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## From Bethlehem to Basilicata: Framing Pasolini from Palestine

Robert G. White, Kingston University

### Abstract

*Sopralluoghi in Palestina (Location Hunting in Palestine)* (Pasolini 1965) documents Pasolini's search for an archaic, biblical world within which to set *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo (The Gospel According to St. Matthew)* (Pasolini 1964). Pasolini's search in Palestine/Israel was eventually abandoned, with *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* being filmed in and around Basilicata. Pasolini's documentary has proven a fertile object with which Palestinian artists have conducted dialogues. This article reads the documentary 'contrapuntally' (Said 2003: 4) —as a text to be resituated and responded to—through two responses, *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* (Anastas 2005) and *Ouroboros* (Alsharif 2017). Examining Alsharif's engagement with Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli (Christ Stopped at Eboli)* (1945), the article interrogates Pasolini's and Levi's Basilicata and Anastas' and Alsharif's responses from Palestine, arguing that the contrapuntal movement between these four works constitutes a 'dialectical' cinematic image of Palestine— between image and reality, the archaic and the contemporary.

### Keywords

Ayreen Anastas

Basma Alsharif

pan-South

contrapuntalism

ideological contamination

philosophical archaeology

transnational Palestine

*Sopralluoghi in Palestina*

### **Biography**

Robert G. White completed his PhD at the London Graduate School, a Critical Theory doctoral programme at Kingston University, London. He is currently an Associate Lecturer in Media and Communication at Kingston University. He is a contemporary Palestinian cinema specialist, whose research explores the intersection of film and critical theory. He is currently working on a monograph for Bloomsbury examining the role of atonality and counterpoint in contemporary Palestinian cinema's exilic engagement with its global archive. He is the co-editor of and a contributing author to *Spaces of Crisis and Critique: Heterotopias Beyond Foucault* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

### **Institutional email and postal address**

[R.White@Kingston.ac.uk](mailto:R.White@Kingston.ac.uk)

Kingston School of Art

Kingston University

Penrhyn Road

Kingston upon Thames

Surrey KT1 2EE

United Kingdom

### **ORCID ID**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2384-4532>

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## **Introduction: Reading Pasolini contrapuntally**

*Sopralluoghi in Palestina (Location Hunting in Palestine)* (Pasolini 1965) documents the filmmaker's search for the archaic remains of a biblical world within which to locate his telling of *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo (The Gospel According to St. Matthew)* (Pasolini 1964). Pier Paolo Pasolini's search in Israel and Jordan was eventually (and intentionally) abandoned, the places and faces deemed—seemingly paradoxically—both 'too modern' and 'too archaic'. Pasolini would displace biblical Palestine to Southern Italy, with *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* being filmed in and around Basilicata.

Both the failure of and issues of representation in Pasolini's search make the film a fertile object with which Palestinian artists have conducted dialogues. This article will read Pasolini's documentary 'contrapuntally' (Said 2003: 4) through two such responses, *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* (Ayreen Anastas 2005) and *Ouroboros* (Basma Alsharif 2017). Such a reading and focus addresses a gap in research. Existing scholarship on Pasolini's engagement with Palestine either reads his work alongside Godard and Agamben as constructing a topology of place and language at the expense of examining responses from Palestine (Gustafsson 2015) or situates *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* within his *Appunti* ('Notes') essay films<sup>1</sup> of the late 1960s (Trento 2012; Caminati 2016, 2019). However, as Noa Steimatsky (2008: 121) has recognized, the production and funding context of *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* mark it somewhat apart from the *Appunti* films, and—as I will argue in this article—this context means the film lacks the openness of those works, too often flattening Palestinian subjects as mere signifiers of an archaic, biblical world. This contribution to a reductive 'Image of Palestine' has provoked responses from Anastas and Alsharif which, I argue, both critique and revitalize Pasolini's original work. While these contemporary Palestinian artists construct new works in which Pasolini's blind spots are critically examined, this very process of

examination resituates the original text through new insights and possibilities discovered within it.

*Ouroboros*' engagement with Carlo Levi in its Basilicata sections means that this article more accurately resembles a quartet across time and place, from Levi and Pasolini's Basilicata of the 1930s and 1960s to Ayreen Anastas' and Basma Alsharif's contemporary responses from the West Bank and Gaza. This structure awakens contemporary political questions which—drawing on Pasolini's own thinking of a *Panmeridione* (pan-South) and the notion of 'Palestinian-ness' as a global *topos* of subalternity reflected in Europe and North America—challenge the reductive East/West binaries through which political discourse on Palestine-Israel<sup>2</sup> are framed. With this in mind, the article concludes by proposing that the intersection of these artworks forms a dialectical image of Palestine, which exists as a *topos* in the currents that flow between Levi's and Pasolini's Basilicata and Anastas' and Alsharif's Palestine. Before moving on, a brief outline of the article's contrapuntal method and its context is required.

The musical concept of counterpoint occurs throughout Edward Said's oeuvre (Said 1994, 2003). Broadly speaking, counterpoint in music is the interaction of more than two tones (or voices) in a composition, often harmonically interdependent yet independent in rhythm and pitch. The focus is on the interaction between independent voices rather than their effect as whole. Said proposes transposing the musical form to a mode of reading for its thematic lack of hierarchy, which allows space for subaltern voices. Said's engagement with counterpoint as method is most sustained in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), in which he suggests rereading the Western cultural archive: '*contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts' (Said 1994: 51, emphasis in original). Such a reading depends on seeing both the critical virtues and limitations in the original text,

and what lies beyond its horizons. A text should therefore be opened not just beyond the limits of its author's vision but beyond those of its historical context.

This notion of reading a cinematic text beyond both its author's critical limits and its historical boundaries will be crucial to my reading of Pasolini in this article. Pasolini was a figure whose Gramscian view of the revolutionary conjuncture compelled him to displace Palestine to Basilicata, but whose failure to fully realize the subjects of his documentary necessitated contemporary responses. While Pasolini's documentary is both the focus of this article and of Anastas' and Alsharif's films, an engagement with an archive of images both from and about Palestine characterizes a broader cinematic movement.

### **Between the image and the archive: The contrapuntal turn in contemporary Palestinian cinema**

The two Palestinian films in this article sit within what I term here a 'contrapuntal turn' in contemporary Palestinian filmmaking. This turn reflects an increasing tendency towards an essayistic mode which questions the authority of the image. While this questioning can be seen in Elia Suleiman's feature filmmaking (perhaps most explicitly in the decoding of overdetermined signifiers of identity in *Divine Intervention* (2002)), in recent years there has been a move towards a more specifically contrapuntal archival engagement with historical Palestinian images in Palestinian filmmaking. To clarify terminology, by 'archive' I refer not only to the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) Palestine Film Unit (PFU) archive partially lost in the 1982 siege of Beirut, but also to non-Palestinian films and filmmakers who have engaged with Palestine (prominently, but by no means exclusively, Jean-Luc Godard and Pier Paolo Pasolini). A notable example of this latter archival engagement comes from Kamal Aljafari, whose recent works, *Port of Memory* (2009) and *Recollection* (2015), repurpose the archive of British Mandate, US and Israeli film images of his native Jaffa, a

practice he terms ‘cinematic occupation’ (Aljafari 2010). This practice reveals a suppressed cultural and cinematic Palestinian history in Jaffa.

Mohanad Yaqubi’s *Off Frame AKA Revolution Until Victory* (2016) recovers and rearticulates elements of the PFU archive, alongside images of Palestine from ‘elsewhere’. The film includes rushes from the Mustafa Abu Ali documentary *Tall el Zaatar* (1977) (discovered in 2015 in Rome), still photographs, scenes from Godard’s engagements with Palestine, *Ici et Ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere)* (Godard, 1975) and *Notre Musique (Our Music)* (Godard, 2004), and British Mandate reportage. These sources form a reflexive essay film on both images of Palestinians and Palestinian image-making (in the case of the PFU), asking how contemporary Palestinian filmmakers might go about what Edward Said describes as Palestinians ‘*producing themselves*’ (1986: 108, emphasis in original). Such self-production comes through critically resistant images decoupled from (and resistant to) their circulation as ideological commodity images.

This critical resistance echoes a hope Said articulated for a future Palestinian cinematic double consciousness which resists both *invisibility* as lived subjects and *hypervisibility* as a regime of clichéd images (Said 2003: 3). While Said would not live to see it, this contrapuntal movement to locate a Palestinian-ness beyond the image is present in the examples given above, the two films under study in this article, and the wider Palestinian cinematic landscape.

### **‘Yes the biblical world appears, but it resurfaces like wreckage’: Location scouting in Palestine with Pasolini**

In preparation for what would become his telling of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Pasolini spent the summer of 1963 conducting a location scouting exercise, hoping to uncover authentically biblical sites for his re-telling of the Gospel. Pasolini explored potential

locations, accompanied by Don Andrea Carraro and Dr Lucio Settimo Caruso of the Pro Civitate Christiana, Walter Cantatore and his producer Alfredo Bini of Arco Film, and the cinematographer Aldo Pennelli. The documentary, which lasts 52 minutes, follows (somewhat erratically) the events of Matthew's Gospel. The film travels from the environs of Mount Tabor and Lake Tiberias, along the Jordan River and on to Nazareth. Detours take the film crew to a Druze village, a Kibbutz and Beersheba, in the Negev Desert. They then travel on to the Dead Sea and Jerusalem (then divided between Israel and Jordan), before crossing the border into Jordan and completing the trip in Bethlehem. Accompanied by his religious advisor, Don Andrea, *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* records Pasolini's quest to uncover the faces and places of his biblical imagination. What emerges through Pasolini's location scouting exercise is a dense, over-determined and archaic 'Image of Palestine' which is always already lost to Israeli modernity. The production context of the film itself is important to understanding the both the *mise-en-scène* and Pasolini's somewhat unguarded and unself-critical engagement with the subjects of his documentary. The journey to Israel and Jordan (as it then was) was funded by the Pro Civitate Christiana, with whom Pasolini had stayed in 1962, reading the Gospel and discovering the genesis for his retelling of it (Steimatsky 2008: 120). The resulting documentary is often contextualized among his 'third-world' documentaries of the 1960s, and particularly as an early 'note' towards the unrealized screenplay *Appunti per poema sul Terzo Mondo* (*Notes for a Poem on the Third World*) (Pasolini 1968) (Caminati 2016, 2019). However, the film stands as somewhat of a curiosity—particularly in its creative genesis as a work in and of itself—as Pasolini elaborates:

When we went to the Middle East there was a cameraman with us who was sent along by the production company. I never suggested a thing to him, because I wasn't thinking of

using the material to make a film, I just wanted some documentation which would help me set *The Gospel*. (Stack 1969: 73)

Pasolini is something of an unreliable narrator when retelling the genesis of the film, claiming in the same interview on *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* both that ‘I realized it [the footage] was all no use – that was after a few hours of driving’ (Stack 1969: 76), and on the relocation to South Italy that ‘I had decided to do this even before I went to Palestine, which I only did to set my conscience at ease’ (Stack 1969: 82). Perhaps this seemingly contradictory account of intentions should not come as a surprise from an artist who, by his own admission, embraced self-contradiction. Nevertheless, given what we assume is a pre-conceived sense of failure, Pasolini’s journey is inevitably conditioned by a separation of ‘modernity’ and ‘archaic’ into Orientalist dichotomies of an industrialized, Euro-Israeli culture and an ancient pre-modern Arab culture encompassing Palestinian and Druze populations. In this way, Pasolini’s pilgrimage to scout face and places takes its place within a long tradition of both colonial exploration and biblical tourism in the Holy Land, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kay Dickinson (2016), following Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish and J.T. Mitchell, identifies a ‘place-myth’ of Palestine-Israel. This refers to the historical intersection of crusades, colonialism and tourism to the region, and corresponding claims of ownership and practices of occupation which ‘do not just describe the land, they have created it’ (Dickinson 2016: 82). Such practices create an image so dense as to obscure the actual lived landscape, which in turn reduces Palestinians to extras in a tableau vivant of biblical imagery and elides them from the frame of ‘modernity’.

*Sopralluoghi in Palestina* opens around 50 km from Tel Aviv, where Pasolini—after spending all morning travelling through countryside ‘modern and very similar to Italy’—finds a scene which corresponds to his biblical archaic vision, a peasant separating wheat

from chaff. While Pasolini observes the scene in satisfaction, Don Andrea references its parallels to Matthew 3:12, where John the Baptist addresses the Pharisees.

[Figure 1: Archaic contamination as Orientalist cliché in *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* (1965). ©Arco Film (with the courtesy of Arco Film)]

The scene is framed initially in medium shot—the ‘shepherd’ an image of pre-industrial, archaic purity Pasolini is seeking—before cutting to a long shot, with the peasant farmer in the centre and Pasolini and Don Andrea observing right of centre. Modernity soon contaminates sound and image in ironic juxtaposition. The scene is shot just off the road, which can be seen in the immediate background of the long shot. While Pasolini articulates his satisfaction at the ‘archaic’ scene, a 1950s car passes directly behind them, a signifier of modernity puncturing the fictitiously idealized (and Orientalized) pastoral scene.

The biblical congruence of face, place and gesture that Pasolini hoped to find dissipates from this point on, with Pasolini’s archaic, biblical land revealing itself to be irredeemably modern. The scene above is the first of several where Pasolini frames the non-Jewish figures in Palestine-Israel through a distinctly Orientalist gaze. ‘Archaic’, ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ all occur in descriptions of Arab-Palestinian and Druze populations, as Pasolini scans their faces in search of correspondence with his preconceived image. This burying of images beneath language has a long history in the Holy Land; freeing these images from Pasolini’s discourse is one of the problems Ayreen Anastas will debate in *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine*.

Pasolini’s way of seeing frames the landscape, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, as one of pathological modernity embedded with shards of archaic time. Just three minutes into the documentary we find Pasolini again lamenting the disjuncture between reality and expectation, as towards Nazareth he encounters ‘un paesaggio contaminato dalla modernità’,

which translates as ‘a landscape contaminated by modernity’. This notion of modernity corrupting a pure, archaic essence runs through Pasolini’s broader aesthetics, and therefore Pasolini’s evolving concept of contamination—as both an aesthetic and ideological process—requires some explication.

### **Critical and ideological contamination in Pasolini**

The concept of contamination in Pasolini, as well documented (Steimatsky 2008, Forgacs 2019), constitutes a specific aesthetic practice, a mixing of high and low styles and voices to produce new aesthetic experiences, functioning as ‘a creative kind of dirtying, one that worked to ‘pull up’ the low and ‘pull down’ the high’ (Forgacs 2019: 22). This is witnessed in Pasolini’s early feature filmmaking, in the contamination of Bach and Vivaldi with the Roman *borgate* (working-class suburbs) in *Accattone* (Pasolini, 1961) and *Mamma Roma* (Pasolini, 1962) respectively, and the contamination of contemporary music with scripture in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*.

Much of the focus on Pasolini’s use of contamination frames it as a productive, creative force, a dialectics which provokes new forms of thought. In his article ‘Dirt and Order in Pasolini’, David Forgacs makes an important distinction, tracing an evolution in Pasolini’s work from positive contamination to negative (Forgacs 2019: 23). Whereas the former is a stylistic and formal approach to artistic dirtying, the latter—a turn towards contamination in an almost biological sense—emerges as a thematic rather than formal response to a cancerous moral corruption of purity by ideological forms, be they Fascism or capitalist modernity. It is this move from contamination to corruption that Forgacs highlights in Pasolini’s work predominantly (but by no means exclusively) after the late 1960s, illustrated in allegorical forms of corruption in *Porcile (Pigsty)* (Pasolini, 1969) and *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom)* (Pasolini, 1975) (Forgacs 2019: 23).

Following Forgacs, it is my contention that this primarily aesthetic repulsion towards ideological contamination marks *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* as distinct from the other *Appunti* films, which use critical contamination to pose political questions and self-critique. This is most explicit in *Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana (Notes Towards an African Orestes)* (Pasolini 1970), which contains elements of self-reflexivity (the opening scene questioning the cinematic self) and critical contamination (questions of Statehood and justice framed through a resituating of the *Oresteia*) to think through ideological contamination (the loss of the archaic aspect of the non-aligned world). In contrast, contamination in *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* is precisely this negative thematic form, expressed as a corrupt form of modernity dirtying archaic forms which, for Pasolini, emerge very occasionally as 'wreckage' (both the 'biblical' world and the 'Arab' world are framed in these terms). This is taken as a justification for his decision to displace the Gospel to a South Italy more authentically archaic but with the analogical potential for political critique.

### **Pasolini, Palestine and the pan-South**

Upon hearing Pasolini's doubts over representing the Holy Land and rectifying the discordance between his imagination and the landscape itself, Don Andrea proposes the idea of displacing the film elsewhere, albeit for different reasons. Seemingly drawing on the incompatibility of religious representation and the plastic arts, he advises Pasolini that: 'No image can be created here. It has to be absorbed and reinvented elsewhere. The specific purpose should be this: condense and absorb the spirit. Then, possibly, relive it, rebuild it, invent it perhaps; in another setting, another place'.

For Pasolini, this reinvention elsewhere is informed by his own interpretation of Marxist and Gramscian thought, seeing the social relations and disparity of wealth in Palestine-Israel analogously through his own European framework. This approach compels him to see in the

non-Jewish populations of Palestine an echo of the ‘European lumpenproletariat’, those set outside of history within Pasolini’s own context. It cannot be understated how central a theme this is throughout his work, from his early poetry to his late documentaries. Pasolini’s own reformulation of Gramsci’s Southern Question imagines a political and cultural ‘South’ far beyond the borders of Italy. This is what Giovanna Trento terms ‘the Pan-South (*Panmeridione*)’ (Trento 2012: 59). This concept is thought of topologically rather than geographically, as shifting points of place and language in a network comprising ‘peasantry, dialects, pre-modern societies, Rome’s sub-proletarian suburbs, rural Friuli, urban Naples, the Arab world, and sub-Saharan Africa’ (Trento 2012: 60). Behind this thinking lies what Noa Steimatsky terms ‘the persistence of archaic forms in the contemporary world’ (Steimatsky 2008: 133). These archaic forms include landscapes, gestures and language which remain outside the homogenising, industrialising forces of late Capitalist modernity. Beyond Pasolini’s use, these ideas of the archaic and the *archē* (origin) have a complex philosophical history, which needs contextualising.

### **Locating the archaic**

In Aristotelian thought, the *archē* is a founding principle or concept, which is logically bound to a *telos*, or end goal, a principle crucial to both Hegelian and Marxist philosophy. Pasolini, with an understanding of both Greek mythology and Marxian thought, has a nuanced and complex understanding of the archaic, which for him signifies more of a geographical and linguistic notion than a temporal understanding. Rather than historical reconstruction, he is concerned with transposing remnants of the past to analogously critique contemporary social and industrial relations. Pasolini expands on this, stating that ‘Southern Italy allowed me to make the transposition from the ancient to the modern world without having to reconstruct it archaeologically or philologically’ (Stack 1969: 82). However, a different understanding of

the archaic seeks to excavate concepts (such as ‘Palestine’) from a historical tradition which suppresses their heterogeneity and alternative meanings.

In *The Signature of Things*, Giorgio Agamben (2009) traces the concept of a ‘philosophical archaeology’, drawing on Kant’s metaphysics and Foucault’s genealogy. The work of philosophy, and thus philosophical archaeology, is not just concerned ‘with what has been, but also with what ought to and could have been’ (Agamben 2009: 82). It is precisely this that gives this form of archaeology a curious temporality of a future perfect, or as Agamben terms it, a future *anterior*. Philosophical archaeology thus seeks to strip an object of historical tradition and open it to contingency.

Reading Pasolini’s archaic method as a pan-South *topos* allows for a thinking which can both transpose the Gospel into the Italian South and imagine ‘Christ as an intellectual in a world of the poor available for revolution’ as contemporaneously analogous to a revolutionary and archaic potential in the Italian South which can resist the hegemonic North (Stack 1969: 78). This same method can transpose Hellenic ideas of emergent justice and democracy to the Postcolonial African continent.

One might argue that Pasolini’s specific understanding of archaic method and subsequent act of displacement in *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* ‘freed’ him from both capitalist development and an overdetermined sacred space to create an analogy physically remote from the state, industrial modernity, or official religious sites. However, I would argue that by framing his non-Jewish characters in his film as signifiers of ‘an archaic Arab world’, his romantic primitivism and discursive formations construct a reductive ‘Image of Palestine’ within (Western) historical tradition. Taken in and of itself, without the accompanying analogical force of *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* remains a closed text, in which the ‘Arab world’ is a homogenized ‘spirit’ trapped in an image.

### **The ‘Note’ that is not: Pasolini, the postcolonial and *struttura da farsi***

An unresolved political tension structures Pasolini’s documentary in a way distinct from his *Appunti* films (whose titles indicate their experimental, open, *da farsi* (literally, ‘to be made’) approach. Elements of *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* suggest that Pasolini recognizes the class disparities in Palestine-Israel as analogous to those he sees in South Italy, Africa, and India. Nonetheless, the tendency to uncritically reproduce founding political myths (a barren landscape linked with Arabness) and silence images of Palestinian and Arab subjects beneath Orientalising discourse makes this work particularly open to critical dialogue.

By contrast, *Notes Towards an African Orestes* contains a crucial challenge to Pasolini’s somewhat paternalistic romanticism of his subjects. Towards the end of the film’s first quarter, Pasolini is in a classroom presenting his ideas for a retelling of the Oresteia in Africa to a group of students in Rome. Articulating both the view that Ancient Greek society is similar to that of what he terms ‘African tribal civilization’, and that Orestes’ discovery of justice and democracy is correlative to what has happened in contemporary post-colonial Africa, he poses the question of whether to set the film in the current day or the Africa of 1960. The first student entertains Pasolini’s question, even citing a somewhat Pasolinian contamination of the African continent with the character of European modernity. Upon asking whether other students agree, however, he encounters robust critique of his Eurocentric assumptions and imprecise language. Firstly, he is told, Africa is a continent and not a country. Thus, to speak of a universal experience from the Mediterranean to the southern tip, or the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean makes no sense. Secondly, argues another student, thinking in terms of ‘tribalism’ is how Europe subjugated the African continent. This dialogue constitutes some of the experimental ‘openness’ of the *Appunti* films, with Pasolini taken aback by the diversion away from his question into pointed challenges to some of his assumptions.

Whereas Pasolini's universalist assumptions about 'Africa' and 'Africans' are challenged and critiqued as part of the open construction of *Notes Towards an African Orestes*, similar universalist assumptions about 'Arabs' in *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* remain uncontested, leaving no space for Arab, or more specifically, Palestinian intellectual or cultural life beyond the frame of an 'ancient, archaic Arab world.' The unresolved tension between the Pasolini of the postcolonial Notes, and the Pasolini of Orientalist location scouting in *Sopralluoghi in Palestina*, is perhaps what makes that documentary such a fertile object of engagement for both Ayreen Anastas and Basma Alsharif.

**From Bethlehem to Basilicata: An *archē*-ology of repetition in *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* (Ayreen Anastas 2005)**

In the philosophical (and Agambian) sense of the archaic, Ayreen Anastas employs a properly *archē*-ological approach in *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* (2005), one which opens Pasolini's work to contingency. This approach functions on multiple levels. It uncovers lost potential, unexplored paths and missteps in retracing *Sopralluoghi in Palestina*; it challenges the assumptions about and negations of Palestinian (and Arab) experience in Pasolini's original journey; finally, it remaps it to uncover the contemporary geopolitical reality of occupation.

*Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* is a response to the filmmaker which proceeds in the spirit of Pasolini's *da farsi* approach, interrogating what Pasolini failed to see through the dual blind spots of both personal perspective and historical circumstance. Forty years after Pasolini's original, failed journey, Anastas attempts a repetition. This approach to repetition as a philosophical process is clarified by Anastas (2006: 478), who references the Heideggerian notion of *Wiederholung* (understood as repetition/retrieval) in her own description of the work. This idea sees the act of repetition itself as revealing new possibilities within the

original work. The film is, by Anastas' own admission, an attempt to actualize the potential in Pasolini's abandoned trip by examining both paths not taken, and moments lost to historical circumstance.

The title of the film seems to acknowledge the ambiguous status of Pasolini's *Appunti* legacy, with the *Pa\** an acknowledgement of the politically engaged but paternalistic Western filmmaker. This sound also suggests both a bi-directional stutter and an interruption; the latter travels back as mode of corrective dialogue to Pasolini's 1963 search, while the stutter indicates the staccato contemporary journey fragmented by the geopolitical impossibilities of occupation. Anastas makes an explicit reference to the film's essayistic openness when pondering the title of the film in its closing credits: 'Notes... Re Sites of Thoughts...or Notes...for a New Testament' she wonders, before settling on *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine*. The 'Pa', Anastas states, could refer back to 'father', or forward to 'Palestinian Awakening'. This statement's double consciousness appears to open the present to a radical, secular revolutionary spirit of self-production of the past. The spirit here lies in the nascent moments (and experimental images) of the Palestinian Revolution, now lost as mere commodity images which sustain the bureaucracy of another 'Pa', the Palestinian Authority.

At 51 minutes, the film occupies a near-identical duration to Pasolini's documentary. In the journey's repetition, the voices are multiplied from a dialogue to a quartet, two male and two female. Ayreen Anastas is 'the director' and Karam Tannous is credited as 'the voice' (sometimes heard in dialogue with Anastas). Suhail Shadoud and Haissam Zaina play the roles of Pasolini and Don Andrea, respectively. A tension between place and language conditions the film throughout. There is a desire to respect and imitate the cartography of Pasolini's journey, while his non-localizable terms such as 'the Arab World' and 'the spirit' trigger diversions and detours.

This is illustrated in the film's 5-minute opening, which repeats abortive attempts to recreate the opening of *Sopralluoghi in Palestina*, in which the farmer separates the wheat from the chaff. The original scene takes place close to the Jordanian border (which Pasolini describes as 'the archaic spirit of the ancient Arab world') but far from the Galilee (the archaic place of the Gospel passage). These dichotomies of proximity and distance, place and spirit are played with throughout *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine*. The first scene opens in Bethlehem with a close-up of a woman's hands separating grain as Shadoud paraphrases Pasolini in exclaiming luck at finding 'an image of an authentic biblical world' among a 'landscape of settlements' (explicitly replacing 'modernity'). Shadoud then further infuses Pasolini's words with geopolitical contemporaneity, referring to 'a shrinking landscape of arbitrary borders and barriers' which means Galilee (as it was for Pasolini) 'is still far from here'. The West Bank is 'near to the Arab World in spirit' and thus provides, Shadoud notes with irony, a scene 'typical for the archaic Arab world'.

At this point comes Anastas' first interjection: 'Stop! Stop!' she exclaims over a split screen of the edit suite and Pasolini's original scene. With a sense of critical irony which will condition the repetitions throughout, she states that 'for the repetition to happen we need to follow the original path'. The scene's location (Bethlehem) and domestic setting are 'corrected'. Bethlehem comes at the end of Pasolini's journey, and the setting should be more pastoral to reflect the original scene's aesthetic. The scene restarts with Anastas' command: 'Let's try again'. This next iteration relocates the coordinates ('We are in the Golan Heights, 70km from Damascus (...) Not far from here lies the cease-fire line') and frames a 'pastoral' scene of agricultural workers in a field. Anastas interjects again: 'The Golan is also wrong! The Galilee, not the Golan!' These proper nouns (the West Bank, the Golan, the Galilee) politicize Pasolini's original terms, connecting a topology of occupation (the former two) to a topology of loss (the dispossessed Arab villages of the Galilee).

## Unexplored paths and lost pasts

The slippages of place and language throughout *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* indicate its central concern; the act of repetition uncovers possibilities within the original text which were either unforeseeable or unnoticed. Regarding the unforeseeable, the cartography which lies beyond the horizon of Pasolini's visibility is that of the 1967 occupation and its borders. Thus, the West Bank and Golan Heights become contemporary (geo)politicized markers of Pasolini's 'Arab world'. A landscape 'contaminated by modernity' in 1963 is translated into a landscape 'contaminated by settlements' in 2005. The unnoticed is expressed in *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine's* subtle critiques of the touristic naivety of the original text. These come in the second segment of the trip (Lake Tiberias), where Shadoud (as Pasolini) switches from repeating Pasolini's original words to lamenting 'repeating the same mistakes' 40 years later. The first of these is the decision to travel in the unbearable heat of summer 1963 rather than spring, a time of year 'when I could have gotten a lot more out of this landscape'. The route taken is also lamented. Shadoud's Pasolini notes that the archaic landscapes Pasolini would find in and around 1960s Matera in fact could have been found in the villages around Hebron at that time. Hebron reoccurs in a later scene. A Jerusalem-based Italian architect shows Anastas stills from the location scouting process of Franco Zeffirelli's *Gesù di Nazareth (Jesus of Nazareth)* (1977) and highlights their aesthetic suitability for Pasolini's Gospel. This sequence also laments the impact of the occupation and Second Intifada on these villages and their architecture. The villages around Hebron thus constitute an element of unrealized potential for Anastas. A landscape then undiscovered by Pasolini is now lost to destruction and ruin.

A loss of different kind is expressed in the attempt to recreate Pasolini's kibbutz scene. In the original film, the kibbutz scene is its sole participatory interview. It is discussed as a

model of collective living, with communitarian approaches to labour and childcare presented as an idealistic model. The contemporary repetition, eventually abandoned, sees Anastas and a German kibbutz resident discuss the loss of this ideal. The resident laments a more transactional relationship in contemporary kibbutzism, with a number being privatized and workers renting space while working elsewhere (the interviewee rents a bungalow in the kibbutz a four-minute walk from where he works). The 1963 scene is one of the few occasions where Pasolini finds a collective, communitarian aspect within a modern, increasingly capitalist State. The loss of these principles in the 2005 scene reflects this time an aspect not missed by Pasolini (in the manner of the architecture of Hebron), but lost in Israel's continuing drift from the radical, socialist aspects of its societal structures. Cumulatively, these scenes demonstrate the film's unstable, *archē*-ological temporality. It opens the original work to that which *will* have been and *could* have been.

### **Beyond the 'Image of Palestine'**

Alongside the diversions in language necessitated by the repetitions, the film makes an explicit break with Pasolini's physical journey at the 18-minute mark. As the filmmakers traverse Lake Tiberias, from where Pasolini in 1963 observes 'Ancient Gadara where now Syrian soldiers fire on the Jews',<sup>3</sup> Anastas interjects, correcting 'Gadara' first to 'Occupied Golan' and then 'the Golan Heights', again reflecting the geopolitical reality of the 1967 borders. At this point, Shadoud signifies a break with Pasolini's journey (on to Nazareth) and their own (into the Golan Heights). This is justified as desire to move 'beyond the image'. Shadoud's statement is juxtaposed with Pasolini's footage of 'unusable' images of 'savage, pre-Christian' faces he finds in Beerhsheba, which correspond in his Orientalist perspective to those in the Druze villages. Shadoud's follow up words are superimposed on Pasolini's original scene and interrupt that scene's commentary. Moving beyond the image, claims

Shadoud, entails freeing these images from Pasolini's words, or 'the sound that masks a certain image.' This scene signifies a move beyond Pasolini's original image at two levels. Firstly, it stages a crucial intervention into the geopolitical realities of occupation (Israel's Arab population living not as citizens, but 'occupied subjects') and conducts an interview on both the history of and daily life in the Golan Heights. Secondly, this intervention rearticulates what Pasolini was unable to fully realize (the daily lives of his Arab documentary subjects rather than their 'faces' or 'spirit') or foresee (the post-67 geopolitical reality).

In this desire to move beyond the image, *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* prefigures a contemporary struggle in Palestinian filmmaking—to decolonize the image in order to imbue it with resistance. By resistance, I refer here to a resistance *of* image. What I mean by this is an image which resists either being commodified into an 'Image of Palestine', with overcoded Orientalist symbolism, or an 'Image of Resistance', with overcoded signifiers of terror/resistance—this latter image having been commodified by both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. This contrapuntal engagement with the archive to create new, critically resistant images through juxtaposition and dialogue with old makes *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* an early example of an increasingly essayistic engagement with Palestinian archival images. It is perhaps Pasolini's lack of essayistic engagement in *Sopralluoghi in Palestina*, when compared with his more consciously 'open' *Appunti* films, which gives it the status of an object to be (re)made through repetition and retrieval, as Basma Alsharif will demonstrate twelve years after Anastas.

### **Letter from Gaza: Location Scouting for Palestine in *Ouroboros* (Basma Alsharif 2017)**

The 'Image of Palestine' presented as mere 'wreckage of the biblical world' in Pasolini's documentary is one which Basma Alsharif both interrogates and inverts in her 2017 film

*Ouroboros*, by turning this Holy Land framing of Palestine back on Matera, while simultaneously locating hidden traces of Palestine in the fabric of other colonial histories. Structurally, its cyclical movement links locations from the ‘here’ of Gaza to the ‘elsewhere’ of Los Angeles, the Mojave Desert, Basilicata and Brittany. These locations, while ostensibly beginning and ending with Gaza, exist as a laterally connected network. The film’s form folds them into one another, implicating a network of places and histories in what termed Gaza’s ‘perpetual present’ Alsharif 2017b: n.pag.). The film’s broader temporal structure shifts between intertitles: dawn, noon, dusk and night. Like the film itself, these shifts have little concern for linearity. There is, in a manner echoing *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine*, a thematic concern for repetition and restarts, which are hinted at in the film’s title. The Ouroboros is an ancient Egyptian symbol of a snake eating its own tail, representing a cycle of destruction and creation.

The film’s opening sequences survey the topography of Gaza, which is vertically shot through digital drone cameras. These scenes employ smash cuts to move between the post-2014 scenes of destruction to contemporary Gaza City. The drone photography is accompanied by the aural drone of a hurdy gurdy, which will reappear in the film’s closing scenes in a Breton Chateau, whereby a slow dissolve ties the acoustic space of Renaissance (and Colonial) Europe to the visual space of contemporary Gaza. The film’s temporal shifts and architectural transitions between dilapidation, destruction and renewal position Gaza as a threshold space. Edward Said sees this threshold of creation and ruin as innate in Palestinian architecture, writing that ‘each Palestinian structure presents itself as a potential ruin’ (Said 1986: 38).

Colonialism, permanence and ruin intersect in contrapuntal movements throughout the film. The US segments examine the legacy of slavery and the marginalisation of Indigenous culture (voiceover, used sparingly, is only in Chinuk Wawa).<sup>4</sup> A reading of Conrad’s *Heart*

*of Darkness* is repeatedly interrupted in a scene in the Mojave Desert. Everything begins and ends in Gaza, which, in the film's musical coda, is explicitly edited in between those locations preceding it. While Palestine/Gaza is the trace which links the other locations' histories to a colonial present, the most explicit engagement with Palestinian representation and image comes in the Matera section, the film's third movement in its cycle.

Alsharif's own dialogue with Pasolini in *Ouroboros* is perhaps more critical than Anastas' in *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine*. Highlighting the parallels between the process of location scouting and colonial exploration, she claims that creating an image to correspond to the mind's eye and overlaying that image on a site involves 'inherently exploiting the landscape and population there' (Alsharif 2017a). Clarifying her own engagement with the south of Italy by way of Pasolini's in Palestine-Israel, she inverts Pasolini's image of opacity to 'look at Matera as an image, what it symbolizes in regards to its history and what it represents today: the serene pastoral landscapes, the preserved ancient city' (Alsharif 2017a).

[Figure 2: Matera as commodity image in *Ouroboros* (2017). ©Basma Alsharif (with the courtesy of the filmmaker)]

Alsharif's engagement with Basilicata extends beyond Pasolini to the work of Carlo Levi, specifically his 1945 memoir *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*). This documents his experience of internal exile after his banishment from Turin to Basilicata in the 1930s for his anti-fascist activism. Levi documents his own estrangement, along with the stark poverty of the South in contrast with the industrial North. The book itself, perhaps foreshadowing Pasolini's own displacement of the Holy Land to Basilicata, is rich with descriptions of Lucania (now Basilicata) as a land at the threshold of the sacred and the cursed. It is a place outside time, history and the State and a place of failed transcendence

with ‘pain residing forever in earthly things’ (Levi 2000 [1947]: 12). Grassano, the town to which Levi was first exiled, is described as ‘a streak of white at the summit of a bare hill, a sort of miniature Jerusalem in the solitude of the desert’ (Levi 2000: 13).

In a scene from the Basilicata section of *Ouroboros*, a lone figure (the artist Diego Marcon) wanders through the Basilicatan countryside, smoking a cigarette as the words of Levi’s experience of open incarceration drift across the screen.

[Figure 3: Exilic estrangement: Levi in Gaza in *Ouroboros* (2017). ©Basma Alsharif  
(with the courtesy of the filmmaker)]

This juxtaposition of text and image works as a poetics of exile on several levels. Firstly, from Alsharif’s own perspective, being raised in Kuwait and France to Gazan parents, the scene resonates with the filmmaker’s feeling of estrangement in all three. Further, the status of Gaza since 2005, no longer occupied from within but de facto occupied from without, is effectively that of an open prison. The passage itself is taken from Levi’s initial impression upon arriving in Gagliano (Aliano) and noting the unease he felt at being unfree in a landscape which conveyed openness. The juxtaposition of text, image and context conveys the intersection between exile, occupation and inequality that links Gaza to Basilicata, a link which led Alsharif away from Pasolini toward Levi. There is an ‘irony’ to this which Alsharif (2017a) admits, in that it was Pasolini who led her to Basilicata in the first place. Speaking of the impact of *Christ Stopped at Eboli* on her, she states that ‘I was completely floored by Levi’s descriptions of the villagers in the Southern Italian town: it was as though he were describing Gaza today’ (Alsharif 2017a). Perhaps a blind spot of Alsharif’s critique of Pasolini is that the marginalization of one culture by another was in fact a crucial factor leading Pasolini to analogously reconstruct the class relations of Palestine-Israel in Southern

Italy. The structures and lore Levi and Pasolini both recognize as conditioning the South which they witness bear striking resemblances to one another. The resemblance is most acute between a morality of common fate borne more of nature than religion for Levi, and a morality not founded on evangelism for Pasolini. When Pasolini sees in the margins of 1963 Israel a space where ‘Christ’s preaching has not been heard [...] even from afar’, we see correlative figures in Levi’s Lucania of 1935: ‘Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason, nor history’ (Levi 2000: 12). Pasolini explicates this lack of evangelism, through which he links Palestinian and Southern Italian faces by explaining a morality conditioned neither by State nor Church, claiming: ‘it isn’t founded on love but on honour; [...] If there is piety, it’s because it’s there, not because it’s supposed to be there. You can see this better in the Arabs than in Southern Italians’ (Stack 1969: 75). These threads connect Pasolini’s Basilicata to Levi’s Lucania and Basma Alsharif’s Gaza. The contemporary Gaza Alsharif sees in the pages of Levi’s 1935 Lucania/Basilicata is a correlate of the Basilicata Pasolini saw in the Palestinian remnants of 1963 Israel.

In the way these two works engage with, critique, and are informed by Pasolini’s documentary, they add a crucial contrapuntal voice to open up Pasolini’s original work. Looking beyond its original context to the contemporary geopolitical reality of Palestine, these films interrogate the blind spots in Pasolini’s representation of the people and the land yet manage to uncover productive similarities and new insights through this process of critique.

### **Conclusion: *da farsi* and a dialectical image of Palestine**

A contrapuntal reading of *Sopralluoghi in Palestina*—through *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* and *Ouroboros*—achieves two aims. Firstly, it ‘opens’ the documentary in the spirit of Pasolini’s

own *da farsi* approach. Situating the work relationally goes some way to meeting the aims of open, anticolonial dialogue within that approach. Secondly, such a reading, by both repeating and resituating Pasolini (and Levi) reveals the potential and contingency in the original works: the missed landscapes, lost pasts and contemporary resonances (such as those which connect Levi's Basilicata to Alsharif's Gaza) that can be awakened.

Anastas' *Pasolini Pa\* Palestine* articulates a conversation with Pasolini between 1963 and 2005, in a voice unheard in Pasolini's own film: female and Arabic. It also attempts detours and diversions around his original route, necessitated by the shifting cartographic reality. The structure of Basma Alsharif's *Ouroboros* resembles an atonal, contrapuntal ensemble, through its connections with other histories (both political and cinematic), its tensions between colonialism, postcoloniality, exile and home, and its themes of emergence and disappearance. In seeking traces of Palestine in the American West, French colonial architecture and the South of Italy, Alsharif's film in fact constructs a Palestinian *topos* as a condition, a stubborn reminder (or remnant) of presence in those histories and geographies that have forgotten it. This approach in fact bears a resemblance to Pasolini's own construction of a pan-South *topos*, which connects the condition of Europe's marginalized South to the Global South. Crucially, however, Alsharif's perspective looks out *to* Europe *from* a Palestine producing itself.

These images and moments combine to create an open, multi-directional image, where lateral and temporal connections intersect, creating not an archaic 'Image of Palestine', but more accurately, what Walter Benjamin might term a *dialectical* one. In both *On the Concept of History* (1940) *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin's magnum opus of his mature thought, unfinished at his death) the notion of an image at a standstill, one that allows for a different conception of historical experience, is a crucial one. Benjamin's most sustained theoretical description of the dialectical image comes in Convolute N of the *Arcades Project*, writing,

‘For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic)’ (Benjamin 1999: 106 [N2a,3]).

In this way, Benjamin’s dialectical image renders visible Agamben’s *archē*-ological method, which excavates an earlier work not as a static, past artefact but as a dynamic process which shapes and is shaped by the present. The dialectical image treats the ‘what-has-been’ (and what *could* have been) and ‘the now’ as co-present coordinates in a topological field in which 1930s Basilicata can dwell in contemporary Gaza, and Pasolini’s journey is made and remade in the West Bank.

Pasolini’s work both shapes and is shaped by responses from Anastas and Alsharif, constructing a bi-directional dialogue in which an Italian male voice is counterbalanced by Arabic female ones. A contrapuntal *reading* of Pasolini’s *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* similarly situates it relationally with Levi, Alsharif and Anastas. These four texts interact across an archaic/contemporary axis and a reality/image one. The intersection of these axes through the connective properties of the texts forms what I term a ‘dialectical image of Palestine’. Visually, such an image might be imagined thus:

[Figure 4: A dialectical cinematic image of Palestine ©Robert George White]

This approach highlights the continuities and discontinuities of place and language emergent in a contemporary Palestinian cinema characterized by dialogue with a cinematic and textual archive, from which it constructs contrapuntal, dialectical images of contemporary criticality. These images examine the intersection of myth, image, representation and ruin from which a totalizing ‘Image of Palestine’ emerges. It is just such an intersection which underpins

*Sopralluoghi in Palestina*. Yet Pasolini's compulsion to displace the Holy Land by analogy left space between those images he abandoned. This space is where Anastas and Alsharif were able to produce themselves.

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<sup>1</sup>Between 1968 and 1970, Pasolini made both *Appunti per un film sull'India* ('Notes for a film about India') (1968) and *Appunti per un'Orestide Africana (Notes Towards an African Orestes)* (1970). While both contain issues of representation (which a reflexive Pasolini sometimes acknowledges), they form part of Pasolini's Marxist, Fanon-influenced filmmaking practice, *struttura da farsi* (Caminati 2016: 136). This openness sees film as a 'structure to be made' conceived as an unfinished dialogue, a provocation to revolutionary action.

<sup>2</sup> My use of the hyphen here in contemporary usage for the geopolitical space follows Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Ella Shohat and Gil Hochberg in refusing the very discursive parameters which construct Arab and Jew, Palestine and Israel as politically and culturally partitionable figures.

<sup>3</sup> A reference to the frequent border skirmishes on the Israel/Syria border in the 1960s.

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<sup>4</sup> Chinuk Wawa is a creole language which evolved from a trade language at the point of colonial encounter.

