"JERUSALEM, WE HAVE A PROBLEM": LARISSA SANSOURS SCI-FI TRILOGY AND THE IMPETUS OF DYSTOPIC IMAGINATION

By Gil Hochberg

There is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films.—Susan Sontag[1]

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?—Mark Dery[2]

This essay engages closely with the sci-fi trilogy of the Palestinian artist and filmmaker Larissa Sansour, which is comprised of the films *A Space Exodus* (2008), *Nation Estate* (2012), and *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015). Sansour's trilogy draws on familiar contemporary sci-fi aesthetics, relying on some distinctly Hollywood sci-fi conventions. Yet it also advances a specifically Palestinian anti-colonial dystopic poetics. Sansour's experimental trilogy bears on the specific political context of the Question of Palestine (and of Palestine *as a question*).[3] As such, the trilogy broadens our understandings of sci-fi dystopia as a mode of de-colonial artistic and political imagination. This is an urgent task, since criticism has

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almost exclusively focused on canonical European and North American works when making universal claims about the nature of sci-fi in general and that of sci-fi dystopias in particular.[4] Sansour's films help expand our understanding of dystopia and its growing global appeal, as well as the becoming of "world sci-fi" along the lines of "world literature" or "world cinema." My engagement with Sansour's sci-fi cinematic trilogy thus joins the few recent scholarly works on the de-colonial potentiality of third world sci-fi dystopias that challenges the genre as singularly Western.[5]

Globalizing Sci-Fi Dystopias

Whether or not it can be said that we live in a dystopian time, dystopic-themed novels, films, art, and aesthetics have reached an all-time high in global saturation. Classical dystopias such as George Orwell's *1984* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* have resurfaced as bestsellers in the United States since the election of Donald Trump, joining some of the most popular TV and film productions today: *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-current), *Divergent* (2014), and *The Hunger Games* (2012).[6]

Most critics have treated dystopia, especially sci-fi dystopia, as a Western European and North American genre, effectively implicating it in the history of colonialism, Western imperialism, and Western racial paranoia.[7] Yet the current worldwide abundance of literary sci-fi dystopias, including recently published works from international ("third world") writers such as Boualem Sansal's *2084: La Fin Du Monde* (Algeria, 2015), Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (Egypt, 2016), Michelle Pretorius's *The Monster's Daughter* (South Africa, 2016), and Yishai Sarid's *The Third* (Israel, 2015), to mention but a few, suggests that the genre has been de-westernized, decolonized (if partially), and indeed globalized.

Why the current global fascination with sci-fi dystopias? The ease with which dark futurism and dystopic imagination circulate these days may indicate the genre's potential for raising awareness of our planetary existence and shared destiny. The globalization of dystopias, especially in their sci-fi variations, could function as "an opportunity to begin to think about who we are becoming as a planet."[8] Perhaps such a sensitivity would lead to upheaval in the national, ethnic, territorial, or racial agendas that have dominated political thought, identity formation, and living priorities

for centuries, and their replacement with globally shared environmental planetary concerns.[9] On the other hand, dystopian imagination, particularly in its sci-fi techno-futuristic aesthetic manifestations, tends to recreate a fixed, fascist visual syntax. Uniforms, weapons, machinery, and militarism replace human psychology and social relationships with coded social roles, sterile environments, and a predetermined set of behavior regulations. Moreover, as Noah Berlatsky suggests, most recent sci-fi dystopian films and fiction center on a traditional opposition: what "they"—an evil, foreign civilization, invaders—are doing to "us"—the good, innocent ones, whose integrity must be maintained by all means. In other words, even in the postcolonial context, the colonial legacy "remains central to science fiction," shaping its form and logic, and is "more tightly bound with our political life and public culture than we sometimes like to think."[10] A sci-fi dystopic imagination replaces tired humanism with post-humanism, individualism with mass conformism, and modernism with hyper-technology. It also tends to abandon narratives of recovery and emancipation, which are themselves, as Frederic Jameson reminds us, often narratives of exclusion.[11] Instead, the sci-fi dystopic imagination offers narratives of ongoing colonial, imperial, and violent threat. It is perhaps these less promising formal aesthetic and political aspects that Susan Sontag warns us against when she writes, "there is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films."[12]

In line with Berlatsky's argument about the ongoing legacy of colonialism's Manichean and paranoid thinking in sci-fi dystopias, even postcolonial ones, fear of the other and of invasion and contamination is indeed at the heart of the many cinematic dystopias over the last decade. These include *Ender's Game* (Gavin Hood, 2013), *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *The Fifth Wave* (J. Blakeson, 2016), *Attack the Block* (Jo Cornish, 2011), or *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009). Such films are staged as critiques of historical colonialism and racism, and yet, even as such, they are committed to the classical paranoid sci-fi modality. But it is precisely the genre's undeniable colonial legacy, as well as its familiar and often simplistic symbolisms, that make it available to a practice of ironic citation of the genre's visually seductive elements. This citation overcomes sci-fi's political limitations through ironic misquotations and misplaced iconography. In other words, I am suggesting that it is the ironic politics of citation that both critiques the genre and upends it for radical use.

Writing about the use of sci-fi in African American literature, art, and pop culture in his groundbreaking essay from 1993, "Black to the Future," Mark Dery notes that the future, and specifically "space," became opportunities through which African Americans asserted themselves artistically. These artists may have been robbed of their past and present, but they nevertheless "intend to stake their claim in the future."[13] More recent scholarship on African American speculative literature highlights the radical political potential of black feminist sci-fi writers such as Octavia Butler and Phyllis Alesia Perry. Sami Schalk suggests that for marginalized people, sci-fi can mean imagining a future without racial, gender, and sexual oppression. But this imagination is not always utopian. More often it advances what Justin Louis Mann has called a "pessimistic futurism," one that maintains a pessimistic view of the present while leaving room to imagine a radically different future.[14] In a similar way, Sansour's investment in fantasy, space, and high techno-futuristic sites offers ways to move beyond the present and the past, nostalgia, oppression, the state, and perhaps even beyond the question of return as a legal question about safeguarding the historical rights of refugees.[15] The "beyond" Sansour offers takes us into an uncertain future imagined in outer space—out of space—where the question of Palestine is posed in a futuristic post-factual and post-national time of becoming.

Palestine in Space *or* the Time of the Not-Yet

For many years, Larissa Sansour has made short and biting documentary films about everyday life in Palestine, focusing on some of the most iconic visual markers of the Israeli occupation. The Separation Wall, for example, starred in *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005), featuring Sansour as a Mexican gunslinger who arrives in the West Bank for a match with the Wall. In *Happy Days* (2006), footage shot in the occupied territories, featuring watchtowers, checkpoints, Israeli soldiers, and wire fences, is paired with the theme music from the 1970s American sitcom *Happy Days*. And, finally, in *Run Lara Run* (2008), a comic take on the indie German film *Run Lola Run* (1998), we follow Sansour running across the West Bank, with Israeli settlements visible in all directions. These short films, in addition to her work in photography, her graphic novel (co-written with Oreet Ashery), and sculptures, are distinctly campy. Their political commentary draws most

explicitly from the ironic clash created between context (Palestine under military occupation) and form (visual icons and sound references borrowed from North American and European leisure culture).[16]

In a recent interview, Sansour explains that after years of working with the documentary medium and a focus on the present, she shifted toward fantasy and the future: "The world has been exposed to the Palestinian situation. People are just tired. They have developed an immunity to the [same] images they see from Palestine."[17] Other Palestinian filmmakers and artists have spoken similarly about "image fatigue" and an impatience with the present. As a majority of films from and about Palestinians are documentaries populated with images of destruction and suffering, there is little left for filmmakers to reveal in terms of a futuristic politics or a politics of becoming. This realization resulted in a change of Sansour's method and cinematic language. It eventually gave birth to the first Palestinian sci-fi cinematic trilogy: *A Space Exodus* (five minutes, 2009) was followed by *Nation Estate* (nine minutes, 2012), and finally by *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (twenty-nine minutes, 2016). The first installation is a vignette modeled on Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Sansour uses the same soundtrack) and Neil Armstrong's historic moon landing, featuring Sansour traveling in a spaceship to the moon, where she eventually anchors a Palestinian flag before drifting back into space, calling repeatedly for "Jerusalem," as if it is ground control, with no reply. The second film, *Nation Estate*, locates the newly established Palestinian state in an "estate": a tall building placed in the middle of the West Bank and housing each Palestinian city on a different floor. Finally, in the third and most elaborate installation, an essay film, Sansour designs an intricate, mysterious world of flying porcelain plates, spaceships, biblical figures, soldiers, desert views, and mystical landscapes. Her protagonist, a self-identified "narrative terrorist," hopes to manipulate history, facts, and time by forging archeological findings for future generations.

The three films differ in both stylistic and political standpoints. They progress from utopia to dystopia, and from irony to a more solemn mode of critique. Nevertheless, the trilogy as a whole comes together through a focus on the questions: what does it mean to think about Palestine in futuristic terms? What does it mean to imagine Palestine in terms of a time-yet-to-come? How does such imagination change the very entity called "Palestine"?

And how might such changes affect how we think about the relationship between the past and future, history and fiction, hope and despair, utopia and dystopia?

In this sense, Sansour's trilogy joins other Palestinian artistic projects that focus on the future as a setting for discussing Palestine-in-becoming. One such example is Khaled Jarrar's 2011 passport stamp performative project, "Live and Work in Palestine." The project began with Jarrar inviting foreign visitors to Ramallah to stamp their passport with a Palestinian border patrol stamp he created. Jarrar first performed the act in Ramallah and later in various locations around the world. His stamp performance highlights the fictional existence of the state of Palestine, but also its potential, if contested, becoming.

If Jarrar's project highlights the fictiveness of the Palestinian state at present, it nevertheless stages the state (the stamp granter) as the only possible, valid, or representative agency of a future Palestine. Unlike Jarrar's stamp project, Sansour's sci-fi trilogy forms a more skeptical relationship with the state as a political entity, or the idea of the state as a utopic end. Palestine itself remains today a primarily futuristic political project. Sansour's futurity operates outside the temporality of the nation-state. Adopting sci-fi aesthetics Sansour expands the futurity of Palestine to include a much less predictable outcome. She first locates Palestine on the moon, then in an isolated high tower estate, and finally abandons Palestine altogether (the name "Palestine" is not even mentioned in the film) in a vast and gloomy desert caught between past biblical figures and future spaceships. Jarrar's futuristic project stages a desired future through an implausible scenario. He takes on the symbolic gesture of the state. Sansour's futuristic visions highlight fictiveness and adhere to sci-fi aesthetics. She replaces state-oriented hopes with a dystopic reflection on the nation's own fantastic status as a post-factual fabrication: a fabrication that relies on a successful mythology of the past in the name of a no less mythologized future.

Writing about the Palestinian condition of living in continual suspense, Palestinian curator Reem Fadda (2009) has urged a forward-thinking framework that takes the future as its point of departure. Given that the present is marked by stagnation, Fadda finds more political hope in what she calls the time of "not-yet-ness": a potentiality of a time not yet present. For Fadda, as for Jarrar, the not-yet-ness of Palestine refers back to the "state

of not being a state, or a sovereignty in the traditional sense."[18] In Sansour's trilogy, the status of the state is less central to the project of recovery or to the process of reimagining both the past and the future. The futuristic sci-fi setting of the trilogy allows for innovative spatial and temporal possibilities for envisioning a "not-yet-ness," one that does not center on the question of the state or even the question of the nation.

Both celebratory and dystopic, the imagined future allows for the transformation of bodies of the director and her actors into a new space. In *A Space Exodus* the director literally floats in space. On another level, the move into the future cultivates an imagination unbound to any borders—temporal or geographic. Within this borderless space of the not-yet-ness, Sansour avoids presenting possible political solutions or desirable outcomes. None of the three films portray a realistic, feasible, or even attractive future. Rather, by liberating Palestine from its historical and geographical chains, its prosaic status and as a political entity and better yet a "problem to be solved," she allows it to flow into space. Sansour's futuristic project is not messianic. It offers no salvation or at least no easy salvation. Yet its dystopic not-yet-ness imagination should not be conflated with despair. It is rather a critical rethinking of political hope in a time of hopelessness and stagnation.

A Space Exodus

In *A Space Exodus* (2009), an astronaut, played by Sansour, heads toward the moon, where she lands and anchors the Palestinian flag. Borrowing from the famed score of Stanley Kubrick's 1968 *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the film mirrors Neil Armstrong's historic moon walk from 1969. "A small step for mankind. A big step for Palestinians," the voiceover announces. This short, five-minute and twenty-four-second film offers a sardonic utopia of sorts: if there is no room for the Palestinian state on planet earth, perhaps there could be on the moon. The film may first appear humorous and optimistic. The twentieth-century promise of progress for mankind is translated into a promise to the Palestinian people to finally "arrive." The film ends, however, on a much less certain or upbeat tone. Drifting alone in space, the astronaut tries, yet fails to reach Jerusalem, her voice slowly fading as she disappears. Opening with the declaration, "Jerusalem, we have a problem," is another nod to Apollo 13 and Ron Howard's 1995 film *Apollo 13*. The film closes

with repeated unanswered calls—"Jerusalem? Jerusalem?" *A Space Exodus* advances a humorous utopia within a broader dystopic framework. Many reviewers and critics address the film's humor and sense of pop culture in adopting familiar US cultural icons and attributing them to the Palestinian astronaut. Few have recognized that as simple and straightforward as *A Space Exodus* may seem, "there is something more in the video," to quote the Italian philosopher Dario Giugliano. The film, Giugliano suggests "is not just claiming recognition for the Palestinian people [but] the question of history and the relationship between history, truth, and fiction."[19]
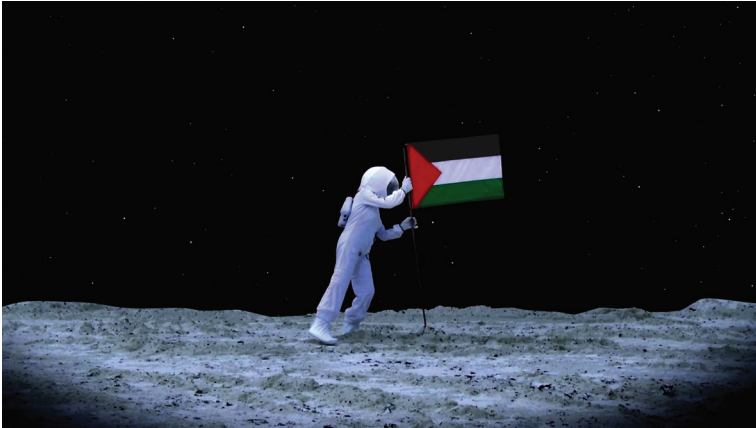

Image 1. Larissa Sansour, *Space Exodus*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

This question of history and its relationship to truth and fiction runs throughout the trilogy. For Sansour, history is a matter of fiction and narrative. It is a question about the relationship between fiction, narration, and truth-value: when does a narrative gain the status of "history"? When is it deemed "science fiction"? All three films deploy sci-fi aesthetic conventions to bypass the common divisions between the factual and the fictional, the

past and the future, history and imagination, and utopia and dystopia. The trilogy suggests that the Question of Palestine is not simply, or primarily, about territory or national rights, but about narrative.

Between Symbol and Cliché

The trilogy's second installation, *A Nation Estate: Living the High Life* (2012), like the first, advances an ironic utopic vision of a Palestinian state, but encloses it within a broader dystopic framework. The film, aesthetically dazzling, pushes the limits of the sardonic utopia to a new level, turning the "state" into an "estate." *A Space Exodus* staged the establishment of Palestine on the moon as a momentary promise and a sight of failure. *Nation Estate* continues to look for innovative ways to overcome the mainly "spatial" difficulties facing the creation of the state of Palestine. Sansour faces these difficulties by compacting the nation into a skyscraper located in the center of the West Bank. Her biting sarcasm is again overt: if Palestine cannot be built horizontally, given the spread of Israeli settlements, walls, and check-points, why not build it vertically?

In the film, the protagonist, again Sansour, arrives at her apart-ment in the new national estate: a modern high-rise that houses all of the nation's iconic symbols, cities, and sites. Each floor is designated for a city (Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jaffa), reachable by a gleaming elevator that opens onto a similarly pristine vista resembling a high-modern airport terminal. The estate high-rise also resembles a museum of Oriental antiquity, wherein the various Palestinian cities are displayed mummified. This idea of pres-ervation contrasts with the futuristic aesthetic of the project in the whole. The clash between the impetus to preserve and the overall hyper-futuristic looks of the "estate" reveals Sansour's political critique of *both* preserva-tion and real-estate development. Both appear in the film as two sides of the same coin: a process through which the livelihood of Palestine is "sold out" to the global market.

After the elevator stops at "Bethlehem"—a modern, clean, and futuristic version of the city—the protagonist makes her way behind the city walls to her all-white apartment facing the desert, where she is met by a miniature olive tree planted in the middle of the house. Sitting down to eat iconic Palestinian food (hummus, olives, and pita bread, of course!) from a plate

designed with the black and white pattern of a Palestinian headscarf (kef-fiyeh), she gazes at the miniature olive tree. As in Sansour's earlier films, here too the Palestinian cultural icons, such as the olive tree, keffiyeh, and the Dome of the Rock, appear in abundance. They are conspicuously staged as "visual icons." Thus these cultural and national symbols are acknowledged as significant, perseverant elements. At the same time, they are rendered obsolete.[20] Indeed, the hyper-stylization of these symbols in *Nation Estate* makes them appear particularly plastic, as if they belong in a wax museum or a kitschy souvenir store. The overt clash between the recognizably Scandinavian, clean-line design of the estate and the specific Palestinian national symbols that make for the "stuff" of the estate makes it hard to determine: Are these symbols or clichés?

Image 2. Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

How does this aesthetic relate to Sansour's political mobilization of sci-fi aesthetics? For one, her citation of standard conventions such as the space-ship in *A Space Exodus* and the uniforms, high-tech design, and futur-istic "hands-free" operation reality in *Nation Estate* allow her to generate dark, humorous accounts that locate the "bite" of irony on multiple ends.

Obviously, it is a bitter irony to envision the future of Palestine first as root-less and floating alone in space, and then as an entire nation confined to a tall building. But what or who is being mocked here? On the one hand, it is a kind of self-mocking, ironic or perhaps not so ironic, known as "Jewish humor."[21] Sansour mocks the helpless situation of the stateless Palestinians and perhaps the nostalgic clinging to national symbols. On the other hand, the aesthetic conventions and styles quoted are American, Scandinavian, and, as in the case of the poster welcoming people to the estate—"Nation Estate, Living the High Life!"—also Israeli.[22] These visual icons are implicated in a political commentary through humorous, misplaced, and appropri-ated citations. When Sansour arrives at her perfectly white apartment and begins to water her miniature domesticated olive tree, it is funny, precisely because of the clash between the "local" Palestinian cultural icons and the Ikea-like aesthetics of the apartment. Welcomed home by a subverted Zionist poster, wearing a COS-looking uniform and immediately turning to the olive tree, the sequence seems to say: "I may look like you, but, like all Palestinians, I love my olive tree more than anything!" The joke is directed at the depiction of the olive tree as houseplant. It also mocks the orientalist and widely circulating cinematic fixation on the olive tree as a national icon, which renders Palestine a static fetish (land of the olive trees)—and a real estate project.[23] The immediate political reference for this sardonic representation is likely the post-Oslo real-estate boom in Ramallah and the West Bank. *Nation Estate* is as preoccupied with the kitchification of national symbols as it is with the marketization of land in the booming real estate and cultural heritage project involving local and international NGOs in the 1990s after Oslo. If the Palestinian olive tree and the keffiyeh have come to represent contemporary Palestinian culture on the global scale, the other side of "global Palestine" is the flow of finance capital transforming the urban landscape of West Bank cities.

Sansour's character—the Palestinian of the future who lives in the national estate—is attached to the olive tree and symbolized through it, but she has also formed a new relationship with it *as a symbol* planted in her apartment. The state has become an estate and the olive tree a cultural symbol and domestic decoration. Sansour does away with nostalgia, instead adopting a multi-directional critical gaze that builds on sci-fi conventions. This is evident in the cold pristine look of the apartment and the militarized

uniform dress shared by all present in the estate. With these renditions, Sansour generates a radically different temporal and spatial narrative. We are invited to revisit, rearticulate, and reshape the Question of Palestine as a question about symbols: about, perhaps most urgently, the commodification of symbols in the name of resurrecting cultural heritage.

Asked what draws her to sci-fi, Sansour admits to not liking the genre herself: "I never even watched *Star Wars*." She goes on to note that "sci-fi has a cyclical nature that works very well with the Palestinian condition, because we always project a state; but at the same time, we always talk about the Nakba (lit. 'Catastrophe,' the loss of Palestine in 1948)." For Sansour, then, a tension between the fixation on the future and focus on the past leaves the present empty: "The present is kind of lost . . . it lives in this state of limbo, it isn't real."²⁴ Elsewhere, she notes that "sci-fi almost invariably carries within it a sense of retro, as ideas of the future tend to appear standard and cliché at the same time as they come across as visionary."²⁵

The two first films in the trilogy solidify Sansour as a master of the cliché. As in her earlier films, both *A Space Exodus* and *Nation Estate* bring together Palestinian, European, and American visual icons to highlight and produce a series of cultural clichés. Indeed, it is the overtly "clichéd estate" of *Nation Estate* that has made some critics associate the work with naïve national sentiments.²⁶ But Sansour, I argue, turns to sci-fi *precisely* because the genre overtly embraces visual clichés such as uniforms, sterile environment, spaceships, glossy production, and high-tech machinery. In that sense, she highlights the citational status of the visual icon as part of the genre's convention. Thus, Sansour mobilizes clichés to liberate Palestine from being a cliché, a place and a political reality that everyone already knows (as if) in advance. Sansour reminds us that the Palestine we all already know is nothing but a cliché: a predetermined set of visual icons, perfect accessories for a high-rise estate, organized along shelves and floors like objects in a showroom.

It is only with the last installation of the trilogy, however, that Sansour brings her camp sensitivity and citational sci-fi aesthetics to a new level. There, she reflects on history as an ongoing trauma of displacement, as well as a failure to narrate and grasp temporality as a present and not just a past to be rediscovered one day in the future. Speaking from the place of the

displaced refugee whose past is a condition for a messianic future, the film is unmistakably dystopic and presents a dark commentary on the limited potential futurity of Palestine.

Narrative Terrorist

In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain (2016) is a longer and darker dystopia that sets sci-fi imagery into an essay-film format, creating a breathtaking cinematic experience.[27] *In the Future* (twenty-nine minutes) is co-written and co-directed by Sansour and Soren Lind. As in the case of most essay-films, the film is comprised of a text, narrated throughout, and images. Some images correlate to the spoken text more or less directly, but most enjoy a life of their own, independent of the text or not directly correlated to it. This double mode of narration—one textual, the other visual—is to a great degree responsible for the film's fragmentary and enigmatic nature. Only by noticing the tensions between text and image, and between the desire to analyze and the resistance to do so, can we trace the film's complex political position regarding the relationship between history and fiction, past and future, utopia and dystopia.

As in the earlier two films, *In the Future* turns to an imagined future in search, again, for a time and place in which Palestine could be conceptualized as a reality. But, unlike the earlier films, *In the Future* no longer speaks the language of the state, and no longer envisions the becoming of a future state, not even in outer space or in the form of a high-rise estate. In fact, no specific political social or historical context appears in the film. Indirect associations and familiarity with the history of modern Palestine and its visual symbolism are the only hints that Palestine is at the center of the film. The same can be said about Israel, and about the tragic incompatibility of the historical narratives that call the same place and different temporalities, by different names (Israel/Palestine). Palestine, in *In the Future* is *already lost*: it is a lost historical reality, a lost geo-political reality, and even a lost name—never uttered in the film. *In the Future* has little if anything utopic about it. The title of the film carries within it a redeeming prospect in the promise of a temporal break. *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*: what could first appear as a grammatical mistake can also mean that when "they" are discovered by archaeologists in the future,

"they" would be understood as people who ate from finest porcelain. The grammar of archaeology mimics the science's temporal logic. As the film demonstrates, the power of such projections is massive: the temporal order of things can be changed by projecting into the future a fiction to be "discovered" and then projected into the past as "history."

In the Future opens with a humming sound. Several spaceships, shaped like bugs with big crossed-eyes, soon lift off the ground into a gray sky. This could be the opening for almost any sci-fi film, making the transition into the following, less-familiar images rather surprising. We are not in space, but rather in what looks like an old postcard or picture of a biblical landscape. A woman's voice announces in Arabic: "sometimes I dream of porcelain falling from the sky, like ceramic rain [. . .] at first it is just dripping slowly, but then the volume increases, it is a porcelain monsoon, like a biblical plague." Meanwhile, animated images of old men with white beards, young girls in embroidered long Palestinian dresses, and various views of the desert unfold before the viewer's eyes. The voiceover situates the viewer in a therapy session, listening in on the most private of conversations: between a patient and her psychoanalyst. The exchange between the two women is personal and intimate. The viewer witnesses the narrators' dreams, memories, fears, and repressions. At the heart of this narrative is a traumatic event: the death of the narrator's young sister, who was shot, perhaps mistakenly. The therapist returns to this trauma time and again, while the narrator departs from it toward other events and speculations. But *In the Future* does not confine the question of memory to the framework of psychoanalysis, trauma, or personal experience. While the therapist continues to pose questions and interrogate the narrator, seeking answers and explanations for her deeds, the screen unfolds a sequence of enigmatic images. The first image looks like an old orientalist photo of two girls dressed in long white dresses and head covers. The photo (or is it a painting?) seems old, but also digital and reproduced. On the right side of the frame, two older bearded men are seated, also dressed in the type of traditional oriental garments seen in nineteenth-century European paintings of the Orient. On the left, three other figures are dressed in European travel or exploration outfits: one in khaki shorts and shirts, the other two in raincoats and dress suits. The figures appear as paper dolls stuck on a board. Suddenly, the girls' eyes open and the figures begin to breathe. The accumulating tension in

this frame, as in the ones that follow, relies on a delicate mix of animation and lifelessness, stillness and mobility, object and human. These are the pairings Freud initially associated with the uncanny. He described them as the source of doubt about "whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate."[28]

This uncanny effect marks an important moment of connection in the film, when the therapeutic narrative and the visual images enter, for the first time, into a dialogue. The two animated-photograph girls, it becomes clear, are the narrator and her dead sister. The living and the dead, holding hands in the middle of the frame, are surrounded by images that draw attention to their own composition and artificiality. Images of overtly orientalist biblical figures are staged against images of modern-looking figures such as soldiers or statesmen, with the vast and empty desert between them.[29]

Image 3. Larissa Sansour, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

The conversation between the narrator and her therapist reveals that the narrator identifies as a "narrative terrorist." She heads a "narrative resistance group" with a secret plan to produce and implant archeological evidence of a fictive civilization to be found by future archeologists. The plan is to avenge the sister's death, but also to create a new reality in the future, based on a manufactured fictive past. Images of porcelain plates scattered on the

desert ground, men and women dressed in orientalist gowns, landscape views of the biblical terrain, a young woman in a large raincoat, a young girl sleeping on what looks like a gigantic porcelain plate or a futuristic hovering bed unfold. These eclectic collections of images match the traumatic fragmented narrative of loss and depart from it: some images seem directly related while others remain enigmatically undecipherable.

Like a great majority of essay films, *In the Future* brings together text and images, the visual and the textual, but maintains a purposely jolting relation between the two distinct realms of representation. The mystery of the images opens the film to uncertainty and reflection, while the framing narrative seeks and fails to put these images in place. The attempt mimics the labor of the psychoanalyst seeking to decipher her patient, the narrator and self-declared terrorist. For Laura Rascaroli, the essay film "is a field of experimentation and idiosyncrasy" that "involves the spectator in a dialogue."[30] The essay film is thus dialogic in essence, despite, and perhaps also because of, its idiosyncrasy. In *In The Future*, this dialogic idiosyncrasy joins familiar and unfamiliar images, rendering an overdetermined field of representation such as the images associated with the orientalist presentations of the biblical terrain truly spectral. The images remain familiar, yet uncanny and haunting.

Sansour notes that her film "revolves around the very notion of the post-factual."[31] She engages this notion that has become a familiar everyday hazard in terms of the ability to produce, manufacture, and circulate "facts" by means of fiction and powerful narrative. Sansour's narrative terrorist and her guerilla group did not invent the idea of post-factual truth, as the narrator explains to her analyst, but, becoming aware of its power, decided to borrow the tactic. The narrator does not provide further information, and the film as a whole never mentions Palestine, Israel, or Zionism. It is thus unclear whether this wonderfully enigmatic film can be directly mapped onto the region's political reality. And yet, certain aspects of the film also make it impossible for informed viewers not to do so. One such "identifying" aspect is the film's explicit focus on archeology as the main means of creating post-factual truths and future histories. It is true that archeology universally functions as an important nation-building tool. It is also well known that archeological endeavors have been and remain a top national priority for Israel, aiming to prove the historical connection of the

Jewish people to the land of Israel (Palestine) and to justify, if not altogether deny, the process of colonization through which Palestine was occupied and made into present-day Israel. As observed by Nadia Abu El-Haj, Israeli archeology is not just about looking for evidence of an ancient Jewish past in Palestine.[32] It is about determining the very criteria for what is considered an authentic historical account. The archeological record is thus advanced as holding "remnants of nations and ethnic groups" and what is found is already classified as evidence for "distinctly demarcated cultures that could be identified and plotted across the landscape."[33]

Modeled perhaps on the success of the Israeli archeological task force, the self-declared terrorist and her guerilla movement create fictional archeological evidence, the porcelain plates, which they intend to disperse across the desert. The plan is for future archeologists to find the plates and make claims for the existence of a lost civilization, which they shall conclude was wiped off the planet by colonial forces. Again, the film does not identify the civilization or the colonizers, and nor should critics. The gap between the ability and inability to identify and name is the very site that carries the film's political promise as a dystopic science fiction about an irredeemable past, which may or may not be discovered in, and only in, the future.

As the title of the film emphasizes, past and future are intertwined: in *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, the narrator recalls her plans to create a fictional past and a new archive for this past to be discovered in the future *as previously overlooked*. The narrator, the terrorist, then, is also the archivist, planting the evidence for the archeologists of the future, who, like her current therapist, are invested in "digging into the past." Masquerading as a science of discovery, archeology is deployed to generate (national) narratives of origins, belonging, and rights. "Since our lives are already determined by a fiction imposed on us," the narrator comments, "it is possible [for us] to stage a resistance through a counter-narrative: an alternative fiction. You just replace one myth with another." The remaining portion of the film alternates between this utopic vision, including the narrator's fantasy of victory, and the dystopic conditions that render it impossible.

Given that the "ongoing work of archeology [in Israel] was constitutive of the territorial self-fashioning of Jewish nativeness out of which a settler-colonial community emerged as a national, original and native one," the

ability of the "narrative terrorist" and her "narrative resistance group" to overcome such powerful post-factual truths remains, within the film, questionable.[34] Far from a celebratory film about the power of counter-myths or the victories of the oppressed, *In the Future* is a haunting, open-ended visual account of the long-lasting effects of loss and trauma. *In the Future* strikes a balance between engaging the concrete and urgent question of human suffering, on one hand, and refusing to find catharsis in the representation of suffering on the other. Thus, while it is true that in line with the classical sci-fi format the film is set at the very end of historical time, it is also the case that this end-of-time is not so much a particular historical event as it is a general condition: the disastrous condition "through which history is narrated," to borrow Ari Akkermans's words. At the same time, the film's cerebral aesthetic maintains a clear distance from pathos. The core of the narrative and the deep traumatic secret that the narrator revealed in therapy (the death of the sister) stages pathos and anguish as something between the most real, that is the "meaning of it all," and a used-up cliché.[35]

Toward the end of the film, the psychologist asks if the terrorist envisions "a polemic utopia," to which she responds: "this is not an academic exercise for me. I am not defending a thesis." It is for this reason that I would encourage critics not to read the film as an "academic exercise" or a "thesis" about trauma, memory, or recovery, for example. The film refuses to be fully read, at least in this argumentative manner. This refusal is resonant with the film's trajectory. Indeed, while the narrative is staged as an exchange between the narrator and her therapist, and thus *includes* the psychoanalytic scene, it nevertheless also includes the narrator's resistance to psychoanalysis and the therapist's efforts at interpretation. The narrator resists her analyst's attempts to decipher her behavior and render it a legible narrative of loss and revenge. In a parallel way, the film at once flirts with and resists the possibility of a coherent narrative of resistance.

The film closes with a visual citation: a long table that seats an eclectic crowd, including a soldier, perhaps Ottoman or even British; a couple of young women in long Palestinian dresses; one man in a formal suit; a nun; and two young children. On the table are plenty of porcelain plates, wine glasses, and food. The iconography of the "The Last Supper" is unmistakable. But questions remain: does this iconic staged image refer to the lost civilization? Is this a staged memory of the fictional past? Of the people who

Image 4. Larissa Sansour, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, 2015.
Courtesy of the artist.

ate from porcelain plates? Or is this an image from the future, capturing the discovery of the hidden porcelain plates, following the successful plot of the narrative terrorist? Is it an image of hope in the biblical sense, a time of resurrection? Or is it an apocalyptic image, with biblical Christian references to the shroud of Turin, the plague, and frogs falling from the sky, signaling the end of the world?

Augmented by Iraqi electronic musician Aida Nadeem's haunting soundtrack, the film leaves these interpretive possibilities open. It ends with the voice of the narrator, repeating the same words with which the film begins. Recalling her dream, she describes: "a porcelain monsoon dropping over her like a biblical plague." What do we make of this dream, these words, and the image of the dining table?

It is tempting to map these closing images onto the present reality, but Sansour's film refuses to provide such closure. The nature of the political intervention here, and in the earlier two films of the trilogy, is modeled, on various degrees of suspension. There is the inability to fully distinguish utopia from dystopia (*A Space Exodus*), symbol from cliché (*Nation Estate*), or fantasy from history (*In the Future*). If sci-fi proves a useful genre for

Image 5. Larissa Sansour, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

Sansour, it is not simply because it allows her to escape the present and visually imagine the future of Palestine. It is because it allows her to highlight the circumstances of the present that make contemplating such a future impossible. Sansour articulates a dystopic utopia through the sci-fi aesthetic and its position vis-à-vis the imaginative and the realistic. With these tools she renders the utopic genre of sci-fi dystopic. The "no place"/"good place" (the double meaning of utopia)[36] in Sansour's trilogy provides momentary relief followed by a fall (*A Space Exodus*), a simulation of hope that is nothing but a caged dream (*Nation Estate*), or an uncanny return of the repressed, a projection of the past into the future mediated and weighed down by the impact of trauma (*In The Future*).

Even more significantly, the Zionist utopia, alluded to indirectly in the trilogy, appears itself to be based on science fiction, or rather on an archeology posed as science fiction. It is this re-visitation of archeology as a fantastic science that further renders the difference between utopia and dystopia unsustainable. Hence archeology functions at once as a model for the narrative-terrorist to imitate as she seeks to "replace one myth by another," as well as a recipe for failure, continual trauma and the repeti-

tion compulsion, according to her therapist. If the "condition for utopia is exclusion,"[37] Sansour's dystopia is itself presented as a forceful return of the excluded. This return comes after and breaks apart the utopia/dystopia dichotomy. It brings the logic of nationalist utopias to its natural and una-voidable dystopian end.

The post-factual, post-national setting of Sansour's dystopic trilogy is Sansour's answer and contribution to the question I opened with: what does it mean to talk about the globalization of sci-fi dystopia? Or what is the meaning of such globalization, or spreading of (a) "global dystopia"? For Sansour, I suggest, this globalization is not articulated in terms of a concern for "the globe" per se. Her films do not focus on global ecology, geography, the ecosystem, or climate change. Her work is rather localized, dealing specifically with the Palestinian ordeal. But, as such, her films highlight the global aspects of this ordeal, conveying something of the hopeless hope, or the pessoptimism, that binds so many people around the globe today in the face of ongoing global indifference to historical injustice.[38]

If Sansour's sci-fi trilogy is thus part of a growing sense of a "global dystopia," it is so primarily because it gives shape and form to the *hopeless hope* of the excluded—the victims of various successful (national) utopian projects. Utopia, Jameson reminds us, always excludes. Sansour's trilogy uses the dystopian impetus to convey something else, not about the exclusion of utopian thinking but about the possibility of articulating a different kind of hope. The three films articulate from within the dystopic space a moderate version of hope, reminding us that those dreams and hopes that fail to make history and utopias may still make for good science fiction.

ENDNOTES

1   Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," *Commentary*, 1 October 1965.

2   Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, eds. Mark Dery, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 2.

3   Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* [1979] (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

4   Most classic works on sci-fi and dystopia remain very Euro- and US-centric. This is the case for Sontag; it is also the case for many other contemporary scholars of sci-fi and dystopia, for whom the Western canon remains the only source for imagining an alternative future. See, for instance, Louisa Kay Demerjian, ed., *The Age of Dystopia: One Genre, Our Fears, and Our Future* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), which speaks about dystopia as a genre of *our* time that focuses on *our* fears and *our* future, as if this is a global phenomenon. But a closer look at the book reveals that the texts discussed are limited to primarily well-known Western novels and young adult literature (*Hunger Games*). Many other canonical theoretical texts on dystopia and science fiction, which are otherwise quite helpful and informative, remain of little use to those who wish to theorize dystopia and science fiction from a non-Western, non-hegemonic point of view. This is also true for key theoretical texts such as Andrew Milner, ed., *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia, and Dystopia* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2010); Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, eds., *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and, more recently, Gregory Claeys' monograph *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Recent attempt to challenge this Eurocentrism include Jessica Langer, *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal, eds., *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

5   The greatest change in this regard, including a shift to focusing on de-colonial sci-fi and its radical political potentiality, is taking place today in the field of Black Feminist speculative literature. See, for example, Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman, *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Kinitra D. Brooks, *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

6   The series is based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel by the same name. *Divergent* is based Veronica Ruth's 2011 young adult trilogy, and *The Hunger Games* is based on Susan Collins's series for young adults.

7   For an excellent account of the strong relationship between colonialism and sci-fi, see John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008). Sci-fi "comes into visibility" he writes, "first in those countries most heavily involved in imperialist projects—France and England—and then spread[s] to Germany and the US, who were similarly involved in imperial conquest" (3).

8   *Boston Review*.

9   Several circulating terms seek to highlight this potentiality of dystopian science fiction. These include the coined terms cli-si (for works about climate change), eco-disaster, eco-apocalypse, and eco-fiction.

10 Noah Berlatsky, "Why Sci-Fi Keeps Imagining the Subjugation of White People," *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2014.

11 Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 205.

12   Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster."

13   Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," 8.

14   See Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*; and Justin Louis Mann, "Pessimistic Futurism: Survival and Reproduction in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*," *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (2017): 61-76.

15   Many scholars and activists today are thinking and rethinking the idea of "return" in radical ways, not doing away with the importance of "the right of return" for Palestinians but reimagining the meaning of "return" in the context of present-day and future politics. Consider, for example, the artistic project of "Permanent Temporalities" by Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal (and the DAAR collective), which highlights the permanency of the Palestinian refugee camp as a condition from which to think anew the meaning of "return." See Alessandro Petti, "Introduction," Refugee Heritage. Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR), http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/introduction-4/. Also see Nasser Abourahme and Sandi Hilal, "Intervention: (Self) Urbanization and the Contours of Political Space in Dheisheh Refugee Camp," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 59-77.

16   Sansour was born in Jerusalem and studied art in Copenhagen, London, and New York. She has directed and acted in more than ten short video-films since 2003, co-authored with the Israeli artist Oreet Ashery the graphic novel *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* (Charta: 2009), and held numerous exhibitions in Europe and the Middle East, featuring her videos, photography, and more.

17   "Video: Larissa Sansour, Creating a Palestinian State with Science Fiction," *Middle East Eye*, 7 April 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/larissa-sansour-creating -palestinian-state-science-fiction-67744336.

18   Reem Fadda, "Not-yet-Ness," in *Liminal Spaces 2006-2009*, ed. Eyal Danon and Galit Eilat (Holon, Israel: The Center for Digital Art, 2009), 227.

19   Dario Giugliano, "A (Hi)story Pour les Analphabètes—of Larissa Sansour's Video," *Third Text* 25, no. 3 (2011): 308.

20   When I asked Sansour to describe what she considers most significant about the aesthetics of the "estate," she responded: "I am very interested in the symbolism associated with Palestinian identity. I think a lot of it is a direct result of a traumatic psyche, the need to hold on to images as reminders of Palestinian-hood. In *Nation Estate*, all of these signifiers are crammed into one space (the key for the right of return, the Palestinian embroidery, the olive tree, the food, the Dome of the Rock and so on). I wanted the building to be pristine and clinical like a museum, housing these objects like empty historical vessels that have [already] lost their meaning." Larissa Sansour, email message to author, 12 June 2017.

21   Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious* [1905] (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990).

22   The image is modeled on the well-known and widely recognizable "Visit Palestine" Zionist poster from 1936. The original poster was designed by the graphic artist Franz Krausz in an attempt to encourage Jewish tourism and immigration to the Land of Israel. See http:// www.haaretz.com/jewish/this-day-in-jewish-history/1.719286.

23   The olive tree in a pot is also reminiscent of Asam Abu Shakra's famous painting of potted cactuses.

24   Abdellatif R. Abdeljawad, "Unbreakable: Palestinian Artist Larissa Sansour Dishes Out the Final Installment of Her Sci-Fi Trilogy," *REORIENT*, 16 February 2016.

25   Aurangzeb Ahmad, Interview with Larissa Sansour, 11 May 2013, http://www.islamscifi. com/islam-scifi-interview-of-larissa/.

26   Quoting a friend who visited the exhibit with him, Kevin Jones mentions the friend describing the work as "syrupy optimism." See Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, "Larissa Sansour: Science Faction," https://www.lawrieshabibi.com/exhibitions/30/overview/.

27   The essay film genre incorporates text and image, following what can be loosely defined as an essay format. The genre is commonly characterized by fragmentation and a distinct lack of closure. Most film scholars agree that the attempt to define the essay film have so far only been *partially* successful, mainly due to the hybrid nature of the genre itself, which crosses between fiction and nonfiction cinema, and between cinematic and non-cinematic qualities. Among the originators of this cinematic genre are Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda, and Jean-Luc Godard. Later directors working in the genre include Chantal Ackerman, Werner Herzog, Harun Farocki, and Isaac Julian, among many others.

28   Freud is following Jentsch here; Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" [1919], in *Fantastic Literature a Critical Reader*, ed. David Sandner (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 80.

29   Regarding the archival sources and inspiration for the rich and diverse visual images of *In the Future*, Sansour notes: "I researched a lot of archives, from the Library of Congress to UNRWA and various private Palestinian collections. All the archival sources captured different colonial moments from Palestine's history. Some from the Ottoman era, the British mandate and the early days of the Israeli state. The biblical seeming figures are primarily Samaritan from the late nineteenth century and Bedouins. The more modernized figures are of actual Palestinian families just before the 'Nakba.' They are standing on the backdrop of refugee tents that the UN built for Palestinians in 1948." Larissa Sansour, email message to author, 12 June 2017.

30   Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49, no. 2 (2008): 39, 40.

31   *Labocine*, "Envisioning Future States with Science Fiction," n.d. https://medium.com/labocine/envisioning-future-states-with-science-fiction-7a4ea54e00ca.

32   Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

33   Ibid., 3.

34   Ibid., 242.

35   Ari Akkermans, "A Sci-fi Film Imagines a Dystopian Future for Palestine," *Hyperallergic*, 26 April 2016.

36   From the Greek *ou-topos*, meaning "no place" or "nowhere" and the almost identical *eu-topos*, meaning "a good place."

37   Joan Gordon, following Frederic Jameson, argues that utopia always excludes the imperfect and the erasure of "the condemnation of difference." See Joan Gordon, "Utopia, Genocide and the Other," in *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Transformation*, eds. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 210. Jameson adds that the utopia is "very much the prototype of the settler colony." See Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 25.

38   Pessoptimism refers to the term coined by Palestinian writer Emile Habibi in his 1974 novel, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*. The term merges the Arabic words for pessimist (*al-mutasha'im*) and optimist (*al-mutafa'il*). See Emile Habibi, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (trans. Trevor Le Gassick) (London: Arabia Books, 2010).