

Press Release

## Elia Suleiman discusses his personal journey to becoming a filmmaker – his early life in Palestine, the filmmakers who influenced him and how he learnt to make films

*Moderated by Richard Pēna, the session showed clips from Suleiman's previous films including Divine Intervention, Chronicle of a Disappearance and The Time That Remains*

**Doha, Qatar – 8 March, 2015:** Palestinian filmmaker and Doha Film Institute Artistic Advisor Elia Suleiman shared his own journey to becoming a filmmaker at Qumra in a candid and inspirational master class on Sunday.

The session was the second in a series of five master classes taking place during Qumra, a new event presented by the Doha Film Institute dedicated to supporting emerging filmmakers.

Suleiman recounted memories of his early life growing up in Palestine, his passion for telling personal stories and the filmmakers who inspired him along the way.

During Qumra, Suleiman will also be mentoring four filmmakers whose projects are participating in an intensive development programme including: Ahmed Al Baker's sci-fi drama **In Search of Adam** (Qatar); Susan Youssef's drama about searching for identity in **Marjoun and the Flying Head Scarf** (Lebanon, The Netherlands, USA, Qatar); Khalifa Al-Muraikhi's desert set drama **Sahaab** (Qatar); and Mahmoud Al Massad's dark comedy **Blessed Benefit** (Jordan, The Netherlands, Germany, UAE, Qatar).

Suleiman talked about his early years growing up in Nazareth, Palestine where there was only one cinema and very little in the way of an artistic scene.

After dropping out of school, he went to New York as an illegal immigrant at age 21 where he started working odd jobs and got his first experience of cinema.

"It was where my autodictat route as a filmmaker really started," Suleiman said. "My student friends would sneak me into film classes in NYU to watch a movie. I got in through the fire escape and I had to leave before the lights went up but it was the beginning of my cinema viewing experience and I got the feel of what makes an image an image."

Suleiman made his first film at age 30 and explained at that time he didn't really know how to write a script or make a movie, learning the technical headings in a script from reading Roman Polanski's **China Town**.

“My English wasn’t so great and I didn’t understand the technical part of a script – the camera movements but I copied the headings after reading the script for Polanski’s **China Town** and I began knocking on doors.”

Suleiman said the first image he ever took was when he went back home to Palestine. “The first image I ever took was after 3.5 years in New York. I went back home, my brother had a video camera to film his children’s birthday and I borrowed it when I went to see my friend who was a Bedouin shepherd. I shot a close-up of a goat chewing – it was a still shot that lasted 5 minutes and the goat was looking at the camera. I still have it on VHS and that was my first fascination with cinema.”

Suleiman’s first film, **Introduction to the End of an Argument** caused a lot of controversy but also became an instant hit on the festival circuit as it was a very fast collage of images, a non-linear structure that ridiculed and mimicked the stereotypical images of Arabs in the Western media and the history of Middle East politics.

From there Suleiman was commissioned as one of five Arab filmmakers, to express his thoughts and feelings about the Gulf War and its impact on Arab people, culture and intellectual thought in **The Gulf War...What Next?**

“This was the serious beginnings of me trying to deal with a cinematic image,” he said.

After deciding he was sure he wanted to become a filmmaker, Suleiman began to see a lot of films back in New York to educate himself in cinema. He said he couldn’t identify with a lot of what he saw – including classic films from such acclaimed directors as Jean-Luc Godard and Wim Wenders – but that changed when he the work of Japanese and Taiwanese directors such as Yasujiro Ozu and Hsiao-Hsien Hou.

“When I encountered Ozu’s films I had an instant identification with his point of view of where to put the camera. I felt his cinema resembled the ambiance of where I came from – the political situation, trying to live a life of normalcy under occupation. His films, like **Tokyo Story**, gave you the sense of the alienation that the elder generation felt in terms of what had happened to them, a sense of denial.”

Moving from making a short to a large scale feature with 70-80 locations with a huge crew presented its own challenges. “It’s not really a follow up film to a short film, it should’ve been my fourth film but I took a leap and took all the risk because I didn’t know any better. I knew there was a huge difference but somehow I just thought - it is what it is.”

After being turned down by multiple producers in France, some of whom insulted him by saying they thought he was an American filmmaker and that his film had nothing to do with Palestine, Suleiman had no choice but to produce the film himself.

"I thank them for that because **Chronicle of a Disappearance**] wouldn't've been the same type of film if I hadn't had to produce it myself," he explained. "I took control. I had all the liberty and freedom. It is a rare opportunity to make this size of film with that freedom and that was thanks to the fact no one wanted to produce me."

Suleiman, who stars in the film along with his family members, his relatives, and other non-actors, talked about how he persuaded his family to be in the film, which sees him return to the West Bank after a long absence and conveys the feelings of restlessness and uncertainty that arose from the occupation.

"My parents were ageing and I was worried they would not understand the intrusion into their private life, I was afraid for their wellbeing. It wasn't until the late phase of preproduction that I decided to broach the subject with them. But my father loved the idea of being in a film as he thought of himself as Humphrey Bogart, he knew a lot about cinema. My mother's attitude was simply, well OK. People in Nazareth had never really seen a film being made and certainly not featuring a non-actor as an actor as that hadn't been in existence anywhere before."

Speaking of the reaction to the film, even though it won the Best First Film prize at the Venice Film Festival, Suleiman said Arab audiences rejected the film saying it was offensive. A fatwa was issued in Egypt against him, the film was forbidden in places and a few prints were destroyed. He was also boycotted by actors in Palestine because of using non-actors in the film.

After **Chronicle**, Suleiman said he caught on to personal, semi-autobiographical storytelling and decided that he needed to live, and that his aimless wandering and daydreaming became partially research.

"I needed to live and experience and watch things happen so I followed my own senses – to roam and see things – and I knew there was something out there if I kept myself alert. "

In **Divine Intervention** Suleiman used CGI for the first time and talked about the technical difficulties of using the technology for long shots. He also talked about the structure of the film.

"With **Divine Intervention** I started to write scenes called highlights, smaller scenes," he said. "I didn't know how to write a plot but I could write scenes and these scenes added up and then I knew I had a script."

Suleiman then went on to discuss the very personal nature of **The Time That Remains**, which is based on Suleiman's father's diaries and the recollection of the events of 1948 and the creation of the state of Israel, in which his father, as part of the resistance, was caught and tortured.

Wanting to stay as true to the real life events as possible Suleiman recalled he "checked on every location my father described in his diary. A lot of the locations are still in my neighbourhood and we shot scenes in the exact same place that they happened."

Reflecting on his own personal journey to becoming a filmmaker, Suleiman said: “I am still not utterly convinced I am a filmmaker the way I see other filmmakers,” he said. “There is a kind of non-action in my character that defies more of a continuity in terms of making film after film, writing script after script that I see in other filmmakers. But when I start to write I have satisfaction.”

-ENDS-

**About Qumra:**

Qumra is an initiative that seeks to provide mentorship, nurturing and hands-on development for filmmakers from Qatar and around the world, alongside a series of screenings for Doha audiences featuring films by international masters and recipients of support from the Institute.

*\* The Arabic term ‘qumra’ is popularly said to be the origin of the word ‘camera’, and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.*

**About Doha Film Institute:**

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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