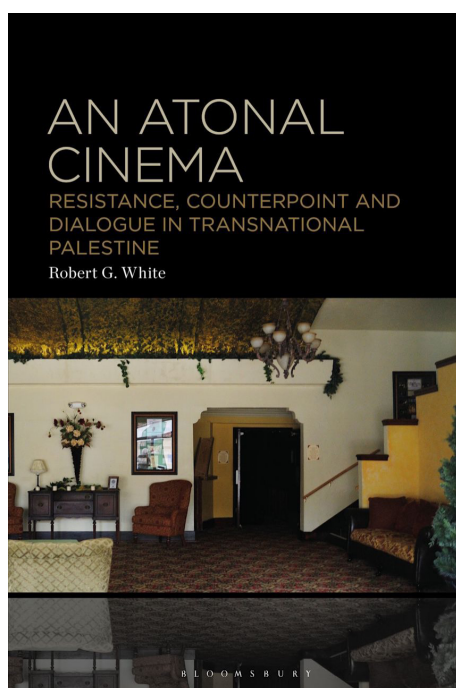


## An Atonal Cinema: Resistance, counterpoint and dialogue in transnational Palestine

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Few words are as politically charged, and carry as much intensity and divisiveness, as the noun “Palestine”. Reviewing a text on Palestinian cinema is thus an inherently political task, requiring that the commentator confronts many a complexity that resists simplified

intellectual categorisation. Palestine occupies a unique position in contemporary discourse precisely because its very invocation defies neutrality and consensus, compelling intellectual debate - if not outright confrontation - rather than simple agreement. Consequently, any engagement with Palestine will inevitably provoke heated discussion, which can serve as a powerful catalyst for scholarly discourse. Academic interventions concerning Palestine can never be entirely detached; to the point where scholars cannot comfortably retreat behind purely theoretical frameworks and must grapple deeply embedded ideological positions. In this sense, the contested nature of Palestine is, in itself, generative, providing fertile ground for rigorous academic examination and critique.

The complex and distinctive nature of Palestinian cinema is perhaps best illustrated by the controversy surrounding the 2025 Academy Award for Best Documentary, granted to the Palestinian-Israeli film *No Other Land*. Despite achieving significant international recognition, including prestigious accolades from IDFA, the Berlin International Film Festival, BAFTA and BIFA, at the time of its Oscar win, no distributor in the United States was willing to represent the film. This paradox raises profound questions regarding the political sensitivities surrounding the very term Palestine within US cultural and specifically filmic circles.

Robert G. White's *An Atonal Cinema* presents an insightful and original scholarly approach to the complex intersections of cinema and politics in the context of Palestine. Central to White's analysis is his innovative use of the concept of 'atonality,' a term drawn from musical theory, to explain how contemporary Palestinian filmmakers actively reject conventional narrative structures. White argues that this deliberate resistance to narrative resolution reflects the fractured and discordant reality of Palestinian experience, defined by displacements, historical ruptures, and ongoing disputes over identity. The book is firmly anchored in a comprehensive theoretical foundation, particularly in Edward Said's contrapuntal approach as outlined in such seminal works as *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) and *Reflections on Exile* (2000). Through a nuanced application of Said's theories, White compellingly demonstrates how Palestinian filmmakers deploy cinematic techniques that seek to confront and subvert historical omissions, and thus critically engage with the complex process of identity formation and memory preservation.

Robert G. White's *An Atonal Cinema* is meticulously structured across four substantive chapters, bookended by an incisive theoretical introduction and a forward-looking conclusion. Each chapter delineates a distinct thematic and geopolitical axis within the corpus of contemporary Palestinian cinema, thereby constructing a transnational cartography of resistance, memory, and representation. The sequential organisation, ranging from engagements with European political modernism, through spatial and temporal meditations within occupied Palestine, to diasporic articulations in Latin America, and finally to critical intertextual dialogues with orientalist legacies, permits White to articulate a sustained interrogation of cinema as a site of epistemic and aesthetic dissent. This architecture undergirds the monograph's central contention: that Palestinian filmmaking enacts a contrapuntal aesthetics, wherein formal experimentation becomes inextricable from the political labour of decolonial representation.

In Chapter One, White places Palestinian cinema within broader transnational contexts, by exploring how Palestinian filmmakers critically respond to and engage with influential European auteurs such as Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Genet. He particularly focuses on Godard's politically charged film essay *Ici et ailleurs* (1976), highlighting its thematic and stylistic echoes in the work of the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman - especially in Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996). White convincingly argues that Palestinian directors like Suleiman employ contrapuntal methods, characterised by irony, reflexivity, and narrative ambiguity, to reclaim cinematic representation from external, often orientalist depictions. The use of such strategies allows Palestinian filmmakers not only to resist the simplistic portrayals imposed from the outside, but also to assert their own complex and layered narratives. White underscores Suleiman's "Palestinian Trilogy" – comprising *Chronicle of a Disappearance*, *Divine Intervention* (2002), and *The Time That Remains* (2009) - as a prime example of this critical cinematic approach. Suleiman's films, White argues, deliberately subvert reductive stereotypes by employing subtle humour, visual irony, and narrative complexity, offering nuanced insights into Palestinian daily life that resist closure and invite varied interpretive responses.

In Chapter Two, White analyses how Palestinian filmmakers based within Palestine itself represent memory and identity through nuanced cinematic portrayals of space. He gives particular attention to the works

of Kamal Aljafari, closely examining films such as *The Roof* (2006) and *Port of Memory* (2009). White argues that these films carefully manipulate cinematic time and spatial framing to depict Palestinian experiences of confinement, marginalisation, and visibility. For instance, Aljafari's *Port of Memory* employs the filmmaker's family home in Jaffa as a poignant symbol of a once-vibrant community now largely abandoned and decaying, a powerful metaphor for collective displacement. Meanwhile, *The Roof* provides an intimate exploration of the director's own family experiences across Ramle and Jaffa, using the metaphor of an unfinished home, the titular missing roof, to reflect ongoing displacement and the perpetual uncertainty surrounding Palestinian return narratives. White highlights how these filmmakers deliberately frame landscapes and interiors, capturing empty rooftops, deteriorating buildings, and ghostly urban spaces, to communicate the tensions between visibility and erasure inherent in daily life under occupation. In doing so, these films visually articulate the enduring presence of loss alongside a persistent, underlying sense of hope, transforming absence itself into a central narrative force.

In Chapter Three, White broadens his analysis by exploring the complexities of Palestinian diasporic identity through the cinematic lens of Chilean-Palestinian filmmaker Miguel Littín. Littín's work serves as a critical case study for White to address how displacement, exile, and intergenerational memory shape diasporic filmmaking. By placing Palestinian cinema in dialogue with Latin American revolutionary cinema, White demonstrates how filmmakers from different yet politically related contexts use film in similar ways - as an instrument of political resistance, identity construction, and the reclamation of suppressed histories.

White surveys Littín's career with care, examining both his earlier Latin American films, such as *Alsino and the Condor* (1982), set against the backdrop of Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution, and his later work, such as *The Last Moon* (2005), which addresses the Palestinian diasporic experience in Chile. Particularly significant is precisely *The Last Moon* itself, which articulates the Palestinian narrative by tracing a family's separation through emigration from Palestine to Chile at the start of the twentieth century. In this film, Littín vividly captures the formation of what would become the largest Palestinian community outside the Middle East. White's detailed reading reveals how Littín's films effectively express a sense of diasporic solidarity, bridging the historical

experiences of exile in Latin America with those of the Palestinian people. This comparative approach highlights cinema's ability to create a shared political language across geographical boundaries, embodying a powerful form of transnational dialogue that links revolutionary memory and collective identity.

In Chapter Four, White provides a critical analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini's cinematic interactions with Palestine, exploring the complex dynamic between empathy and exoticisation that characterises Pasolini's portrayals. Central to this discussion is Pasolini's 1963 documentary *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* (translated as *Seeking Locations in Palestine for 'The Gospel According to Matthew'*), in which Pasolini aimed to identify landscapes suitable for his biblical adaptation. White identifies how, despite his professed intention to capture authenticity, Pasolini's representation often betrayed an orientalist sensibility. This is particularly evident in his depiction of Palestinian peasants, whom Pasolini saw as possessing a primitive authenticity, describing them in terms that romanticised their supposed closeness to a biblical ideal, in contrast with contemporary Israelis.

Making use of Edward Said's contrapuntal analytical approach, White then examines how contemporary Palestinian filmmakers critically engage with and respond to Pasolini's problematic representations. A notable example discussed by White is Ayreen Anastas's film *Pasolini Pa Palestine\** (2005), which deliberately retraces Pasolini's original route through Palestine. Anastas's film explicitly interrogates Pasolini's earlier images and narrative structures, highlighting contradictions and omissions within his documentary approach. By creating a dialogue with Pasolini's work, Anastas consciously challenges his colonial and exoticised perspectives, foregrounding Palestinian voices, landscapes, and experiences that Pasolini marginalised or overlooked.

Through this comparative analysis, White illustrates how Palestinian filmmakers employ a cinematic practice of "writing back", actively reclaiming and redefining their representation in response to Pasolini's portrayals. The result is a nuanced dialogue that simultaneously acknowledges Pasolini's sympathetic intentions yet critically confronts the limitations and biases inherent in his orientalist perspective.

In the concluding chapter, White introduces the concept of "post-Palestinian cinema", proposing an emerging form of filmmaking that transcends traditional political dichotomies, such as occupation versus resistance. He persuasively argues that contemporary Palestinian

filmmakers are developing increasingly more sophisticated and expansive representations of identity, actively exploring alternative and speculative futures that challenge narrow nationalist narratives. White identifies examples such as Mohanad Yaqubi's *Off Frame AKA Revolution Until Victory* (2016) and Basma Alsharif's *Ouroboros* (2017), which embody this transformative approach. Yaqubi's *Off Frame* is an introspective documentary that reconstructs and reconsiders fragments of Palestinian revolutionary cinema from the 1960s and 1970s, critically examining how certain historical narratives have been marginalised or forgotten. Alsharif's *Ouroboros*, meanwhile, is an experimental film structured around cyclical journeys and landscapes, symbolically proposing forgetting as a means of renewal and progress. By examining these innovative cinematic expressions, White underlines Palestinian cinema's ability not merely to reflect political struggle but also to serve as a fertile space for reimagining cultural identity and collective memory beyond conventional depictions of conflict.

White's study constitutes a significant scholarly contribution, offering a detailed and sophisticated analysis of contemporary Palestinian cinema and its broader political and cultural ramifications, particularly within postcolonial and transnational academic frameworks. The book comprehensively demonstrates how Palestinian filmmakers employ stylistic experimentation not simply as aesthetic gestures, but as a purposeful form of political and cultural intervention. Consequently, White's work will undoubtedly become a foundational reference for scholars engaging with Palestinian cinema, archival methodologies, postcolonial theory, and transnational cultural studies. Moreover, beyond its immediate academic impact, this book provides valuable insights into the broader role of cinema and artistic narrative as essential tools for exploring identities and critically interrogating history.

## References

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