The Time That Remains* could be taken as an open question referring to our relationship to this elasticity, which is the source of everything comic as well as tragic for Suleiman: time, which is always vanishing and yet stretches on endlessly; which prolongs all suffering even as it provides the only vehicle for hope; which undermines the meaning we construct and yet provides the only form that meaning can take. For Suleiman, in our relationship to time we are all inevitably present absentees, and we must come to terms with this if we want to accomplish anything. The time that remains is up to us, up to a certain point, and then it's not. If Suleiman has a political message, it is a two-sided one, which comes with a characteristically grave wink: he exalts the liberating multitude of possibilities that reside within the elasticity of time, while warning us that time is all we have, and that it won't last forever.

-Mike Vass