APOCALYPTIC PASTS, ORWELLIAN FUTURES

Elle Flanders's *Zero Degrees of Separation*

Hoda El Shakry

George Orwell was a fool. George Orwell in his wildest dreams could not imagine a reality such as this.
—Ezra Nawi, *Zero Degrees of Separation*

Zero Degrees of Separation is a film that began with the notion of history and images, vision and responsibility. . . . [It] is about the invisible lines that separate us and connect us.
—Elle Flanders, director's statement, 2007

In 2002 the director Elle Flanders uncovered a box of over fifty reels of 16 mm film shot by her grandparents in the 1950s that documents "their involvement in the establishment of the state of Israel."[1] That same year, she heard the story of Ezra, a charismatic Jewish Israeli of Iraqi descent in his fifties who was deeply involved in human rights activism and living in Jerusalem with his younger Palestinian partner of four years, Selim. Inspired by their story, Flanders contacted Ezra only to discover that he had been her grandparents' gardener while she was living with them in Jerusalem in the 1970s. Thus we enter the world of *Zero Degrees of Separation*, where everything is connected and the political is always intimately personal. Flanders considers she did not choose the film; rather, as she states, "the film chose me."[2]

Flanders's tragically poignant documentary film subtly captures the daily

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horrors of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by weaving together the idealistic dreams of the creation of a Jewish homeland with the reality of life under the occupation. The film deftly moves between Flanders's own grandparents' home footage documenting their arrival in Israel in the 1950s and more recent footage that traces the lives of two Israeli-Palestinian couples: a gay couple, Ezra and Selim, as well as a lesbian couple, Edit and Samira. Without collapsing them into one another, Flanders's editing skillfully places these narratives in critical dialogue. The documentary is framed by her grandparents' footage of their first trip to Palestine in 1927 and eventual settlement in the recently declared independent state of Israel. The archival film silently chronicles a hopeful generation of immigrants in a seemingly idyllic landscape.

Delicately woven into her family's home movies is footage shot in 2002 while Flanders was on the road with Ezra as he was engaged in interventionist political activities using his "privilege as an Israeli" to help improve the Palestinian quality of life.[3] Such efforts range from driving Palestinians without transportation from checkpoints, bringing food supplies in the back of his truck to isolated and persecuted rural communities in the hills of Hebron, to confronting Israeli soldiers with provocative New Year's cards and asking them to question how and why they enforce a regime founded on "destruction and destruction, hatred and hatred." Flanders also interviews Ezra's partner, Selim, a Palestinian in his twenties who was first imprisoned at the age of fifteen and has since been arrested a number of times for misdemeanors as minor as throwing stones. During the period of their interviews, Selim is awaiting word on his pending trial for living with Ezra in Jerusalem without a permit—an act that has him under indefinite house arrest.[4] Notably, Edit and Samira's somewhat fraught partnership mirrors the political tensions that underlie and challenge Ezra and Selim's relationship. Both women are feminist political activists, living together in Tel Aviv. Edit is an Ashkenazi Jew of Argentinean descent working in a rape crisis center, while Samira is an oncology nurse at a hospital in Tel Aviv.

Flanders's cinematic pastiche is politically powerful precisely because of her aesthetic innovations in form. Spliced into both the archival and interview footage and displayed as intertitles on a grainy gray screen that echoes the texture of the 16 mm footage are various accumulated statistics on the occupation: on the number and types of checkpoints in the various occupied territories, U.N. violations, the expansion of settler populations, the number of Palestinians imprisoned without trials, and the use of torture in Israeli prison interrogations.[5] Procured predominantly through U.N. reports and various Israeli human rights organizations, these statistics punctuate the film, often mediating between the archival and contemporary footage. The documentary is set to a haunting musical score

Newly arrived Jewish youth fashioning the Star of David with rifles. Still from Flanders/Morrison family archive, 16 mm film, 1950

composed by David Wall. The soundscape includes brief staccato interludes of piano and trumpet, almost dissonant in composition, but beautifully paired with the apocalyptic landscapes and silent archival images.

While some films addressing questions of queerness in the Middle East foreground sexuality or present it uncritically to divert attention from other forms of political or social oppression, Flanders succeeds largely because she refuses to reduce the occupation to sexuality or sexuality to the occupation. Her film eloquently and deftly tackles the myriad ways in which the current situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories has created obstacles, terror, violence, complicities, and complacencies—on both sides of the conflict. Sexuality emerges as a lens through which Flanders addresses questions seminal to the current conflict: violence (both against the proverbial other as well as against one's own), police brutality, the corruption of the courts, global complicity in human rights violations, the geopolitical policies that further displace Palestinians in favor of ever-expanding Israeli settler communities, the politics of mobility and immobility, and the mapping of Western colonial ideologies onto racial conflicts (both between Israelis and Palestinians and within the Israeli community between Arab Jews, or Mizrahim, and European Jews, or Ashkenazim).

Reading between the Reels

I was astonished at the unfolding of history before my eyes, at the inherent signs that reflected the conflict in Israel and Palestine today. By connecting these documents to the current conflict, I hoped to extract a new story exposing that which their cameras gleaned but did not explicate.
—Elle Flanders, Director's Statement

Cinematically, *Zero Degrees of Separation* is almost sublime in its simplicity. Flanders cleverly interlaces the film's two temporal spaces: the utopian vision of a Jewish homeland with the Orwellian reality of surveillance, checkpoints, and terror. But rather than create a heavy-handed linear documentary, Flanders allows each narrative to explicate, complicate, and contextualize the other, placing them in dialogic relation with one another. This innovative manipulation of form, however, does more than merely dazzle the viewer with Flanders's keen editing eye. Rather, it creates an eerily fragmented temporality in which her grandparents' home footage can only be seen proleptically, the current state of the conflict already glimpsed between the reels. That this temporal displacement does not function so seamlessly in the opposite direction—the framing of the interviews with the two gay couples through the archival footage—highlights the asymmetry of power relations. The footage of Flanders's grandparents and other Ashkenazi immigrants subtly demonstrates the already incommensurable nature of the utopian Zionist project. The archival shots are replete with moments of tragic irony and contradiction that foreshadow a reality over fifty years in the making. The immigrants are dressed in impeccably tailored suits, carrying hand-held cameras and being escorted in private cars and buses through rural spaces that are quite visibly inhabited by workers and families who seem to blend in with the background landscape. The acute contrast between the arriving immigrants and the indigenous population is apparent in every detail: the smiling and hopeful faces of the Ashkenazi immigrants in relation to the stoic faces of the Palestinians as they travel by foot along the side of the road; the bright Western-style suits versus the traditional *djellabas*; the sense of mobility of the Ashkenazi as they disembark from ships or travel by automobile in contrast to the slow movement of the Palestinians on foot or donkey. It is therefore in the delicate bringing together of these two narratives that Flanders allows one to see their mutual implication.

Domesticating the Political

From the moment I started living with Selim, things became more acute, became more personal. It entered into this house.
—Ezra, *Zero Degrees of Separation*

Probably the most politically astute figure in the documentary, Ezra is a man who lives his politics, jeopardizing his safety, career, and life in order to use his privileged position against the system.[6] His relationship with Selim emerges as another reminder of the quotidian reality of the occupation—a reality replete with checkpoints, prison, torture, corruption, abuses of power, ignorance, and intolerance. Ezra's tireless dedication to questioning and undermining the forces of the occupation is something that exceeds his relationship with Selim. Even the challenges that they face in their relationship function as reminders of larger social inequalities perpetrated by and symptomatic of the occupation. Ezra's social and activist work is perhaps perversely mirrored in Selim's house arrest and pending trial. Selim is trapped in Ezra's home, awaiting his probable deportation back to Ramallah, living a microcosmic reality of the restricted mobility that would normally dictate his life. This stark contrast in their respective situations adds increased tension to their relationship, but it is something they openly acknowledge and attempt to work through until it reaches its inevitable culmination in Selim's deportation and the end of their relationship.

Flanders uses the genre of documentary to deconstruct the ideological implications of an authoritative historical narrative. By undercutting such tropes as fixed temporal structure, historical memory, linear narrative, and controlled interview settings, she questions the boundaries between the national and the personal. Her use of space, both in the portrayal of the not-quite-barren landscapes of Palestine in the 1950s and in the specific settings in which her interviews are conducted, collapses the seeming opposition between private and public. The "sets" of the interviews with both couples—varying from checkpoints (Ezra) and courtroom lobbies (Selim) to hospital changing rooms (Samira) and political rallies (Edit)—foregrounds this very tension between domestic spaces and national issues. This undermining of any romanticized notion of the domestic allows Flanders to explore, along with her participants, the ability and the limitations of personal choices to overcome dominant political and national agendas.

How to Sleep at Night

> Even before I accepted my identity as a Jew who is an occupier I had to accept that I'm an Ashkenazi [who] has privileges in relation to Mizrahi Jews. . . . But I can't solve this—and can't take responsibility for all the horrors that have been done here in the name of the Jewish people. Because then I will not be able to live with myself and certainly not with Samira.
> —Edit, *Zero Degrees of Separation*

The intimate personalization of the political is echoed in Flanders's own inclusion of her family's footage in her documentary to tell an entirely different story than it ostensibly documents. She problematizes and challenges her family's involvement in the Zionist project without apologizing for it, heeding Ezra's own words that "there are no saints in this story." Flanders therefore offers a personal glimpse into life under the occupation that, while acknowledging both the film and her own complicity with structures of power, refuses to reduce the conflict to simple labels of oppressor/oppressed or perpetrator/victim, such gestures merely serving to reinscribe modes of power without necessarily challenging existing hegemonic structures. In discussing the underlying tensions in her relationship with Edit, Samira touches quite sincerely on the futility of such guilt: "I can't ask her, or need her, to apologize or feel bad about what she is and about the nation she's from, her origins, or her sense of belonging. I couldn't ask for such a thing. . . . I couldn't ask for it. . . . This is the situation, it's shit. It doesn't mean I don't hold people responsible. This is where the responsibility lies. I don't want you to apologize, but I want you to go out on the streets and speak out." The Nakba—celebrated as the Israeli Independence Day and mourned as the commemoration of the Palestinian occupation—highlights a marked disjuncture in Edit and Samira's relationship. While Edit recognizes that the establishment of the state of Israel was made at the expense of an indigenous population, she also realizes that she owes her parents and therefore probably her own existence to it as a refuge from anti-Semitic persecution in her family's native Argentina. She and Samira compromise on how to commemorate the day—Edit celebrates Independence Day with her friends, while Samira mourns the Nakba alone at home. In drawing out these kinds of tensions, Flanders tackles larger political issues pertaining to the conflict without reducing them to empty signifiers, falling into standard partisan rhetoric, or overromanticizing. Her concern is with telling the everyday stories of people and how they live, the things that challenge their humanity, the obstacles they face daily, and

the compromises they need to make in order to survive. Telling the stories of gay people allows Flanders to address the insidious and pervasive nature of oppression while writing sexuality back into a narrative about national conflict that naturalizes heterosexuality.

Bursting the Bubble

> I wanted to start pushing queer cinema into a whole new realm. I don't know about you, but I don't go home to my lover every night and say, 'Oy, did I have a bad gay day!' I think being gay, like . . . Israel and Palestine . . . is a lot more complex than that.
> —Elle Flanders, quoted in John Hobbs, "A Thin Line between Love and Hate," *In Magazine*

Much of the body of cinema that addresses gay issues in the context of Israel or the occupied Palestinian territories tends to valorize the democratic freedoms of the gay community within Israel, often contrasting them with more "oppressive" measures and stances against homosexuality among Palestinians or Muslims. Painfully transparent in this burgeoning cinematic genre, such a tactic inevitably attempts to justify Zionism by demonstrating its compatibility with Western democratic and liberal ideals. Often absent from such representations is the underlying politics of Israeli gay rights, which, some have argued, are tied to other expansionist Israeli policies such as an effort to increase numbers in the military and to bolster birth rates.[7] Films celebrated in specifically queer cinematic circles include Parvez Sharma's 2007 documentary *A Jihad for Love* on reconciling being gay with Islam; Eytan Fox's body of cinematic work, which includes *The Bubble* (2006), a film about a left-wing Israeli youth who during his military service falls in love with a Palestinian Muslim at a checkpoint at which he is stationed; Adi Barash and Ruthie Shatz's 2003 documentary *Garden*, about two young male prostitutes—Nino, a seventeen-year-old Palestinian, and Dudu, a Mizrahim Israeli—who both work in the "electricity garden," a central pickup location in Tel Aviv; and A. Yun Suh's 2009 documentary *City of Borders*, about Shushan, a Jerusalem bar that functions as a multicultural meeting point for ostracized Israeli and Palestinian gays. While *Garden* and *City of Borders* consciously attempt to move beyond the standard narrative in which an "Israeli boy falls for a Palestinian boy who must 'pass' as Israeli in order for their relationship to survive" (for it only ever works in that one direction), *The Bubble* and *A Jihad for Love* fall prey to the same predictable tropes: celebration of Israel's progressive stance toward gays, the

intolerance of Islam, and the ability of sexuality to single-handedly subvert political oppression.

Whether taking a fictional or a documentary approach, these films often tend to read sexuality—queer sexuality in particular—in isolation. They fail to challenge definitions of queerness or what it means to make a specifically queer film, and ultimately falling prey to a limiting model of identity politics. Maija Howe draws an apt distinction between a rhetoric focused on what it means to be queer through an exclusive focus on sexuality, and explorations of the lives of queers that do not disproportionately foreground their sexuality at the expense of "broader political and socio-cultural issues."[8] Flanders explicitly states that the agenda of her documentary is not to create a specifically "queer" film but rather to address questions of humanity and responsibility. In response to some of the negative feedback she has received from the queer film festival circuits, Flanders states:

> You also have those who say, "This isn't a gay film." I am constantly struggling with trying to suggest that it is important we look at the next generation of queer filmmaking. Do we always have to navel-gaze and just talk about ourselves and our identities? Or can we talk about ourselves in relation to the rest of the world? To me, it's really important that we stop navel-gazing, that we realize that we—as gays, lesbians, whatever—are completely connected to many different aspects of the world.[9]

Flanders's decision to narrate the stories of Ezra and Selim and Edit and Samira through her grandparents' archival footage is therefore an explicit attempt to break the mold of what it means to make a "queer film." Flanders does not frame queer stories through the exclusive lens of sexuality, focusing primarily on what it means to be gay in either an Arab/Israeli or Muslim/Jewish context. Rather, she highlights the obstacles these couples face because of ethnonational and religious policies of segregation. In a reality of oppression, limited mobility, surveillance, and terror—and one could argue even outside such circumstances—sexuality is not something that can be explored in isolation from other markers of otherness and social or political injustice. Precisely what is so "queer" about *Zero Degrees of Separation* is that, despite the fact that its director and four main characters are all openly gay, it is not only about the sexuality of its characters. In staging a meeting between what appear to be temporally disparate events, Flanders's film questions the very premise of what it means to be queer and how "queerness" itself is represented. *Zero Degrees of Separation* therefore demonstrates the ability of queer narratives to contest normalized and naturalized structures of power—be they

sexual, gendered, national, political, or social—by exploring how these elements interact and without compromising one at the expense of another.

Beyond *Zero Degrees of Separation*

Ezra has several trials pending for obstruction of justice. He continues his work against the Occupation in the villages of Susya, Jimba and Twane in the hills of Hebron.

Selim lost his case and was deported back to Ramallah. He and Ezra no longer live together. Last heard, he got married.

After Ariel Sharon was invited to speak at the Rape Crisis Centre, Edit quit her job. She continues to demonstrate occasionally against the Occupation.

Samira continues to demonstrate against the Occupation. She has a new Israeli girlfriend—a doctor whose mother fears for her daughter's career and safety.
—Closing Intertitles, *Zero Degrees of Separation*

Since the completion of *Zero Degrees of Separation*, the plight of some of its characters, particularly Ezra, has significantly worsened. After Selim's deportation to Ramallah, which ended their relationship, Ezra was convicted of assaulting two police officers in 2007 while preventing the unlawful demolition of a Bedouin Palestinian home by Israeli bulldozers in Um El Hir, located in the southern part of the West Bank. In a piece in the *Nation* published two days before his scheduled July 1, 2009, conviction, Ezra issued a statement contesting the charges and alleging the two officers lied about the assault to cover up their own questionable conduct and that of other stationed officers.[10] He faults the unnecessary violence and aggression of the Israeli police force that he claims condones poisoning the sheep of Palestinian herders, the beating of children and the elderly, prevention of access to water and electricity, and the demolition of Palestinian homes. In addition to nearly 140,000 letters being sent to Israeli officials in support of Ezra's activism in the West Bank, human and civil rights organizations have been attempting to contest his sentencing, and there has been select media coverage, predominantly among the European press.[11] Even in his hour of need, however, Ezra is able to see the larger forces at play in his own conviction, and the complicity of the Israeli police and Ministry of Justice. Ezra cites the strategic use of his sexuality against

him, as when the local Israeli police spread rumors among the Palestinians with whom Ezra works that he was afflicted with AIDS. Ezra explains that his unique position as a working-class gay Mizrahim is what makes him both an unlikely candidate for such activism and an ideal target for internalized Israeli racism:

> One of the reasons I have been singled out has to do with who I am. It is difficult to explain, but as a Mizrahi Jew, a gay man and a plumber, I do not belong to the elite of Israeli society and do not fit the stereotype of the Israeli peacenik — namely, an intellectual Jew of Ashkenazi descent. Actually, the police officers who constantly arrest me and I are part of the same social strata. I was programmed like them, have a similar accent, know their jargon and our historical background is comparable. And yet, in their eyes I am on and for the other side, the Palestinian side. This simple fact seems to disturb them so much that they have to vilify me; that is the only way their worldview will continue making sense. I threaten them precisely because I undermine the categories and stereotypes through which they understand the world.[12]

Therefore even outside the frames of Flanders's eloquent documentary film, it is possible to see the interlacing forces embedded in the unjust system that has made relationships like Ezra and Selim's untenable, and their consequences certainly reach beyond the realm of sexuality to matters of social equality and responsibility in which sexual orientation is but a piece of the puzzle, albeit a crucial one. One can only hope that such honest glimpses as those offered by Flanders and Ezra into the dark recesses of familial and national pasts will teach us that history is always already intimately personal. In a narrative world of borrowings and connections, it seems only fitting to end with the closing words of *Zero Degrees of Separation*, words spoken by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish that capture the tormented temporality of the occupation: "What remains of the garden behind is the power of the shadow."

Notes

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1. Flanders's grandfather was involved in Britain's Joint Palestinian Appeal, while her grandmother helped facilitate the settlement of displaced Jews in Israel.
2. Quoted in Amy Dalness, "State of Removal: An Interview with *Zero Degrees of Sepa-*

ration Filmmaker Elle Flanders," Alibi.com, September 28–October 4, 2006, alibi.com/index.php?story=16487&scn=feature.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, unsourced quotations are taken directly from *Zero Degrees of Separation*. Since the film is subtitled and intertitled in English, I have used Flanders's own translations of Arabic and Hebrew speech.
4. Half of Selim's family is originally from Jerusalem, while the other half is from Ramallah, highlighting the absurdity of zoning and permit laws in the occupied territories that separate family members almost arbitrarily, requiring them to acquire elusive permits to travel between the various Palestinian territories. Flanders highlights the tactical convenience of this strategy in one of the film's informative intertitles: "U.N. documents reveal that most checkpoints do not separate the West Bank from Israel. They block passage between Palestinian villages and cities."
5. Most of the statistics date back to the production of the film and are from B'Tselem—The Israel Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (www.btselem.org/English/index.asp), as well as from the Israeli Committee Against Torture (www.stoptorture.org.il/en).
6. As I shall show, even Ezra's privilege is qualified and contested in the complex matrix of racial, sexual, and class politics governing Israel.
7. An emerging body of work reads Israel's "progressive" gay rights critically and in relation to other political and ideological concerns. See Raz Yosef's insightful analysis of queer cinema, "Homoland: Interracial Sex and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Israeli Cinema," *GLQ* 8 (2002): 553–80. On the legal politics of gay rights, see Alon Harel and Gideon Parchomovsky, "On Hate and Equality," *Yale Law Journal* 109 (1999): 507–39; and Harel, "The Rise and Fall of the Israeli Legal Revolution," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 31 (2000): 443–71; on the politics of gays in the military, see Danny Kaplan and Ben-Ari Eyal, "Brothers and Others in Arms: Managing Gay Identity in Combat Units of the Israeli Army," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29 (2002): 396–432; and Danny Kaplan, *Brothers and Others in Arms: The Making of Love and War in Israeli Combat Units* (New York: Haworth, 2003).
8. Maija Howe, "'Queers Being' and 'Being Queer,'" *Senses of Cinema*, no. 42 (2007), archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/festivals/07/42/queerdoc-2006.html.
9. Quoted in Dalness, "State of Removal."
10. Ezra Nawi, "Israel's Man of Conscience," *Nation*, June 29, 2009, www.thenation.com/doc/20090713/nawi.
11. See the Web site www.supportezra.net/. See also Ethan Bronner, "Unlikely Ally for Residents of West Bank," *New York Times*, June 27, 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/06/28/world/middleeast/28westbank.html; and Neve Gordon, "Israeli Activist to Be Jailed for Caring," *Guardian*, May 6, 2009, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/06/israel-human-rights-police.
12. Nawi, "Israel's Man of Conscience."