



**Sight is not destroyed in order to be remade in one gestural slash, but is witnessed by the viewer, and Price's camera, as it undergoes a gradual process of restoration.**

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

Made in the context of a fictional television interview in Jean Luc Godard's film *Notre Musique*, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish appears to speak the unspeakable, to admit a measure of complicity in the brutal destruction suffered by his nation at the hands of the Israelis. As the Israel/Palestine conflict tragically continues, his comments complicate and challenge the received archetypes of Israel and Palestine.

For Judy Price, *Notre Musique* poses "lots of complicated questions." Price's recent video works, collectively entitled *On This Narrow Strip of Land*, could be understood as an engagement with the complexities of the Israel and Palestine conflict and her own position within it. The measure of complicity that Darwish exposes strikes a chord with her own position as a Jew opposed to the violent expansionist policies of the Israeli state. Like Godard, she employs multiple strategies, drawing images from archival sources, the observation of unexpected events caught in passing and from a sustained study of places resonant with the overwritten histories and redrawn boundaries of Israel and Palestine, in particular St John's Eye Hospital in East Jerusalem. Her repeated visits to Israel and Palestine have resulted in a body of video work which also poses an ongoing question, speaking Darwish's unspeakable by addressing a subject which is both urgent and taboo.

But as film and photography are her primary mode of expression, Price seeks to assimilate and understand the Israeli and Palestinian conflict through metaphors of vision rather than words. As Wendy Everett observes, the act of perception and enlightenment finds one of its first assertions in the recurring image of the eye in Surrealist cinema. "Since cinema, like Surrealism, is a predominantly visual medium, it is natural for the journey to begin with the eye or, more precisely, with the two eyes of the spectator: an eye (the organ of sight) and an I (personal identity; the seer). Both eye and I may be closed or open, dreaming or awake, looking out or looking in, but on this journey they must look afresh, must see in a new way..."<sup>1</sup> Whilst Everett's reference is to the visceral provocation of the iconic slashed eye in Dali and Bunuel's 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou*, her notion of the 'two eyes' of sight and seer could also be applied to the invitation in Price's videos to 'look afresh'.

This is because Price employs the image of the eye to penetrate and navigate the complexities of the conflict, opening it up to the viewer as an ongoing revelatory process. The notion of sight becomes a subtle layering of references and metaphors drawn from history, language and culture, which in turn set off a string of associations leading the viewer deeper into the complexities and ambiguities of the Israel / Palestine situation. Her videos often depict a landscape framed by an elevated and suspended viewpoint, as a way of rearticulating the significance of territory in this disputed land. For example, in *Time Line*, a film of a cable car over Jericho offers both a privileged view of the town while at the same time it alludes to an ambiguous state of suspension and destabilised vision. In *Assemblage*, archive footage from the British Mandate period shows the raising of a British

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observation balloon, a metaphor which conjures up both release from the land and the mapping of it, the establishment of territory through the process of reconnaissance, or surveillance. Speaking of the role of the camera as a 'point of mediation', Price's work rejects a polemical position where the two states are presented only as binary opposites and instead uses the eye of the camera as a way of exposing the paradoxes, the liminal spaces, the no-man's land which lies between.

This is a difficult balancing act to achieve, which may explain Price's respect for *Notre Musique*, seeing in its fractured mode of address a possible strategy for mirroring the many facets of the Israel and Palestine conflict and its representation without falling into the trap of taking sides. The diversity of Price's images imply the seriousness and commitment of her project, as she seeks to address a situation overwhelming in its complexity. However, within this we are offered moments of epiphany, tentative celebrations of possible freedom and humanity, which again challenge the stereotypes of Israel and Palestine with which the West is most familiar. A butterfly dances on a Jerusalem rooftop in *Saffron of Jerusalem*, a boisterous stag night is observed at the Dead Sea beach in *Light Drinks the Dark*, and unseen laughter echoes in the swaying cable car of *Time Line, Jericho*.

Important to Price's exploration was a trilogy that she made using archive film material from the Imperial War Museum, uncovered while she was artist in residence at the London Jewish Cultural Centre's film archive from 2006/07. In particular Price focuses on the image of Palestine before the emergence of the Israeli State, during the period of the British Mandate



# Blind Spot

Judy Price and metaphors of vision in Israel and Palestine

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between 1917-1948; when many of the seeds of the Israel and Palestine conflict were sown. The images that she chooses evoke an era of colonial bureaucracy, in which land and peoples are organised, checked and administered by white men conspicuous in khaki shorts. This archive footage enables Price to halt history and revisit it, and the films which resulted from her residency, *Reel*, *Assemblage* and *Interference*, might be seen as an active form of excavation which unfolds before the eyes of the viewer. However, in a reverse methodology to that of the conventional archivist, who endeavours to bring disparate film fragments together to create a coherent narrative, Price splinters those fragments still further, so that hidden meanings and histories can surface and be released.

Returning us to the metaphors of sight and seer, *Reel* is constructed from the sections of the film which are not designed to be seen but to act as instructions to the projectionist or the film librarian. Scribbled instructions on the reel ends take on the quality of hieroglyphic texts or arcane Kabbalic codes, or alternatively, the scratched celluloid and magnified scrawlings also become a form of defacement. They signify the colonial arrogance of 'overwriting' land and identity, whilst they also operate as a form of decipherment. Running the jottings and abbreviations of past instructions backwards and in reverse becomes a perverse form of reading, trying to create other languages for understanding the complexities of the current Israel and Palestine conflict. The black spots which materialise across some of the images in *Reel*, once simply punched out circles within the end frames of the film print, now perform an ominous punctuation. Their partial obliteration of the image alludes to an obliteration of identity and the blind spot by which the West has most often viewed the beleaguered region.

Furthermore, Price talks about Palestine being an inconvenient hum, or a 'white noise' in the everyday experience of most Israelis. Slavoj Žižek also sees this kind of 'background noise' as a symptom of the fundamental imbalance between the Israeli experience of the conflict and the Palestinian one, where movement and access to daily provisions is severely restricted. "This background noise, this underlying global imbalance, belies a simple consideration of 'who started it, and who did which violent act.'" By bringing back into audible range what has been deemed as background noise, or what is known in film terms as 'atmos,' Price calls attention to the desensitising effect of the conflict. It is an invitation to listen with more care, something that has been done little by politicians over the many decades. The vibrations and resonances she picks up reverberate with the daily experiences and places common to both sides; indeed, the echo of church bells and far away traffic from the peaceful rooftop in *Saffron of Jerusalem* or the Arabic rave music of the stag party have the rare power to transcend the territorial, their sounds carrying, and finally mingling, in the air over their imposed borders and boundaries.

As a symbol of restoring sight and lifting blindness, St John's Eye Hospital acts as a poetic signifier for hope and resolution within the bleakness of the Israel and Palestine conflict. However, the light in *The Refrain* is often filtered or reflected rather than direct. It is almost as if the hospital is apprehended with a vision that is not quite restored and still remains dimmed or distorted. There is also the resonant image of the eye itself, as the film depicts operations in progress or optical examinations in close up.

In these images Price performs a subtle reprise of *Un Chien Andalou's* visceral slit, except here the surrealist provocation for new modes of perception becomes a quiet appeal for clarity. Sight is not destroyed in order to be remade in one gestural slash, but is witnessed by the viewer, and Price's camera, as it undergoes a gradual process of restoration. The metaphor of sight has provided Price with a means of penetrating the layers of history and tangled allegiances embedded in the beleaguered territory and in the Western perception of it. These vignettes of Israel and Palestine may not escape the burden of histories that mark these landscapes, but Price's subtle play upon metaphors of vision - from its blindness to its restoration - urge the viewer to 'look afresh' and anew.

This essay is an abridged version of a longer piece that can be found at [www.daniellearnaud.com](http://www.daniellearnaud.com)

Judy Price is a London based artist. *Within This Narrow Strip of Land* was shown at Danielle Arnaud Contemporary Art Gallery, London in May 2008 and at the USF Centre Bergen, Norway in January 2009.

Lucy Reynolds is a writer, curator and artist.

#### Endnotes

- a Everett, Wendy, 'Screen as Threshold', *Screen* 39:2 Summer 1998 p142
- b Žižek, Slavoj, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso, London, 2002, p127

