Mechanisms of a Settler Colonial Architecture in Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate (2012)*

Film Analysis by Carol Que

The dystopian scenario visualized in Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate (2012)* became too close to life on 6 December 2017 when Donald Trump decided to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. In the past week, images of Qubbat al-Sakhra (Dome of the Rock) as the defining architectural icon of Palestinian Muslim and Christian identity have been rampantly circulated in connection with Trump's announcement to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Yet this is the logical conclusion of Israel's efforts, through consistent hammering of media propaganda and policy, in proclaiming Jerusalem as their "eternal, undivided capital" since 1967.

In the *Nation Estate* project, Sansour extends Palestine's one-state reality through an architectural and spatial optic, to shed light on the slow violence of militarization and capitalist production that is built into the settler-colonial environment. Conceived in the wake of the Palestinian bid for UN membership, *Nation Estate* is in two parts: a nine-minute satirical sci-fi video essay, and a photographic series, offering a vertical solution to Palestinian statehood that is confined entirely within a skyscraper. Despite the glossy first impression of technological advancement and comfortable living conditions, the architecture in Sansour's high-rise is both weaponized and commercialized to implement the power relations of settler-colonial ideologies. The title of the work conflates nationhood and property, and the use of "estate" implies that the building is no longer something to use, but to own – with the hope of increased asset value, rather than use value, over time. Naturally, Sansour's film finds its basis in real life, where the neoliberal state-building program of the Palestinian Authority (PA) turns history on its head by presenting it as the only means to end occupation and achieve statehood

while promising high economic growth and prosperity.[1] Such is the contradiction of the freedom that is associated with Palestinian nationhood, and its physical geography being reduced to commercial land, as easily co-opted by settlers as it is by the United States.

Adila Laïdi-Hanieh notes how the history of landscape painting and landscape photography may have been tied to the history of capitalism, through recording landed gentry's property or commodifying an idealized version of a pristine landscape in an industrializing society.[2] In fact, this was precisely the driving impetus for Franz Krausz's original poster (figure 1), for which the paramount paradigm at work was the representation of landscape as memento mori before its actual disappearance or expected appropriation.[3] In *Nation Estate*, the representation of architecture as memento mori beckons the question of further expropriation in the future, and how that may be possible when there is nowhere else to go but up.

Figure 1. Historical Zionist poster, by Franz Krausz, issued by the Jewish Agency in 1936.

Sansour's Practice in Context

From one generation to another, Palestinian artists have depicted narrative scenes of historical moments that metaphorically comment on the lived experience under British colonial rule, and today under Israeli settler colonialism. They have continued to explore how memory is embodied in the lived moments of history that have crucially marked their experience of exile post-1948.[4] As Tina Malhi-Sherwell contends, it is important to note that much of the history of pre-1948 Palestinian art was erased as a result of the war that saw the establishment of the State of Israel.[5] Today, the overwhelming responsibility to represent a reality that is fraught with violence and trauma is bound up with the immorality of over-aestheticizing a current oppression, an imperative which typically produces a mirror image of reality but leaves little space for imagining solutions.

This is evident in the case of Palestinian photography: Laïdi-Hanieh observes that its history has been an almost consistent practice of quasi-exclusively documenting the inscription of the occupation on the landscape.[6] The documentary imperative to precisely reflect reality was an issue for Larissa Sansour, whose artistic oeuvre began with documentary footage in *Tank* (2003) and *Rotor Blades* (2004). Expressing her frustration with the limited critical engagement that documentary perspectives provide, she began to

incorporate humorous, kitschy narratives in *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005), sitcom theme music in *Happy Days* (2006), and filmic references to Stanley Kubrick in Sbara (2008), moving into a marked aesthetic that straddles absurdity and reality.

Born in East Jerusalem, Larissa Sansour is a London-based Palestinian artist who works across video, photography, sculpture, and installation. Sansour is now part of a generation of Palestinian artists that has made significant inroads in the international art scene, showing in galleries, museums, and biennales. Her foray into sci-fi began in 2009 first in collaboration with interdisciplinary artist Oreet Ashery in the creation of a graphic novel, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (2009), and the production of *Space Exodus* (2009). Sansour is perhaps best known for her sci-fi aesthetic, although it was not a genre she began with.[7] While *Nation Estate* is deeply involved with current Palestinian politics, the video essay inevitably takes influence from the 1970s Arab Surrealist Movement and the burgeoning wave of Arabfuturism – specifically, a pan-Arabist engagement with sci-fi aesthetics.[8] Lama Suleiman reflects upon how Palestinian narratives of loss, dispossession, and catastrophe have to be seen as part of wider Arab narratives and from within a pan-Arabist perspective.[9] She explains that this has recently manifested in an emerging Arabfuturism, expressed in not just contemporary art, but also recent literature and film.

Suleiman discerns that there is a persisting aesthetic disparity in Arabfuturism between diasporic and native futuristic expressions. In the Palestinian context, this disparity is sharper than in the rest of Arab culture.[10] The examples of Europe-based Palestinian artists, such as Sansour herself, Jumana Manna, and Taysir Batniji, demand deeper examination of such discrepancies, as do also Palestinian artists practicing in West Bank and Gaza, such as Jumana Emil Abboud and Khaled Jarrar. This includes understanding what resources are available for cultural production. For instance, Sansour's aesthetic is slick and refined, but with high production costs that she fundraises for. Her works have largely been shown in an international context, but also in Palestine.[11] She notes that various gallery and museum directors have considered her work as "not Palestinian enough":

> At one point, a curator told me they really wanted to include me, but my work is too highly produced . . . they wanted gritty, guerilla-handheld camera work from the Middle East. I do spend a lot of energy and time fundraising to make very slick, highly produced films, because I want to break that cliché of what is expected of Middle Eastern artists . . . that's one of the biggest reasons why I work like this.[12]

On the other hand, *Nation Estate* has been accused of promoting an agenda that is too "pro-Palestinian," by the CEO of Lacoste who requested Sansour's withdrawal from a competition sponsored by the company.[13] This speaks to the constant struggle that Palestinian artists face in neoliberal capitalist art systems: specifically, to have public platforms, forums, audiences, and financial support, but also to manage and prevent the hijacking of their culture and politics within preordained checklists of what it means to produce marketable Palestinian art. This ignorance persists in the thinking that sci-fi is

something novel or strange to Arab culture.[14] Hence the significance of Sansour's sci-fi aesthetic exists not only in challenging the popular imagination that assumes all Palestinian art to be marked by the mantle of militancy and/or suffering, but also in continuing the lineage of science fiction narrative tradition in pan-Arabist history.

Art History through a Settler Colonial Analytic

One of my key intentions is to propose a model for writing an art history that will actively grapple with the impact of settler colonialism for artistic practices and art historical narratives, by following Patrick Wolfe's frequently cited definition: settler colonialism understood not as a singular event, but as a structure that facilitates the logic of elimination.[15] Using settler colonialism as a framework of analysis retains a specificity when describing its impact, to challenge the normalization of dispossession as a "done deal," relegated to the past rather than ongoing.[16] For instance, the Nakba could be understood as an ongoing process that is manifested today in the continuing subjection of Palestinians, instead of an isolated historical moment of catastrophe marking the 1948 Palestinian exodus, or simply as a precondition for the creation of Israel or the outcome of early Zionist ambitions.

Subsequent to J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's positioning of settler colonialism with the analytic counterpart of "enduring indigeneity," this essay will clarify that Wolfe's definition of settler colonialism is also a structure which indigeneity and the existence, resistance, and persistence of indigenous peoples persists against – that indigeneity itself is enduring.[17] Sansour's impetus to create a transformative, liberatory, self-reflexive artistic agenda through the film deems it necessary to analyze Zionism's structural continuities and the ideology that informs Israeli policies and practices in Israel and toward Palestinians everywhere. Yet it is not enough simply to classify Israel as settler-colonial on the basis of its manifest instantiation of the logic of elimination. Wolfe argues that while its essential feature is its sustained institutional tendency to supplant the indigenous population, the techniques of dispossession differ significantly, despite the eliminatory outcome that has remained constant.[18] *Nation Estate* exposes the systems of settler colonialism and the nature of Zionism in Palestine, through which elimination of the native is bound by separation rather than expulsion because of international human and civil rights.[19]

This text, then, is my initial attempt at understanding what decolonization might mean from my position as implicated in Australian settler colonialism, and to contribute to anti-colonial, anti-imperial, and anti-racist solidarities. Within academic settings, I have noticed that Sansour's work is usually featured as a case study within broader artistic and cultural movements of Palestine, or within the wider Arab context. This points to the necessity for measured but urgent engagement with her video essays as the central subject through ekphrasis and political analysis. Understanding that the academic industrial complex benefits from communities of overstudied Others, I intend to fully respect and learn from the wisdom and desires in Sansour's work, while refusing to portray/betray

her to the spectacle of the settler-colonial gaze. In this case, I have obtained permission from Sansour to write on her work, and will continue to think of and implement a working process attentive to power and responsibility. In turn, this essay will point to *Nation Estate*'s architectural and lived form as the visual embodiment of settler colonialism. I will examine the ideas embodied in the layout and fabric of the building, studying it in the context of its historical, physical, and intellectual cultures, and as a space that houses its nationalist symbols. It is in this regard that I seek to investigate and propose a framework for considering Sansour's work.

Imaging Carceral Logics of Architecture

The highrise of Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate* (2012) appears to record particular hierarchies of memory. Located in Jerusalem, the building contains its own internalized intellectual system, its own schema that deals with presence and absence. As Sansour turns to look at the towering reproduction of Franz Krausz's *Visit Palestine* tourism poster (figure 2), the viewer realizes that it does not serve the image's original promotional purposes (figure 1).[20] Nor does its placement show any indication of the image's history as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism in the 1990s.[21] Instead, its current presentation mimics the display of an artwork in a white cube space, re-appropriated as a mockery of the Palestinian nationhood and its current state of containment. By visually supplanting Qubbat al-Sakhra on the poster (figure 3), the superstructure attests to a new regime of neoliberal capitalist worship present in a Palestine that subordinates the goals of national liberation for international recognition, institution building, and good governance.[22] In the words of Raja Khalidi and Sobhi Samour, it is needless to say that a neoliberal "liberational" strategy runs counter to the actual experience of successful decolonization.[23]

The first scene situates the viewer gliding along the bend of an underground train tunnel. Evocative of a bunker, this concrete tunnel bears no vestige of past wars. Yet,

Figure 2. Sansour looking at the *Nation Estate* poster, *Nation Estate* (2012).

Figure 3. *Nation Estate* poster (2012).

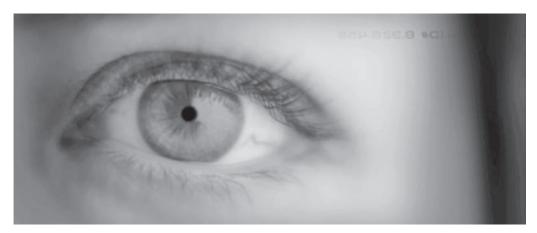Figure 4. Escalators from the Amman Express, *Nation Estate* (2012).

Figure 5. Identity authentication, *Nation Estate* (2012).

a feeling of being immediately crushed is apparent. The tunnel passage fades to show the reflection of our protagonist, a lone traveller performed by Sansour herself. Upon disembarking from the Amman Express, Sansour ascends two escalators in a sequential manner, directed by the built environment to move forward and upward (figure 4). The imperceptible spatial control that guides human movement is especially evident when Sansour encounters the security check, which effactually blocks her from going further until her identity is matched with an identity code through eye and fingerprint scanning (figure 5). This is not dissimilar to the color-coded ID card system existing today in Palestine since 1967, each of which has a number that indicates region, and the more recently implemented magnetic card with biometric information, that informs Israeli military personnel of the person's past record.[24] In Sansour's dystopia, this system has taken a turn for the hi-tech and biological with a security scheme implanted within walls, automated and ever-present.

Figure 6. Atrium, *Nation Estate* (2012).

Figure 7. Palestinian flag-altar, *Nation Estate* (2012).

After identity verification, the scene switches to an eerily silent atrium (figure 6). Sansour's footsteps resound through the vast space, backed by faint gusts of air-conditioning that magnify the overwhelming space. The atrium is postmodern in design, reminiscent of an airport lobby for its cavernous but standardized expanse.[25] Uncompromisingly modern and more monumental than necessary, the atrium's architectural overstatement suggests national pride and ambition. Yet for such a grand space, human movement is linear instead of circulatory, channeled one-directionally towards a large-scale, vertically positioned Palestinian flag on a protruding wall. Reminiscent of an altar, its arresting presence in the space is anchored by consecutive plant plinths that lead from the entrance (figure 7). Here, Sansour develops a lightness of breath, and her eyesight seems to be affected by the reflective white surfaces and glare from the extensive glass facades, causing figures and features of the people around her to appear indistinct (figure 8). In The *Architecture of Light*, Mary Ann Steane notes that it is the advent of electric light (with the support of air-conditioning) that has enabled deep-plan buildings and the need for laws to decide what corner of the sky office workers should be able to glimpse from their desks.[26] Although
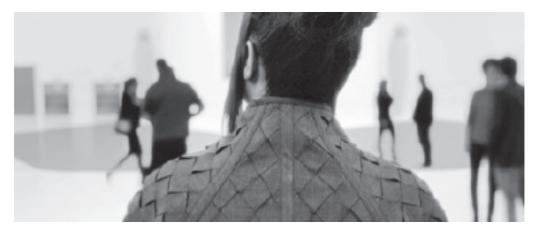
Figure 8. Sansour entering the atrium, *Nation Estate* (2012).

Figure 9. Elevator directory, *Nation Estate* (2012).

it is unclear what economic system *Nation Estate* runs on (if any), the atrium is also constructed to mimic a corporate lobby, complete with a reception desk under the flag altar and neon tube lights. As a popular architectural feature for office buildings, the glass facades provide a glimpse of the seemingly outdated wall and watchtowers surrounding *Nation Estate*. These paramilitary "Wall and Tower" settlements are described by Sharon Rotbard as a pre-state spatial strategy and technology that made use of fortification and observation – a protective enclosure – that dominated their surroundings by the power of vision.[27] Along with the sanitizing white interiors and harsh artificial lighting in the building, *Nation Estate* implements a form of panoptic surveillance and physiological control based on light and visibility.[28]

Meanwhile, the elevator directory appears to be a tombstone of sorts, made of concrete that is militaristic, inscrutable, resolute in silence and mass (figure 9). The grey concrete resembles the hasty and cheap architecture of emergency edifices, refugee camps, separation walls and control towers. This is set in contradistinction to the shiny white concrete commonly used in the West Bank's current building frenzy – concrete that is

used to flatten the hills of West Bank, to build settlements over the landscape. Indeed, there seems to be no space in this building for anything that is not necessary for purely sustaining and maintaining the facade of a civilization – its cities, landmarks, and national signifiers. On the elevator directory, Levels 1 to 5 are institutions that regulate Palestinian movement outside the *nation estate* – from diplomatic missions, aid and development, NGOs, government HQ, permits and passport control. Subterranean Palestine includes the train station, the energy and sanitation unit, and the Dead Sea. While there is no sign of water infrastructure on the elevator directory, Sansour confirms the source of the Palestine's water supply in the lift. An advertisement for the Norwegian Fjords resounds crisply around the contained space, its glowing blue screen indicating the source of this week's general water supply, and its status as a proud supporter of the Water Pipes for Peace program. The punch line here is a direct jab at the complicity of international foreign aid and their reluctance to challenge Israel's hold over water and irrigation systems – the punch line being the failure of international attempts at a peace process thus far.[29]

Even the elevator interior is constructed to emphasize its height, stressed by how Sansour and the other two people direct their gaze upwards to watch the changing floor indicator (figure 10). Notably, there is minimal interaction and no spoken dialogue between characters in the film – the only voices audible are the pre-recorded announcement systems in the train and lift, as well as the advertisement voice-overs. *Nation Estate*'s clinical character not only noticeably undermines livability and the very social fabric of its community, but this is a building constructed plainly with a singular purpose. By excluding the Palestinian population via separation and containment, Palestinian indigenous sovereignty is preserved as a stagnant, acquiescent entity within an isolated realm that continues in parallel to the settler one. Chrisoula Lionis observes, "The homeland is reduced to a simulation of real places."[30] When the elevator doors on the Jerusalem floor open onto a full scale Qubbat al-Sakhra, the shot lingers on the flickering tube lights above the dome, and later, on the slick marble floor that holds the Nativity Church of Bethlehem. Spatialized as simulacra, these sacred sites are displaced to enforce a renewed touristic purpose for the building inhabitants, done so in order to suppress collective memories of their original cultural, historical, and religious meaning.

In the scene where Sansour looks down at the real Jerusalem from her apartment window (figure 11), the politics of surveillance is flipped in what Eyal Weizman calls "the vertical politics of separation and logic of partition."[31] Within the context of Israeli architecture and urban planning, the phrase marks a reference to settlements strategically built on hilltops to command heights over the land. Weizman demonstrates the reality of spatial logic in his seminal book *Hollow Land*, the protean manner in which Israeli occupation has inscribed its presence on the land. He proposes that unlike historic colonial endeavors, this is not an ordered occupation of space, but a flexible, moving occupation of "structured chaos" where the Israeli state is present and/or absent, and its absence relayed in this process of dispossession.[32] The arsenal deployed includes not only military force but also "illumination schemes . . . architecture of housing, the forms of settlements, the construction of fortifications and means of enclosure, the spatial mechanisms of circulation

Figure 10. Inside the elevator, *Nation Estate* (2012).

Figure 11. Sansour looking down at Jerusalem, *Nation Estate* (2012).

control and flow management, mapping techniques and methods of observation, legal tactics for land annexation."[33]

Hence it is significant that verticality is no longer a necessary strategy when surveillance within containment is found to be more efficient in *Nation Estate*. Only at the conclusion of the video can we comprehend the physical enormity of this Ballardian highrise and confirm the dual incarceration of the entire Palestinian nation state, first within the architecture, and again within the wall enclosure (figure 12). *Nation Estate* has all the stylistic facets of international modernist architecture, or in Leslie Sklair's terms, an "icon of capitalist globalization."[34] The skyscraper isn't just a symbol of capitalism, it is capitalism materialized in monumental steel, glass, and concrete – these materials that were initially mobilized to convey messages of transparency and democracy now make up the prison and tomb. Here in Sansour's imaginary, the logistics of the gaze and function of observation is part of how architecture's carceral logics transforms a self-knowing commercial space into a prison. This calls to mind Ilan Pappé's description of

Figure 12. External perspective of the building, *Nation Estate* (2012).

present West Bank being an open-air prison, in its propagation as an autonomous zone and resemblance to the idea of a "state."[35] Sansour's highrise would be a further elaboration of the mega, high security prison system that performs a false paradigm of peace, even when taken to its logical extreme as a sealed, architectural container.

On the Permeability of Land, Bodies, Borders, and Nations

Yet *Nation Estate* is not constructed without resistance from within. While indigeneity is most obviously conveyed through the known Palestinian symbolism of an olive tree, it is also expressed through an intimate close-up of the soil that the olive tree grows from. To borrow a term from earth sciences, *permeability* is understood as a measure of the ability of a porous material to allow fluids to pass through it. If the ideological dialectic and political strategy of sumud, meaning steadfastness, can be encapsulated within soil, *Nation Estate* depicts an enduring indigeneity that connects both olive tree and the soil it is embedded within. The appearance of soil show clearly its dense and resistant properties;

Figure 13. Soil of the olive tree, *Nation Estate* (2012).

through the soil's slow filtering of water, its languid absorbency rate (figure 13), and in the way resilience is embedded in the earth.

Indeed, in a place that reduces Palestinian nationhood to a relic, the olive tree continues as a symbol of enduring indigeneity and indigenous attachment to the land – but one that is still necessarily attended to by a silent maternal figure who continues to provide nourishment. When Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Lover from Palestine" popularized the metaphor of the female body as the ancestral homeland, Kamal Boullata detects the resurfacing of Darwish's verbal metaphor in the pictorial language of Palestinian male artists a decade after the metaphor became a commonplace reference in literature and poetry.[36] As Sliman Mansour explains, it was after the emergence of the armed struggle in the 1960s that "the Palestinian woman with her nice dress, flowing hair and long neck," became a symbol of the revolution.[37] Palestine came to be represented exclusively by idealized depictions of women with generous curves, representing the well-known trope of land as mother earth.[38] Across Palestinian artistic culture, this imaginary comes to constitute a gendered variant of the landscape, by which patriarchal property enforces the confinement of women as well as the colonized. After watering the tree, Sansour
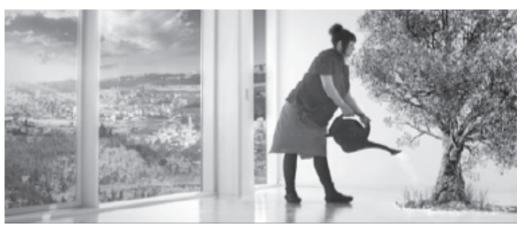

Figure 14. Sansour watering the olive tree, *Nation Estate* (2012).

Figure 15. Sansour's pregnancy, *Nation Estate* (2012).

is positioned to look down at the horizontal sprawl of Jerusalem from her highrise apartment prison. This is also the first time that Sansour is revealed to be pregnant, as she gingerly places her hand over her belly while looking out her window (figure 15). If Israeli population policy today continues to encourage Israelis to have more children and Palestinians to have fewer, the politics of reproduction cannot be disentangled from the ongoing history of settler colonialism.[39] Indeed, the womb remains to be a political site since the pairing of reproduction and nationalism post-Nakba.[40]

The visual compliment of the nationalist discourses that posited women as responsible for reproducing the nation, thereby inscribes women's fertility with the political significance of patriotic obligation. In nationalist discourses not only were women perceived as giving birth to future generations, they were also held responsible for reproducing the boundaries of the nation.[41] Bound up in a place that continues to assert an essentialized Palestinian identity, Sansour as the protagonist can only communicate her dread for future generations through her eyes (figure 16).

Figure 16. Sansour looking directly at the camera, *Nation Estate* (2012).

While *Nation Estate* contributes to the canon of images under ongoing and brutal Israeli settler colonialism, it navigates the risk of self-victimization through remedying the weight of ethnography vis-a-vis a science-fiction imaginary. Yet the perverse logic that has Palestinians bearing both the responsibility and burden of explanation still prevails. Sansour is aware of and refuses to appeal to her international, mostly Western audience that has grown more familiar with and become desensitized to the codification of Palestinian dispossession. Although her cinematic language of imposing Palestinian symbols does not fulfill the expected narrative marked by pathos and suffering, Sansour consigns them to the status of relics. The artist remains indebted to Palestinian visual culture for iconography, but she deploys it in a way that shows its nationalist underpinnings as easily co-opted by neoliberal settler colonialism. While the quandary of statelessness is real, the "solution" – a nation state – risks cementing the outcome of Palestinian liberation within

the very political structures that first orchestrated its persecution. In her *Funambulist* article "Palestine made flesh," Sophia Azeb asks some pressing questions: When has the nation-state functioned as a tool of liberation? When has the nation-state escaped the confines of its origins in enslavement, imperialism, exile, and settler colonialism?[42] Indeed, Hannah Arendt's criticism in *Jewish Writings* (2007) can attest to a similar critique. Arendt shows how nationalism mirrors nineteenth century imperialism is based on the very idea of how the Jewish state was a misguided response to European anti-Semitism and would become, when realized, a product of the colonialism and anti-Semitism it sought to resist.[43] In turn, Azeb recognizes that the geographical nation-state of borders and laws – that sovereign entity which categorizes and determines who receives citizenship and why – "that nation-state is conquest and the root of occupation itself."[44]

Sansour helps us see that the systemic problem of nation states continues to perpetuate a choice between second-class citizenship or expulsion. Architecture is part of the performance of politics and in *Nation Estate*, it is being used to describe a different kind of proclaimed imagination – one that is both a consequence of settler colonialism and global capital. The fictional highrise is both an image of Palestine enmeshed in the colonizing practices of Israel from one side, and on the other by capitalism's ruthless cultural logic. If settler colonialism and indigeneity is viewed as a bipartite frame of reference for understanding the political reality and terrain of injustice in Palestine, decolonization becomes the logical necessity – decolonization in settler-colonial contexts that prioritizes indigenous peoples "living under political arrangements to which they have consented."[45] Here, *Nation Estate* is developed as an intellectual exercise that not only points to the myth of the traditional two-state solution as the only viable option and realization of rights, but also reiterates the one state reality that Palestinians currently live under. In this sense, the film points plainly at the one-state reality that is the State of Israel, insinuating that any analysis of the conflict should first begin there.[46]

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Endnotes

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