

Within this Narrow Strip of Land

An Essay By Lucy Reynolds

Blind Spot

“Do you know why we Palestinians are famous? Because you are our enemy. The interest in us stems from the interest in the Jewish issue. So we have the misfortune of having Israel as an enemy because it enjoys unlimited support. And we have the good fortune of having Israel as our enemy because the Jews are the centre of attention. You’ve brought us defeat and renown.”

Made in the context of a fictional television interview in Jean Luc Godard's film *Notre Musique*, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's observations noted above suggest a dangerous co-dependency between the two warring states, in which Palestine owes its existence to the 'defeat and renown' visited upon it by Israel. These are provocative statements, in which Darwish appears to speak the unspeakable, to admit a measure of complicity in the brutal destruction suffered by his nation at the hands of the Israelis. As the Israel/Palestine conflict tragically continues, Darwish's comments complicate and challenge the received archetypes of Israel and Palestine. For just as the two sides seem locked in continual conflict so the roles that both must perform in the eyes of the West, filtered through its media, are also locked into those of victim and oppressor. Godard's passionate film attempts to salvage these representations of Jew and Arab from the mire of history, by framing them philosophically, and by its restless probing of myriad images of the conflict from films and from televisual reportage.

Notre Musique is a significant film for Judy Price, posing “lots of complicated questions” The measure of complicity that Darwish exposes strikes a chord with her own position as a Jew opposed to the violent expansionist policies of the Israeli state. Price's recent video works could be understood as an engagement with the complexities of the Israel and Palestine conflict and her own position within it. Like Godard, she employs multiple strategies, drawing images from archival sources and from a sustained study of places resonant with the overwritten histories and redrawn boundaries of Israel and Palestine, in particular St John's Eye Hospital in East Jerusalem. Repeated visits to Israel and Palestine have resulted in a body of video work which should not be seen as complete but as part of an ongoing question or research, a courageous attempt to speak Darwish's unspeakable by addressing a subject which is both urgent and taboo.

Metaphors of Vision

Being a poet, it is through the written and spoken word that Darwish approaches the subject of Israel and Palestine, so that he might '*speaks in the name of the absentee... in the name of the Trojan poet*'. As film and photography are her primary mode of expression, Price seeks to assimilate and understand the Israeli and Palestinian conflict through metaphors of vision. Just as the eye is the point of exchange between the body and the world, so Price finds the camera a 'point of mediation', which brings her personal encounter with the Israel and Palestine situation into a different kind of focus and perspective. Indeed, the metaphor of the eye has long provided a paradigm for the act of perception, both in art and cinema, where one of its first impulses is found in Surrealism. As Wendy Everett observes: '*Since cinema, like Surrealism, is a predominantly visual medium, it is natural for the journey to begin with the eye or, more precisely, with the two eyes of the spectator: an eye (the organ of sight) and an I (personal identity; the seer). Both eye and I may be closed or open, dreaming or awake, looking out or looking in, but on this journey they must look afresh, must see in a new way...*'ⁱ Whilst Everett's reference is to the visceral provocation of the iconic slashed eye in Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel's 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou*, her notion of the 'two eyes' of sight and seer could also be applied to Price's videos which invite the viewer to 'look afresh', albeit without the extremes of Bunuel's film.

This is because Price employs the image of the eye to penetrate and navigate the complexities of the conflict, opening it up to the viewer as an ongoing revelatory process. The notion of sight becomes a subtle layering of references and metaphors drawn from history, language and culture, which in turn set off a string of associations leading the viewer deeper into the complexities and ambiguities of the Israel and Palestine situation. Her videos often depict a landscape framed by an elevated and suspended viewpoint, as a way of rearticulating the significance of territory in this disputed land. For example, in *Time Line*, a film of a cable car over Jericho offers both a privileged view of the town while at the same time it alludes to an ambiguous state of suspension and destabilised vision. In *Assemblage*, archive footage from the British Mandate period shows the raising of a British observation balloon, a metaphor which conjures up both release from the land and the mapping of it, the establishment of territory through the process of reconnaissance, or surveillance. Returning to the role of the camera as a 'point of mediation', Price's work rejects a polemical position where the two states are presented only as binary opposites and instead uses the eye of the camera as a way of exposing the paradoxes, liminal spaces, the no-man's land which lies between.

This is a difficult balancing act to achieve, which may explain Price's respect for *Notre Musique*, seeing in its fractured mode of address a possible strategy for mirroring the many facets of the Israel and Palestine conflict and its representation without falling into the trap of

taking sides. Rather than the method of montage employed by Godard, Price distributes her diverse images of the two states spatially, setting them up as a half still, half moving registers of different visual and audio encounters throughout the gallery space. As the viewer moves between the illuminated screens and projections, their passing recalls the crossing of conflicted borders and territories, which have come to define the experience of space and movement between Israel and Palestine. Within the images themselves, further displacements are orchestrated through the slippage between sound and image, as contemporary sounds rub against archive imagery, or in the auditory blur between video screens. The diversity of Price's images, which also encompass archival material, the observation of unexpected events caught in passing or the focused long term study of a resonant place, implies the seriousness and commitment which she brings to her project, as she seeks to address a situation overwhelming in its complexity. However, within this we are offered moments of epiphany, tentative celebrations of possible freedom and humanity, which again challenge the stereotypes of Israel and Palestine with which the West is most familiar. A butterfly dances on a Jerusalem rooftop In *Saffron of Jerusalem*, a boisterous stag night is observed at the Dead Sea beach in *Light Drinks the Dark* and unseen laughter echoes in the swaying cable car of *Time Line, Jericho*.

The Angel of History

Thinking of the irresolvable situation of Israel and Palestine one is reminded of Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' who flies backwards into the future but with his face turned back to the past. With horror, the angel is forced to watch the accumulating destructions of the past but is powerless to intervene as he is helplessly propelled towards the future. '*Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.*'ⁱⁱ With this allegory Benjamin portrays history as a spectacle of disaster which there is no hope of halting, and where time is rationalised as a spatial continuum, moving inexorably forward. '*This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*'ⁱⁱⁱ Thus the only course open to the angel, and by inference the historian, is that of impotent if not detached observation. It could also be argued that, caught in the 'storm of progress', we are so mesmerised by this spectacle of movement, embodied in the displays of cinema and television, that it engenders a form of increasing blindness, an inability to truly see the destruction being wrought.

Whilst it would be reductive to construe Benjamin's allegory as a claim that catastrophe could be halted by the examination of history, it does correlate to a trilogy of films Price made using archive film material from the Imperial War Museum, uncovered while she was artist in residence at the London Jewish Cultural Centre's film archive from 2006/07. In particular Price focuses on the image of Palestine before the emergence of the Israeli State, during the

period of the British Mandate between 1917-1948; when many of the seeds of the Israel and Palestine conflict were sown. The images that she chooses evoke an era of colonial bureaucracy, in which land and peoples are organised, checked and administered by white men conspicuous in khaki shorts. Doing what Benjamin's angel could not, this archive footage enables Price to halt history and revisit it. Furthermore, like many artists working with archival footage, her intent is not that of recorder but seer. The films which resulted from her residency, *Reel*, *Assemblage* and *Interference*, might be seen as an active form of excavation which unfolds before the eyes of the viewer. However, in a reverse methodology of the conventional archivist who endeavours to bring disparate film fragments together to create a coherent narrative, Price splinters the film fragments still further, so that hidden meanings and histories can surface and be released.

In *Reel* footage culled from army records and information films is slowed down so that the illusion of movement is lifted and the still photograph beneath is revealed. As the images are freed from the impositions of their original narratives they begin to release other meanings. The marching troops on manoeuvres in the desert, for example, become a fleeting harbinger of future desert wars whilst the parade of faces, caught for a second before they dissolve, speak poignantly of the humanity caught within the conflict; Arab, Jew and Englishman not yet aware of what would occur in the Palestinian territories. *Reel's* stilled images could also be compared to those of earlier filmmakers who called for a halt to the 'storm of progress' through the slash of an eye, and other perceptual arrests of avant-garde cinema. In the strobing flicker of Tony Conrad's film *The Flicker* (1966) or Peter Kulbelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1957), the spectator is required to engage with the passing film frames in such a visceral manner that it paradoxically draws attention to their origins as still photographic frames. As Laura Mulvey observes, this perceptual sensation leads to the impression that the passage of time has been stopped, 'a still frame when repeated creates an illusion of stillness, a freeze frame, a halt in time'^{iv}. The images in *Reel* are held for long enough to remember the fundamental stillness of the film strip, to recapture the detail lost to the relentless movement of narrative: the smiling soldier, or the Arab in the Jerusalem street, his head turned away from the camera. Yet these images still pass too quickly for proper contemplation, their slow blink holding out the promise of revelation never fulfilled.

It could also be argued that it is through the avant-garde filmmakers' undivided attention to the mechanics of cinema, from the repressed temporal spaces of narrative to the material celluloid itself, that they are able to dismantle its continuums. Returning us to the metaphors of sight and seer, *Reel* is constructed from the sections of the film which are not designed to be seen but to act as instructions to the projectionist or the film librarian. Scribbled instructions on the reel ends take on the quality of hieroglyphic texts or arcane Kabbalic codes, or alternatively, the scratched celluloid and magnified scrawlings also become a form of defacement. On one hand, they signify the colonial arrogance of 'overwriting' land and

identity, on the other, they operate as a form of decipherment. Running the jottings and abbreviations of past instructions backwards and in reverse becomes a perverse form of reading, trying to create other languages for understanding the complexities of the current Israel and Palestine conflict. The black spots which materialise across some of the images in *Reel*, once simply punched out circles within the end frames of the film print, now perform an ominous punctuation. Their partial obliteration of the image alludes to an obliteration of identity and the blind spot with which the West has most often viewed the beleaguered region.

Reel's abrupt rhythms act as exclamation marks of warning, a flash of alarm embodied in its black circles and defaced images. Caution! Danger! Step Carefully! It contrasts with the slower and more contemplative rhythms at work in *Bleed*, *The Seer* and *Light Drinks the Dark*, which comprise part of a series of small screen videos shot at locations in Israel and Palestine. Almost moving photographs rather than films, the composed watchfulness of their fixed frame focus also conveys a sense of danger and warning. In *Bleed*, for example, an entirely black screen is demarcated by a thin line of light which runs horizontally across it. It is only when movement is glimpsed within the line that the viewer becomes aware that this is a far distant road and these are vehicles travelling along it. *Bleed* returns the viewer to the ever-present question of territory which infuses Price's work, and more specifically the anxiety of displacement engendered by the pervasive darkness surrounding the illuminated road, which offers no clue to its whereabouts or the nature of the terrain. In its stark delineation of space, the road in *Bleed* takes on a resonant symbolism. It resembles a fissure or scar, etched deeply into the undetermined landscape, *memento mori* of the mental and physical scars that a century of warfare has imposed on the people of this disputed land.

Bleed's sense of suggestive ambiguity is present across all of Price's body of work on Israel and Palestine, but it is particularly acute in this series of small screen vignettes. In many cases this ambiguity is tied to identity. The marching figures in *Quest* could either be soldiers or protestors. Seen in silhouette and at night, it is hard to ascertain any identifying features, returning the viewer to the question inevitable to all representations of the region. Which side are they on? This sense of unease and disorientation is exacerbated by the long-range viewpoint that frames most of the videos, in which Price's camera eye becomes the 'sightings' of a weapon, implicating the viewer into an intrusive game of surveillance. The activities observed by the camera often take place in the small areas of illumination within encroaching darkness, lending the images the chiaroscuro of old master paintings, and bestowing upon them a nobility and gravitas that belies their ordinary origins, drawing parallels to the biblical themes of classical painting. This is one of the many cultural and historical allusions which echo through Price's films, referencing not only the region's significance as a religious site, but also Western perceptions and representations of the 'Holy Land'. It exposes the temporal slippages at play throughout Price's work, which reflect Palestine's history of occupation and

shifting boundaries. Cast in shadow against the ancient walls of Jerusalem the marchers in *Quest* might equally be Roman legionaries as modern day soldiers.

White Noise

In *Interference* the British official at a telegram post is trying to patch through a message. His attempts at communication are foiled by the artist's intervening hand, caught in an eternal loop, he is forced to go through the motions forever, encapsulated in grainy archive footage, his gestures taking on the clownish exaggeration and pathos of a silent comedy. However, the title *Interference* refers to the incongruous sounds which issue from his device. Infiltrated by Price his machine pours forth all manner of unsolicited voices and music: waltzes, love songs and laments. No wonder the British bureaucrat looks so distraught. *Interference* strikes a mischievous note in a serious body of work, but it also exemplifies the importance Price attributes to how sound influences the reading of an image. This was already apparent in *Fly Catcher* (2005) an earlier two screen video work in which a foley artist's plastic bag of flies is juxtaposed with the image of flies for which it was intended. Perhaps this early piece, like *Interference*, is also a good metaphor for the gap between belief and reality, which so characterises the Israel and Palestine conflict. Price talks about Palestine being a 'white noise' in the everyday experience of most Israelis. The conflict emits an inconvenient hum, nonetheless letting them carry on their daily routines without acute disruption.

Slavoj Zizek also sees this kind of 'background noise' as a symptom of the fundamental imbalance between the Israeli experience of the conflict and the Palestinian one, where movement and access to daily provisions is severely restricted. '*This background noise, this underlying global imbalance, belies a simple consideration of 'who started it, and who did which violent act.'*' So-called 'background noise', or what is known in film terms as 'atmos', is a crucial aspect of *Within This Narrow Strip of Land*. Each piece amplifies the frequencies of its space; the echo of church bells and far away traffic of the peaceful rooftop in *Saffron of Jerusalem*, or the Arabic rave music of the stag party, transmitted from distant ghetto blaster speakers in *Light Drinks the Dark*. By bringing back into audible range what has been deemed as background noise, Price calls attention to the desensitising effect of the conflict. It is an invitation to listen with more care, something that has been done little by politicians and statesmen over the period of the war. As precisely tuned as her images, sound becomes another point of mediation between Price and the complex subject of the conflict. The vibrations and resonances she picks up reverberate with the daily experiences and places common to both sides, indeed these sounds have the rare power to transcend the territorial, their sounds carrying, and finally mingling, in the air over their imposed borders and boundaries.

Degrees of Blindness

Sound plays a key role in *The Refrain*, a major double screen video work which is the culmination of repeated visits by Price to film at St John's Eye Hospital in East Jerusalem, which was founded in 1882. Here the sounds of Jerusalem carry from one screen to another, reverberating within the sound artist Maia Urstad's haunting and minimal score. A rich metaphorical play exists between the hospital's purpose as a centre for regaining sight and its geographical position or *site*, now established at Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem, following a number of other incarnations and locations stretching back into history. Indeed, it is a paradox typical of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem that the good work done by St John's Hospital should owe its existence to Britain's past imperialism, first during the Crusades and later under the British Mandate in Palestine (1917-1948). The hospital thus embodies the entwined themes of vision and territory which permeate Price's work about Israel and Palestine. Allusions to site and sight play across two screens, unexpected visual and auditory juxtapositions unfold further layers of history and metaphor which trigger new readings of the disputed territory.

In a city of such religious significance, and divided by many religious agendas, the monastic calm that Price evokes in her images of the hospital conjure associations to the biblical miracle of the restoration of sight, a sign of being blessed. *The Refrain* depicts the hospital as a sanctuary of almost spiritual intensity and healing. The shafts of sunlight playing across the corridors and rooms have a luminosity that references spaces of worship and reflection. The hospital's significance as a site for the performance of miracles also relates to Price's focus that she refers to as the 'transcendental of the everyday act'. In *The Refrain* transcendence is implied through Price's visual play on light and visibility, which in turn could be seen as an allusion to reaching clarity of understanding, and to 'seeing the light'. As with all her videos the images are composed and contemplative, oscillating between stillness and movement. Simple domestic acts such as the folding of towels by an orderly or the rearrangement of surgical tools on a tray have the pared back minimalism of a Dutch painting, their poised stillness imbuing them with a metaphorical weight that recalls the Vanitas still life, and echoes the sense of sacred reflection which infuses *The Refrain*. However, these images of calm are balanced by close ups on the activity of the hospital, as doctors perform miracles of a more secular nature. Price reminds the viewer that whilst St John's resonates with the many sacred sites of Jerusalem its purpose is not prayer but an active engagement in the contemporary problems of Palestine. At the same time, the momentum of Urstad's arresting soundtrack counterparts Price's contemplative images with a sense of urgency and purpose. She amplifies the sounds of the hospital in a manner which remains sensitive to the importance of 'background noise' across Price's work, creating echoes and resonances which reverberate between the two screens, yet where the sound bleeds ambiguously across the images, calling into question their auditory origins and identity.

As a symbol of restoring sight and lifting blindness St John's Eye Hospital acts as a poetic signifier for hope and resolution within the bleakness of the Israel and Palestine conflict. However, the light in *The Refrain* is often filtered or reflected rather than direct. It is almost as if the hospital is apprehended with a vision that is not quite restored and still remains dimmed or distorted. Light sources are far out of reach, reflected on corridor walls or glimpsed in a distant doorway; a woman is framed through glass and only becomes apparent when her sudden movement causes a ripple of distortions. These allusions to blindness resonate through all the works in *Within This Narrow Strip of Land*. They are embodied not only in *The Refrain's* overt symbolism but also in the dark spaces of *Bleed* and *The Seer*, and the warning blind spots of *Reel*. Furthermore, there is the resonant image of the eye itself in *The Refrain*, as the film depicts operations in progress or eye examinations in close up. In these images Price performs a subtle reprise of *Un Chien Andalou's* visceral slit, except here the surrealist provocation for new modes of perception becomes a quiet appeal for clarity. Sight is not destroyed in order to be remade in one gestural slash, but is witnessed by the viewer, and Price's camera, as it undergoes a gradual process of restoration.

This difference in emphasis from earlier avant-garde strategies reveals much about Price's measured and enquiring approach to her complex subject matter. Like Godard's restless collage of televisual and cinematic references in *Notre Musique* she takes her references from a wide range of sources; plundering the archive as well as presenting a first person record. Like the restoration of sight, *Within a Narrow Strip of Land* evidences a slow process of enlightenment, which in the case of St John's Eye Hospital has required repeated return visits. The metaphor of sight has provided Price with a means of penetrating the layers of history and tangled allegiances embedded in the beleaguered territory and in the Western perception of it. These vignettes of Israel and Palestine may not escape the burden of history which mark these landscapes, but Price's subtle play upon metaphors of vision; from its blindness to its restoration, urge the viewer to 'look afresh' and anew.

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ⁱ Everett, Wendy, *Screen as Threshold*, *Screen* 39:2 Summer 1998 p142

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* pp257/8

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid* p258

^{iv} Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x a Second*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006, p67

^v Žižek, Slavoj, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso, London, 2002, p127