



**THE TIME IS NEW:
SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY ARAB CINEMA**

It Must Be Heaven

While some writer-directors give themselves the best lines, Elia Suleiman has uttered three words in his four self-starring, feature-length films.

Significantly, those trio of words all appear in the Palestinian auteur's latest tragicomedy, *It Must Be Heaven*. As usual, Suleiman plays his alter ego, E.S., except here he breaks his silence when questioned about his home country by a New York taxi driver. 'Nazareth,' E.S. replies, then adding, 'I'm Palestinian.'

For the rest of *It Must Be Heaven*, which won the Jury Special Mention award at Cannes in 2019, E.S. slots neatly into meticulously choreographed *mise-en-scène* as a hat-wearing, eyebrow-raising observer. The loose plot consists of E.S. flying around the world to pitch movie projects. In Paris, Vincent Maraval of *Wild Bunch*, satirising himself, complains, 'Your film is not Palestinian enough... It takes place in Palestine, but it might as well be everywhere.'

But like *Divine Intervention* (2002) and *The Time That Remains* (2009), *It Must Be Heaven* is really a series of comic vignettes that juxtapose everyday poetry with everyday violence. In one whimsical sequence, a bird refuses to leave E.S.'s laptop; in another, two soldiers trade sunglasses in a car until the camera reveals a blindfolded woman in the backseat.

Meanwhile, E.S. observes that the violence of Palestine is following him across the globe. Or, as the real Suleiman told me, pre-COVID, at the 2019 London Film Festival, it's 'the Palestinisation of the world'.

Here, in an edited transcript, Suleiman proves to be so chatty in person that he makes other directors look like E.S.

Gael García Bernal introduces you to a producer with: 'He's a Palestinian filmmaker, but he makes funny films.' Are these exchanges real quotes?

Absolutely. This is a direct quote from a huge American producer who introduced me to Clint Eastwood. He was the head of Warner Bros, and told Clint, 'He's Palestinian, but he makes funny films.' Clint winked at me and said, 'Well, shit happens.'

Were you pitching a film to Warner Bros?

Warner Bros wanted to produce a film of mine. I said, 'Why do you want to do this?' They said, 'It's good for the catalogue.' It's not feasible that Warners, in America, would want to produce a film of mine unless I made a film that is theirs, you know? So I cut it short.

It Must Be Heaven is kind of a New York film, though.

It's still not the commercial film I would have been asked to make. But literally every single line you hear in the film is something I've heard. I just transfer them cinematically.

So in your film, the world is connected by violence.

It's what triggered the making of it. Global violence is the state of exception that everyone lives in. And having myself lived everywhere, I've taken in this Palestinisation of the world, where it's no longer just in local geopolitical areas – it's actually everywhere you go.

We've become traumatised by the sound of sirens. I wait sometimes to see that it's an ambulance or the fire department, and not a police car. Because when you live in Paris, after we've witnessed what we've witnessed [in November 2015, when coordinated terrorist attacks killed 130 people] – it's still with me now. When I'm in the apartment and I hear a siren, I say, 'Oh, no, please, not again.'

This film speaks about how hell broke loose in Palestine, where now we've had, for so many decades, a very well-composed and mature form of fascism that the world still treats as if it was normal day-to-day life. And then this character turns his back to this violence, and goes to see an alternative place to live in. As I did.

I'm talking about things I've lived through, like what happened in Paris. You're traumatised, because now the violence is chasing you wherever you go. I was really traumatised. I have not spoken about it too much in person. Maybe with my wife. But not really deeply enough to scrutinise the emotion that I still maintain out of what happened in France in that moment. You live a double trauma.

You show both sides of Paris. There's the fashion show with Cara Delevingne, but also homelessness.

He comes to see paradise, and it turns out to be another form of global violence. It's a pretext: fashion and beautiful girls. But the day after, the streets are empty. He doesn't realise it's the 14th of July [France's Bastille Day holiday]. It's a pretext to establish the bond with Paris – with Arabs running away from the police, and tanks roaming the streets.

The silences, and the breaking of the silence, in your films always add a lot of tension to the humour.

There's so much pleasure in composing the sound. Many times, it's the sound that actually stays in your mind, from the souvenir of an image. I always think of sound as not the background, but parallel to the image.

You get compared to Jacques Tati. Can you tell a lot about someone by who they bring up? Like, if I said Mr Bean...

[Shakes head.] No. He's too clichéd. I'm more Tati and Buster Keaton. I'm not inspired by them – everybody thinks that. I made films before I knew who they were. But I love what they do, and it's very flattering.

So me saying Mr Bean, you take as an insult?

I don't care for him. Maybe if you're watching him on TV while eating Chinese noodles. Some of his stuff is funny. But Peter Sellers is someone whose films tickle me, because they're sometimes really complex gags.

When your character visits the gay bar at the end of It Must Be Heaven, it reminded me of the clubbing scene in The Time That Remains. It's very cathartic to see people jumping around.

The last scene in the film comes back to my identification with the new generation of Palestinians who have stripped themselves of nationalism, and have become activists. It's exactly the concept that I've been toiling with myself all these decades of becoming a citizen of the world. They have become citizens of the world, actually, from their own positioning, without having to travel, because they're now conscious that Palestine is a concept of gender equality, a concept of being progressive, and a concept of building identifications with all injustices in the world.

I look at them with a positive sense of hope, because they are manifesting their resistance with cultural diversity and with the manifestation of, let's say, festive ambiances. So their resistance to occupation is dancing against the oppressors. You cannot arrest people who are being creative. Of course, you can always put a poet in jail. But you cannot arrest the poetry.

So you think young people are going to save the world?

I wish I were 30 years younger. What the younger generation are doing today, I'm envious of. The people you see in the last scene are people I witnessed myself during the shooting. Something synchronised between the emotion I was building inside of me, and then confronting them. I had not met those people.

Other people on the shoot told me Haifa has the most beautiful bars. We went on a tour and I got so slammed. At 3am, at the end of the night, the last bar was a gay and lesbian bar. I kept on drinking and watching. And I thought, 'This is the last scene of the film, for sure.' It was great. It was completely in sync with my feeling and sentiment. It came to me like a destined scene.

Elia Suleiman interviewed by Nick Chen, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021

IT MUST BE HEAVEN

Directed by: Elia Suleiman

©: Rectangle Productions, Pallas Film, Possibles Media, Zeyno Film, ZDF, Turkish Radio Television Corporation, CN3 Productions

Presented by: Rectangle Productions, Nazira Films, Pallas Film, Possibles Media, Zeyno Film

In association with: Doha Film Institute

In co-production with: ZDF/Arte,

Turkish Radio Television Corporation (TRT)

In association with: Wild Bunch, Le Pacte, Shortcut Films,

Maison 4:3, The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, KNM

With the support of: Eurimages

Presented by:

Québec crédit d'impôt cinéma et télévision - Gestion SODEC

With the support of: Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung

Presented by: Canada crédit d'impôt pour la production cinématographique ou magnétoscopique canadienne

With the support of: Société de développement des entreprises culturelles - Québec, Aide aux Cinémas du Monde, Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, Institut Français, Téléfilm Canada, FFA – Filmförderungsanstalt

Executive Producers: Fatma Hassan Alremaihi, Hanaa Issa

Produced by: Edouard Weil, Laurine Pelassy, Elia Suleiman,

Thanassis Karathanos, Martin Hampel, Serge Noël

Line Producer: Serge Catoire

Post-production Supervisor: Mélanie Karlin

Written by: Elia Suleiman

Director of Photography: Sofian El Fani

Visual Effects Supervisors: Thomas Duval, Emilien Lazon

Visual Effects: Digital District

Editor: Véronique Lange

Production Designer: Caroline Adler

Costumes: Alexia Crisp Jones, Eric Poirier

Hairdressing and Make-up: Grit Hildenbrand

Music Consultant: Yasmine Hamdan

Sound Recording: Johannes Doberenz

Sound Mixing: Lars Ginzler

Sound Editing: Gwennolé Le Borgne, Olivier Touche, Laure Anne Darras

In memory of: John Berger, Humbert Balsan

Cast

Stephen McHattie (*card reader*)

Raia Haidar (*femen in park*)

Fadi Sakr (*master of ceremony*)

Kwasi Songui (*taxi driver*)

Guy Sprung (*professor*)

Nancy Grant (*producer*)

Alain Dahan (*airport security*)

Gael García Bernal (*himself*)

Elia Suleiman

Tarik Kopty (*father neighbour*)

Kareem Ghneim (*son neighbour*)

George Khleifi (*waiter in restaurant*)

Ali Suliman, Faris Muqabaa, Yasmine Haj (*brothers and sisters in restaurant*)

Nael Kanj (*bishop*)

Asmaa Azaizy (*bedouin woman*)

Grégoire Colin (*man in metro*)

Vincent Maraval (*producer*)

Claire Dumas, Antoine Cholet (*ambulance crew*)

Eric Cornet (*homeless man*)

Yumi Narita, Kengo Saito (*Japanese couple*)

France/Qatar/Germany/Canada/Palestine/Turkey 2019

102 mins

THE TIME IS NEW:

SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY ARAB CINEMA

The Man Who Sold His Skin (L'Homme qui a vendu sa peau)

Sat 4 Sep 17:40 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Kaouther Ben Hania);

Thu 16 Sep 20:50

200 Meters

Tue 7 Sep 20:50; Wed 15 Sep 18:10

As Above, So Below (Kama fissamaa', kathalika ala al-ard)

Wed 8 Sep 20:45; Fri 1 Oct 18:10 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Sarah Francis)

143 Sahara Street (143 rue du désert)

Sat 11 Sep 11:30; Mon 20 Sep 18:15

It Must Be Heaven

Sat 11 Sep 20:40; Mon 27 Sep 18:00; Mon 4 Oct 14:30

Let's Talk Ehkeely

Mon 13 Sep 18:00 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Marianne Khoury);

Tue 5 Oct 20:50

Tlameess

Tue 14 Sep 20:40; Thu 30 Sep 18:00

Talking About Trees

Mon 20 Sep 14:30; Mon 27 Sep 20:45; Sun 3 Oct 18:00

You Will Die at Twenty (Satamoto fel eshreen)

Thu 23 Sep 20:30 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Amjad Abu Alala);

Sat 2 Oct 14:20

Narrative Encounters: Shorts Programme

Fri 24 Sep 20:40; Tue 5 Oct 18:10

Adam

Sat 25 Sep 14:20; Mon 4 Oct 20:50

About Leila

Sun 26 Sep 18:00; Sat 2 Oct 20:30

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