In this study, I will conduct a comparative analysis of three feature films produced in Israel/Palestine. Common to these films is the significant thematic import of scenes including silence, quiet or the muting of characters. The first, *Chronicle of Disappearance* (1996), was directed by Palestinian/Israeli citizen director Elia Suleiman; the second and the second and third by Jewish-Israeli directors: Haim Bouzaglo’s *Fictitious Marriage* (1988). Both were produced against the background of the First Palestinian Intifada.

These mute scenes occur against the background of the relationship between the two dominant languages in the three films, Hebrew and Arabic. According to sociologist Yehuda Shenhav, if in the past there was a two-way movement (motion) between Arabic and Hebrew, it has been blocked. Instead, the relationship between the languages became significant “in light of the definition of Hewish sovereignty as having (possessing) a monopoly over the territory, the population and the identity.” This politics, including its theological and political aspects, is based, according to Shenhav, on the “radical polarization between friend and enemy,” and as such it preserves a relationship of rivalry and limits the areas of overlapping between the two languages (161).

In her monograph *Poetic Trespass*, Lital Levy offers an account of literary works operating within a space she calls “no-man’s land,” and which have the ability “to transgress these rigid boundaries of language and identity.” In her view, this “no-man’s land is at once a space *between* Hebrew and Arabic and a space *outside* the ethnocentric domain that equates Hebrew with ‘Jewish,” Arabic with ‘Arab’” (3). “There,” she argues, “we uncover a space of alternative poetic visions and cultural possibilities. This space [...] provides a zone of passage for symbols and ideas to migrate between the two languages” (3). Levy goes on the explain this space’s meta-linguistic dimension: “in literature of the no-man’s land, Arabic and Hebrew are bound together in a continuous state of creative tension, generating metalinguistic discourses through the performative deployments of language” (12).

In my reading (review, analysis) of the three films, I will argue that the mute scenes I discuss function performatively and within the tension Levy points to, thereby forming a cinematic “no-man’s land.”

In his monograph, *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion strives to describe the characteristics of the mute character in film. According to Chion, frequently “the presence of a mute character clues us to the fact that there is a secret” (96), considering that the character is perceived as having knowledge that is not available to us in its entirety. For this reason, “the mute character elicits *doubt* (...), and this factor defines his position in the narrative structure. There is uncertainty about boundaries. Bodies without voices, as well as voices without bodies, seemingly seem to have no clear parameters” (97-98).

In the reading I offer, the indecisiveness regarding boundaries elicited by the mute character has a liberating effect in terms of the political aspects entailed in it. In this context, Chion suggests that “the mute character occupies an undefined position in space” (97). From within this ‘undefined position’ the separatist perception that aligns national language and identity with one another collapses, and various narrative and thematic developments that generate the transformation of ideas related to identity and belonging in both films are generated.

1. *Chronicle of Disappearance*

Elia Suleiman’s first feature film, *Chronicle of Disappearance*, is divided in to two main chapters (acts?). The first describes a film director’s (played by Suleiman) return to his birthplace, Nazareth, after a long stay in New York. This chapter is titled “Personal Diary,” and it is comprised of episodes that follow Suleiman’s travels throughout the country alongside the individual stories and routines of his family members, neighbors, and friends.

The second chapter opens with a drive through East Jerusalem as the city is slowly revealed. In the background a song is playing, whose words, which seem to tell a personal story, are charged with political meaning given the context: “between me and you, long days/why are we fighting?”. The chapter’s title, “Political Diary,” film scholar Haim Bresheeth explains thus: “In Jerusalem he is finding it increasingly difficult to act as the *person*, to act *personally*, the way he did in Nazereth” (75).

Arriving in Jerusalem, Suleiman sets up a meeting in a real estate agent’s office. He waits outside the office, while indoors there is a young woman named A’dan (Alla Tabri). AS we discover, her belonging to the designated group of the Palestinian minatory in Israel, makes it difficult for her to find an apartment: she is asked about her accent in every call she makes to apartment landlords. The composition which is perfectly divided in half present an intersection of the two characters’ points of view (gaze); the dividing line simulates a mirror, while Suleiman’s shadow is reflected on the wall.

Later, Suleiman is invited to a cultural center in East Jerusalem. When he goes on stage and is asked about his next film and the language that characterizes him, he is unable to speak due to the high frequencies emanating from the microphone. The maintenance man walks back and forth on the stage, in a repeated effort to fix the problem; in the meantime, the noises coming from the audience become increasingly louder: a baby’s crying, cellphones ringing. If in this scene the microphone constitutes an obstacle for Suleiman’s character, it seems that later a different microphone will serve as a tool for A’dan.

Unlike Nazareth, Jerusalem is characterized also by the presence of policemen and soldiers whose appearance renders them sole representatives from the Jewish-Israeli side. Nurit Gertz and George Halaifi suggest that since they represent for the director the damage to the order, they “are punished for it through humor” (166). They move in unified rhythm and choreographed formations, speak in defective military jargon (code), and act in a strange and distanced manner which Bresheet describes as “a physical and aesthetic manifestation of hysteria” (74).

Gertz and Halaifi opine that the policemen and soldier’s absurd behavior is revealed throughout the film as one (a single) portrayal, which expresses the general essence of trauma in the twentieth century: “life as absurd.” However, they emphasize, this portrayal “conceals behind it a different trauma—the trauma of the occupation” (166). On his way back from the cultural center, Suleiman’s character comes across a two-way radio that one of the policemen dropped while hurrying along. In an episode titled “To be or not to be a Palestinain,” two policemen break into Suleiman’s home in search of the lost radio. They comb the house while covering for one another, ready to fire, while Suleiman follows them, in his slippers, as if invisible. Finally, amongst the discoveries reported in the “execution report” are descriptions of the rooms, miscellaneous objects and the titles of books including “Wearing Pajamas”.

In the film’s first chapter, Suleiman appears as a mute character, although there—in Nazareth—he interacts with the environment: he toasts a drink with his friends, listens to stories told by his family members, shares a cigarette with his cousin. This interaction typifies Suleiman’s next movies, *Divine Intervention* (2002) and *The Time that Remains* (2009). According to Gertz and Haleifi, the second chapter in *Chronicle of Disappearance* is unique in that its characteristic muteness is inserted into the broader political context (158).

In the scene described above, the muting of the voice becomes, for the first time, the muting of the body as well. In his book (monograph), Mladen Dolar describes the voice as a paradoxical topologic point. The voice is positioned at an intersection between the body and language, but does not belong to either path (route). Not only does the voice separate itself from the body, leaving it behind, it is also “incompatible” with the body—it is impossible to locate it within the body. Still, the voice is the operator that links body and language (71-73).

In Dolar’s view, we can parallelly describe the political nature of the voice. The voice is positioned at a topologic overlap, an intersection between two paths: the first is the naked life, that is the origin of the voice’s creation, and the second, community life, political life. In this location too, the voice still does not belong to any path, but it links the two (106). In this sense, one can describe the muting of Suleiman’s voice and the disappearance of his body in this scene as the unravelling of the two, overlapping links in face of the depicted political context.

As part of the obscured boundaries mentioned above, Chion describes an experience of duality as characteristic of the structure of the film narrative that includes a mute character. As he suggests, frequently the mute character operates as a double, a vessel or mirror of consciousness for another character (98). In *Chronicle of Disappearance*, A’dan’s character, the young woman from the realtor’s office, operates in a way we can describe as complementary to Suleiman’s muteness. Her character first appears in the film’s second chapter and her actions constitute a consequence of its intensified political context.

In the following scenes, it is revealed that in fact, A’dan has the two-way radio that the policemen searched for in Suleiman’s house. As mentioned above, A’dan’s voice and accent constitute obstacles for her in finding an apartment in an earlier scene. Now, as Gertz and Huleifi note, by using the radio, the same voice “opens up the entire space for her” (158). First, she leads the policemen up and back through the city in pursuit of fabricated events. In line with the position she has adopted, she is filmed from a low-angle position, while she is standing on the roof of a tall building. Later, she uses the radio to announce “Jerusalem is not *meuchedet* (united ..), nor *meyuchedet* (special...)”.

Chion coins the phrase ‘acousmatic’ in his book: voice detached from body. According to him, acousmatic voice is often heard through a mechanical instrument and is mistakenly attributed to someone else (36). Chion suggests that an acousmatic voice whose origin is unknown tends to shift the film narrative to a quest after its location; in the meantime, it is attributed mystical and forceful powers to the point of its governing the entire cinematic space (63). In this case, the quest for the radio that constitutes the origin of the acousmatic voice, in fact begins in Suleiman’s house.

Bresheet is of the opinion that both characters tell the same story—“the story of silence”—in different ways: A’dan’s way is adopting the means and language of the other side by using the radio and disrupting them. After giving instructions, A’dan announces—“for a change, we will now play a song”—and chooses to sing the Hebrew anthem. In Bresheet’s view, the singing of the anthem constitutes the crux of the disruptive method that A’dan chooses, on the one hand, and reinvests the song’s words with their original meaning: the song of the oppressed who have lost their homeland (82).

In an earlier scene, Suleiman’s character is watching a movie on television in which a group of men are singing a song of longing for the homeland in Arabic, while dancing a traditional dance: “The hidden tears were not found to comfort us.” While A’dan sings the anthem in Hebrew she is watching the same movie, this time in slow motion and without sound. Thus, the effect that creates a sense that the men in the group are dancing to the sound of the singing of the anthem.

According to social-linguistics scholar, Yasir Suleiman, language embodies to intertwined dimensions: the instrumental-communicative dimension and the symbolic dimension (7). In his view, language constitutes a preferred site for the expression and ideologization of existing conflicts; in a conflictual state, the language’s symbolic dimension accumulates many more, and significantly more charged, meanings than the instrumental-communicative (16). Suleiman emphasizes the versatile nature of the symbolic dimension by way of pointing to social anthropologist, Anthony Cohen’s study (222).

In his monograph, Cohen describes symbols’ dualistic nature: they enable us to operate within a given society; however, one may provide a different interpretation, derived from his worldview, even to that which is supposedly considered a common symbol. In Cohen’s words, “the sharing of a symbol is not necessarily the same as the sharing of meaning” (16). In Suleiman’s view, this trait is what provides language with its unique power: “The ability to negotiate difference and to gloss it over [...] through the power of imagination” (222).

From this standpoint, Suleiman proposes to view the relationship between the two languages, Hebrew and Arabic, a conflict between symbols. In this sense, the symbols’ meanings are not shared, but the way in which they are used are always determined by the speaker’s interpretation (223). After A’dan undermines the words’ symbolic import by the significance she attributes to their tone (not “meuchedet,” not “meyuchedet”). Thus, also the accent that constituted an obstacle for her facilitates liberation. In this way, we can also see the significance attributed to A’dan’s singing of the anthem.

Interestingly,