

Rosalind Nashashibi interviewed by George Vasey



Electrical Gaza 2015 film

GAZA STRIPPED

George Vasey: Could you give a brief context to the commissioning process behind your new film for the Imperial War Museum, *Electrical Gaza*?

Rosalind Nashashibi: I was asked to propose a new work on the subject of Gaza, so the impulse came from the IWM curators initially – they asked other artists to propose who weren't connected with Palestine, as far as I know. I had thought I hadn't been to Gaza but my mother reminded me that we had visited once with the family when I was very small, four or five years old, and she showed me a photograph of us having a picnic on the beach.

When did you shoot the footage?

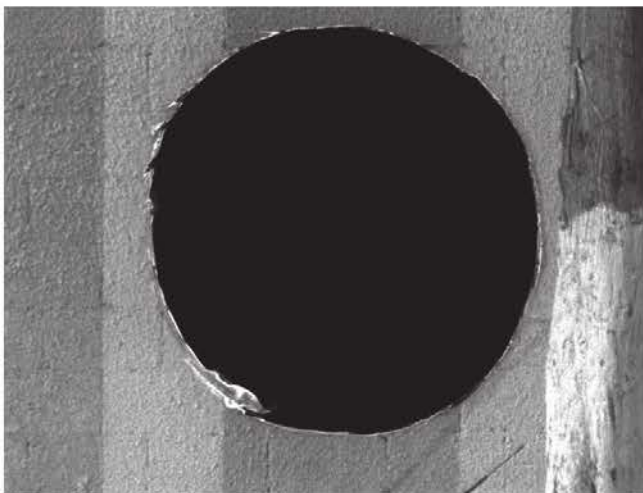
The filming took place in June 2014 during the run-up to Israel's latest war on Gaza, 'operation protective edge'.

Wow, I'm always struck by the abstraction of militaristic language. I understand you have a Palestinian father – do you view the film as, in some way, biographical?

My family is from Jerusalem. I don't view this film as biographical, but when I work in Palestine I'm always seen in relation to my father's side of the family, and it helps me to move around and to be trusted there. The names of your parents and grandparents are more important to the Palestinians and the Israelis than your nationality, citizenship or language.

And the title, how does the word 'electrical' operate in this context?

The word came from a book I was reading a while back about grief,



Electrical Gaza 2015
film

where the writer described the air around him at the beginning of his grief as being electrical. He meant highly charged, tense, artificial and even exciting, but a million miles away from the rush of happiness and life that fresh air can provide. The implication is that you cannot live permanently in that 'electrical' air without becoming damaged and exhausted. That made sense as a description of Gaza.

When I was in the gallery, a young couple came in halfway through a screening and one of them asked the other where the film was shot. They had obviously missed the title of the show, yet large parts of the film do feel curiously placeless. The conditions of Gaza only become apparent at particular moments. In the context of the IWM, the film countered the typically journalistic representation of Gaza. It refused to depict the place and the subjects just as victims, which unfortunately tends to be the norm.

It was important to me to depict what I saw and felt there as accurately as possible – in terms of a mix of how I remembered it and how I understood it when I got back, in reflection. I have tried to depict Gaza as an enchanted place because that is how I experienced it. I understood this a week after returning to the UK when I was watching an animated kids' movie. I realised that I could present Gaza through the language and eyes of childhood as an enchanted place, because it exists on a different plane of reality to everything that surrounds it, especially to us here in the UK. You cannot enter Gaza without complex dealings with different authority groups. Most of that process is hidden and opaque and the outcome insecure. To enter Gaza through Israel is to pass through a process that takes place in a brand-new-looking military facility where you are controlled and surveilled at every step by Israeli guards that you cannot see or touch. The place itself is deserted. Once entered, it is not clear how easily or when you will be allowed to leave Gaza. And this is all before experiencing the peculiar and wired stasis of Gaza and its layers of social protocol. So to go back to the question of victims – that's not how I experienced the place or the people. My experience was much more contradictory and layered, of a culture reflecting of and on itself, rather than in relation to the world outside.

*It is interesting that you mention the children's film because throughout *Electrical Gaza* there are moments when the film is translated into short animations that depict the same scene in the film. Often you insert elements that aren't there in real life. I wonder whether this technique connects to one of your earlier films, 2005's *Eyeballing*, where you collate all these anthropomorphic elements from architecture – a doorbell becomes a smiley face etc. There seem to be two ways of seeing the same scene, first through a form of indexical representation and then also through this other filter of the imagination – a child-like eye.*

Yes, the comparison with *Eyeballing* makes sense because both use strategies to show something that is not visible in reportage or *verité* style filming alone. They are attempts to dig under the images to see what effect they have, to see the moment of cognition taking place. Here the animation was a way of investing much more time and thought into the scenarios than the moments of film alone can offer. The experience of each moment was, of course, multi-layered, and that is something that cannot be easily portrayed through contemporaneous filming. The time of the film is multi-layered, as is my memory

of the events: each time animation is used it relates to a live-action scene that we shot, yet it portrays some of its elements faithfully but enhanced and altered, and, as mentioned earlier, suggests another time/space experience of the same moment.

Yes, in one animated scene a group of soldiers appear who aren't present in the filmed scene. Also, I was particularly struck by an abstract black dot that starts to grow over one scene, forming a redaction – it is striking because there is a sudden shift in representation.

The two scenes you mention visualise elements that weren't there at the time of shooting. The militants/soldiers/guards were around us but behind the camera on that street and the circle or hole that grows over the scene is an abstraction, yet both anticipate the violence that was coming and that was always there, under the surface. The black circle can be a rupture in the fabric of the film and in the fabric of the place – it's a sign of death and destruction to come.

Most of this film revolves around the depiction of men. There are only a couple of scenes where women appear, most prominently about halfway through when a group of women are seen looking after young children. In previous films, such as 2009's Jack Straw's Castle, you have similarly focused on masculine identity, why is this?

Gaza has a more traditional Muslim society than the West Bank or Jerusalem. Like any society that is sealed, it is no melting pot, and it isn't influenced much by the world outside. This means that women are less visible than men in public life. Taking care of foreign media – almost always men – is a job for men in Gaza, and so those around us were men. I felt that the most free people in Gaza were the little boys. They were always out in the street and not yet burdened by the twin responsibilities of family and resistance that weigh on the older boys. The girls weren't so visible – they were on a shorter leash.

You have explored closed and isolated communities numerous times before, of course. I'm thinking of films such as Bachelor Machines Part 1 from 2007, which depicted life on a cargo ship. What is it that draws you to these situations?

It is always hard to say what draws you to the things that you do, it's a big question. I think I must be drawn to patterns being revealed or structures exposed. I like to look into things in detail by filming, to see how they are made. Closed communities have to be self-sufficient as best they can, each role needs to be fulfilled from within or the machine doesn't work – which it never completely does, like the bachelor machine. So on the ship or in Gaza, there is a walled universe in each case where the structure of society and of the institutions is closer to the surface. Nevertheless, many things remain mysterious and opaque.

I was wondering what your relationship was to the people in the film. There is one scene where someone making food seems to offer it to the person behind the camera. It is quite a subtle gesture.

The men and women that you see in the film were all brought together to work with us by the 'fixer'. They were drivers, translators, the family of the fixer and some who were around us for reasons that weren't made clear. They became familiar to us and every time we were in public it was noticeable that they walked in front, behind and on either side of us in a kind of formation. This was all unspoken. They were working for us, they were buying us ice creams and falafel but at the same time they were protecting us and keeping us in sight.

I really enjoyed the soundtrack, which seemed to move quite effortlessly

between ambient house, electro and, finally, Fanfare, a piece of music by Benjamin Britten taken from Les Illuminations. What do you see as the music's function in the film?

The musical tracks operate as fictional screens. Usually they come in strong and end abruptly in near silence or against some contrast of non-music, so they don't transform the film into a passive experience for the viewer or a friction-free cinematic ride. They are there to channel the strong reactions I experienced in these moments and in memory. Footage shot on the streets of Gaza is not enough when the job is to direct the viewers' attention to an inner experience of place and time. One of the tracks is there to transmit the sheer joy and triumph we felt to have finally entered Gaza after years of trying different tactics, and to be bumping along in a car, actually there in Gaza itself. Everyone was smiling and sharing that moment, even the fixer and the taxi driver. That was the experience of the first moments, the short-lived high when Fatah and Hamas had united and before war seemed inevitable.

Later in the film, Britten's music is layered over a shift in perspective. The camera switches to a surveillance viewpoint. There is a curious conjunction between the previous topographies – homes, markets and alleyways – and this sudden panoramic, colonialist-like gaze.

There are two panoramas that run into one another where the Britten music starts: one is shot from a tall tower in a media facility in Gaza City, and the other is shot from a rooftop in Rafah, looking over the tunnel area and the border with Egypt, a spot for surveillance and from which we were visible to soldiers watching from the Egyptian side.

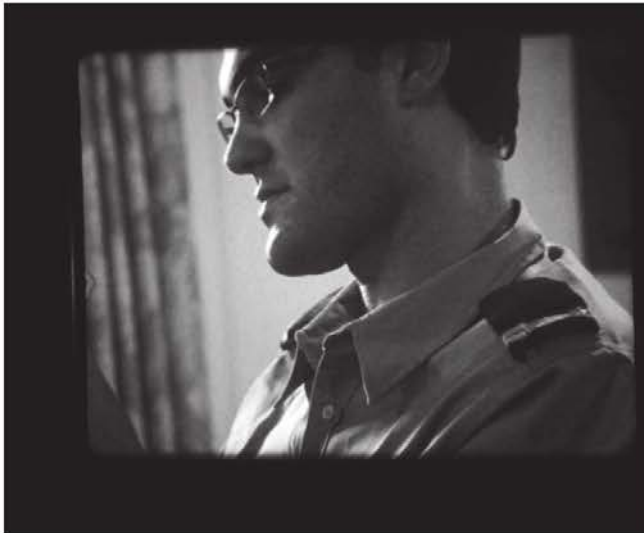
The scene reminded me of Eyal Weizman's writing on the 'politics of verticality', the sense that Gaza is controlled through the sky, via surveillance, and the ground, by asserting historical sovereignty through archeology.

This is a moment where the conditions of Gaza are made more explicit through a colonial eye that controls through surveillance, but it is also a sweeping look from the sky that could be an overview of an almost religious sort, an epic view, taking in a whole landscape of history and of destruction. That viewpoint often precedes destruction.

The film is not subtitled, and language is treated as a somatic and musical element, a recurring motif of your film work – the gesture rather than the voice is foregrounded. Do you see your films as a form of portraiture?

I don't see them as portraits. I'm usually trying to understand something that I don't have language for yet, by making comparisons or juxtapositions so that I can read the friction that occurs between things/times/situations I encounter. People come and go in these scenarios, work their rhythms, and it is part of the weave of what I am both looking at and constructing. What is said is a small part of what happens, equal to glances and movements. In this kind of investigation, words can stand as they are but translating – supplying text – changes their relative importance and introduces reading into the viewer's cognitive process.

There is a compelling edit in the film where the scene of a group of young men sitting around singing quickly cuts to a Hamas march. Both scenes represent, in different ways, forms of collectivism. The depiction of institutional power is something you have explored in previous films: the police force appear in a number of your films, for instance. Could you expand on this representation of militarism?



Bachelor Machines Part 1 2007 film

Eyeballing 2005 film

Jack Straw's Castle 2009 film

I have been looking into our institutions, how we both internalise and navigate them and they navigate us, since I started making films. Cops/soldiers/guards/militants are powerful archetypes that stand in for the control that comes from without rather than within. The men sat together singing. It was a beautiful and harmonious moment, but they were nationalist and resistance songs – some were moving, others were violent. The songs and the joining of voices in a domestic space were acts of resistance and power-building, but also about the simple joy of connection. When that scene meets the one of the Hamas Youth march, I'm thinking that, though there are political divisions in Gaza, resistance to the occupation is a universal cause, and militancy and hospitality are two pillars of Gazan existence.

At the start and near the end of Electrical Gaza we see a group of people transiting through the Rafah border crossing between Palestine and Egypt. This is where the conditions of Gaza become most apparent.

The film starts and almost finishes with chaotic scenes at the Rafah border crossing. The border had been closed for a long time, and, while we were there, the Egyptians opened the border for three days or so. Only a few thousand Gazans were authorised to leave, those who were sick and needed medical treatment outside or had other such urgent situations. But many more flocked to the border to try to leave.

In relation to the border, I was interested in your depiction of the sea, which appears through the film and is often filmed at a distance. In one scene it appears framed on either side by buildings while children play in the foreground. This seems like an important metaphor for me: the sea is often depicted as a site for escape and travel, but here it becomes constricted.

Gaza is locked, and the sea is a beautiful vista but, in some way, false. It was exciting to be at the sea in Palestine as the West Bank always feels so hemmed in by Israel, by the checkpoints and the separation wall, and by the settlements inside. You are never far from the sea but the coast apart from that of the Gaza Strip was all taken by Israel in 1948. In Gaza, however, Palestine is on the sea all the way down. It was breathtaking to have that expanse to look out on, but try taking a boat out for more than a few kilometers and you will be shot at by the Israeli navy that routinely patrols the limits of its blockade. So these features – the sea and the impenetrable borders – define Gaza's limits and they are in everything and everyone all the time. ■

Rosalind Nashashibi's *Electrical Gaza* is showing at the Imperial War Museum, London to 3 January.

GEORGE VASEY is a writer based in Gateshead and curator of the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland.