White Oil, Excavations and the Disappearance of the West Bank

Quarries of Wandering form explores the limestone quarries in the Occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and includes photographs and a 65-minute single screen film White Oil.

The film emerges from 5 years of extensive research from 2009-2014 and excavates the environmental, economic, geological and political aspects of the quarries where a complex set of geopolitical relations between worker, owner, land, military, nationalist identities and sovereign state within the region can be located.

White Oil is premised on a practice where intersubjective relations were one of the most important features in the making of the film. In the first two years, before filming, my time was spent predominantly encountering people from different social groups and organisations in Palestine that were connected to or invested in the quarries Listening and attending to the workers’ day-to-day lives became the means through which I was able to understand the complexities of the quarries.

The issues around participant observation and dialogical aesthetics were crucial in working in a culture and place very different from my own (London, UK), and have helped me identify the underlying dynamics at stake when working with different social groups. My research into the quarries draws on local and consensual knowledge engaging in the particularities of the quarries and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as well as situating my research within collective interaction.

The responsibility and role of the artist in contested environments is not to give legitimacy to art through a co-opting of the social sphere but to become actively engaged with the issues at stake through the modalities and principles of art, always asking the question: what exactly is it that art uniquely brings to these struggles? Thus an ‘experimental-embodied practice’ has been essential in encountering this landscape, wherein a certain openness to contingency and chance has provided one of the main methodologies in the production of this work.

This entailed a detailed examination of the multiple dynamics of the relations between myself as filmmaker and my co-participants, the intercessors of the film. It

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1 Susanne Leeb, ‘We are the Art, Whoever we are’, in Libia Castro and Olafur Olafsson, Under Deconstruction (Sternberg Press, 2011), p. 2.
required negotiating the space and territory of other human beings and recognising their openness and generosity in granting me access to their intimate and personal worlds. My ‘ways of seeing’ have been agitated where the political site of transformation is not posited elsewhere, in the repressed other, but in my embodied experience as a filmmaker, which finds its articulation in the film itself and a practice that I hope supports some sense of veracity rather than adherence to documentary or realist models of representation.

Least to say in the making White Oil it was never about attempting to show the ‘whole picture’ but rather the uncertainty and partiality of knowledge and the impossibility of ever being able to account for the reality of others and of lives that we can never really know. To use Patty Lather’s words, ‘where we do what we can while leaving a place for what we cannot envision to emerge’.  

My Background
My relationship with Palestine, as well as number of other things, goes back to the late 1980s where I lived for a period of time in Israel on a kibbutz and then in the late 1990’s became involved as a political activism with Jews for Justice for Palestine. In 2008 due to a number of circumstances and some work I had made around the British Mandate in Palestine as part of a larger body of work Within this Narrow Strip of Land I was invited by the directors of the International Academy of Art, Palestine in Ramallah, Tina Sherwell and Khaled Hourani, to teach on the BA programme. The International Academy of Art is an institution that I am still very much involved in, both through teaching and through number of exchange programmes that I have initiated with UK Universities and was instrumental in supporting the research and making of White Oil with many of the students contributing in different ways. The Shat-ha Ramallah walking group that I joined every Friday morning to go walking in the West Bank, was also very important in helping me understand the spatial politics of the West Bank from the ground up and where I first identified the quarries from a distance.

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Lather, ‘Against Empathy, Voice and Authenticity’, p.21
There are over 350 quarries in the West Bank. Termed the 'white oil' of Palestine, the stone excavated from the quarries is the only raw material available to support the Palestinian economy. The stone represents approximately 4.5% of GDP and provides a livelihood for over 20,000 workers. However, 65% of the stone excavated is expropriated by Israel for the construction industry in Israel, and to build the illegal settlements in the West Bank with Israel also exports the stone internationally claiming it as their own product.

Today almost every hillside is scarred by the brutal incision of the quarries and walking through the landscape this mutilation becomes disconcertedly visible to the naked eye. The land pillaged and defaced, its wound left open to reveal a 'geology of disaster'.

To understand how quarrying has become such an intrinsic part of Palestinian livelihood, we need to unfold the narratives around Israel’s appetite for the stone and the underlying ideologies at work. Collective memory has been an important objective in Israeli national state building. Archaeology, architecture, history and education have been main players in activating collective memory towards a retrieval of the past and creation of a future. While archaeologists have sought Jewish history below the ground, architects have worked on the ground to define Israeliness ‘as a local native culture’ that has been taken over by the Palestinian latecomer.

Symbolic and Military

Throughout the twentieth century, initiated first by the British during their Mandate of Palestine a number of bylaws were put in place regarding the use of limestone from the West Bank as the main material of construction in Jerusalem. After 1967, these bylaws included areas extending beyond the green line into the West Bank with the stone was used as a unifying material and a way of designing strategic military outposts in the West Bank.

Following the occupation of the West Bank in 1967 a new urban master plan for Jerusalem was put in place to ensure the city’s unification. The architects of this plan, Avia Hashimshoni, Yosef Scweid and Zion Hashimshoni, stated in 1968 that they must ‘build the city in a manner that would prevent the possibility of it being
repartitioned...\textsuperscript{3} as well as take into account that the function and value of masonry construction must also be measured, ‘not only according to architectural value that seeks to reveal a building’s construction methods in its appearance, but according to cultural value that sees buildings as conveyors of emotional messages’.\textsuperscript{4}

As a consequence, a unifying regulation was introduced stating that new construction on the periphery of Jerusalem (which was moving into the remote hilltops of the West Bank, becoming the origins of the settlements that we see today) required the use of stone cladding throughout the expanded municipal area.\textsuperscript{5}

On a symbolic level the stone has been appropriated to capture a sense of spirituality and holiness petrifying all construction in Jerusalem and its surrounding areas, from shopping malls to schools and community centers, synagogues and offices and residential houses with a sacred identity. In sales brochures the yellow hued limestone is portrayed as ‘a precious stone, carved from the holy mountains of Jerusalem’. However, as Eyal Weisman makes clear in his book Hollow Land, ‘when the city itself is perceived as holy, and when its boundaries are flexibly redrawn to suit ever-changing political aims, holiness inevitably becomes a planning issue.’ i

For the Jewish people the stone propels them into an emotional identification with the landscape cementing their presence, ownership and authenticity to the land. However, the ordeal of daily life for Palestinians under Occupation and the labour and fatigue of the Palestinian quarry workers that is the sheer physical force that pulls the stone from the earth is not accounted for in the Israeli narrative. The stateless Palestinian, the dispossessed, the exile, and the exploited subject as cheap labour with no civil rights, used for political calculation in the struggle for land, territory of which the stone and the quarries are part.

\textsuperscript{3} Hashimshoni, \textit{Masterplan for the City of Jerusalem}? (Weizman, \textit{Hollow Land}, p. 28).
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Weizman, \textit{Hollow Land}, p.31.
In addition, with two thirds of the total surface of the West Bank, outside of the cities and towns, under Israeli military and administrative control, there are few opportunities for Palestinians to develop other industries or trades in the OPT because they are denied permits in almost all cases for businesses and alternative industries. Hence the reliance of Palestinians’ on the stone industry as a livelihood is a consequence of the Occupation.

As you can see from the map the yellow and grey areas delineate space which is either out of bounds for Palestinians or severely restricted in how they can use it.

Divided into three areas known as Area A, B and C, these different ‘Zones’ impact on the degree to which Palestinian lives are oppressed and regulated and the extent to which they are able to engage with and use space in the West Bank,

- Area A which includes Palestinian cities is under military and civil control of the Palestinian Authority and is approximately 17 percent of the total area of the West Bank
- Area B contains the vast majority of Palestinian towns and is administered by the Palestinian Authority but controlled by the Israeli military and is approximately 20 percent of the total area
- Area C is under both military and administrative control by Israel and amounts to approximately 63 percent of the total area of the West Bank.

The red circles on the map show the quarries. To exasperate this situation many of the quarries are poorly regulated and often located in close proximity to residential areas, where a high concentration of dust and particles can be found. In recent years there has been an increased level of asthma in the environs of the mining, particularly amongst children— with the quarries also destroying the carefully balanced ecology and biodiversity of the West Bank as well as damaging the little agricultural land that there is.
White Oil

*White Oil* employs a number of filmic languages -- photography, documentary, aesthetics of delay, the cinematic and testimony with dialogical aesthetics and ethnographic methodologies playing an important role. Essential to the making of the film was a collaborative mode of address; the owners, workers and security guards engaged in the filmmaking process and the role of the artist (myself), as filmmaker, activist and ethnographer all come under scrutiny.

In excavating a number of narratives around the quarries White Oil seeks to address how the quarries can be perceived as an archive and cipher for the day-to-day lives of the collective biography of Palestinians, and not just as industrial spaces in which labour and excavation of raw material take place. In *White Oil* the collective biography of workers and the biography of the stone and quarries are weaved into a single fabric to unfold narratives around colonialism, expropriation of land and mobility. As Laura U. Marks’ writes:

Open quote

Cinema is capable not only of following the process chronologically but also of discovering the values that inhere in objects: the discursive layers that may take material form in them, the unresolved traumas that become embedded in them, and the history of material interactions that they encode.⁶

Close quote

The biography of the object is not the objecthood of the object but how things are mediated through it, the processes and practices that create and mobilise objects, for objects are not inert or mute; they tell stories and describe trajectories.

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⁶ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, p. 80.
The film is structured around the interplay between day and night, with the viewer confined to images and sounds of the quarries. Visualisation of the stone’s summation in the architecture and facades of Jerusalem and other areas of Israel is completely withheld, denying the viewer the pleasure of making comparisons between the two landscapes, and is only alluded to through the dialogue. The day scenes focus on the decimation of the landscape: the machines and non-human elements, settlements and landscape, sounds of industry and cutting of the stone. Ramzi Safid, a security guard, appears intermittently throughout the film and provides a narration and consistency. He spends five nights a week sleeping in a portakabin overlooking the quarry at Rafat on the outskirts of Ramallah, before going to his day job as a plumber for the municipality.

As we all as sharing his routines and observations, his stories are about changing human values and how communities have been divided as a result of the Occupation. How he was imprisoned four times without charge in an Israeli jail near Hebron in the 1980s and then in 1996 by the Palestinian Authority, where he found himself in exactly the same cell in the very same prison, now known as Al-Dahria (the Hebron correction and rehabilitation centre), that he had been confined to years before by Israel.

The night scenes, by contrast, are more narrative and intimate, focusing on the social gathering of the Alshalaldaha Brothers and their associates who rent land to excavate the stone from a small quarry in Birzeit on the outskirts of Ramallah.

They spend five nights a week camping out in a metal shipping container in the quarry as their journey home from Birzeit to Hebron through Jerusalem takes four times longer as a result of the checkpoints and the Separation Wall.
The politics, reminiscences and anguish articulated in the material day-to-day lives of the brothers, as they sit around the fire at night watching over their quarry and machines, reflect those of Ramzi. A generation younger, it becomes clear in the film that for the brothers the hardship of earning a livelihood and feeding their families has got the better of them, with dreams of a different kind future or any hope, long buried in the dust and rubble.

*White Oil* attempts to make visible not only darkness and domination, past and present, but also the minor voices of a people living in a state of exclusion. The voices of Ramzi and the Alshalaldaoha Brothers are the everyday struggles and interpersonal dynamics that demand an in-depth listening. They are the forgotten or ‘missing people’ that speak within alternate universes of reference, and provide a counter narrative to the dominant Israel narrative, because a whole other story is vibrating in it.

By knitting together the economic, familial and political, *White Oil* attempts to reposition and transforms our understanding of the quarries by re-encoding them as sites of cultural production through the process of filming. The discursive layers revealed in *White Oil* are the strata and sedimentations of local knowledge and experience and act as an archive of personal histories and experience, and of the myriad losses of land, economy, identity, history and community as well as the changing landscape and conditions of the quarries.

**Here is a 12-minute excerpt from *White Oil* made up of a number of sections from the film to give you a sense of the different visual languages.**
Ibid, p.33.