



A Space Exodus

a film by Larissa Sansour



A Space Exodus (Ba'athat Fada') بعثة فضاء

Content

A Space Exodus quirkily sets up an adapted stretch of Stanley Kubrick's Space Odyssey in a Middle Eastern political context. The recognisable music scores of the 1968 science fiction film are changed to arabesque chords matching the surreal visuals of Sansour's film.

The film follows the artist herself onto a phantasmagoric journey through the universe echoing Stanley Kubrick's thematic concerns for human evolution, progress and technology. However, in her film, Sansour posits the idea of a first Palestinian into space, and, referencing Armstrong's moon landing, she interprets this theoretical gesture as "a small step for a Palestinian, a giant leap for mankind".

The film offers a naively hopeful and optimistic vision for a Palestinian future contrasting sharply with all the elements that are currently eating away at the very idea of a viable Palestinian state. In A Space Exodus, Sansour does finally reach the moon, although her contact with Palestine's capital is cut off. This five-minute short is packed with highly produced visual imagery. The arabesque elements ranging from the space suit to the music are merged within a dreamy galactic setting and elaborate special effects. A great deal of attention is paid to every detail of the film to create a never before seen case of thrillingly magical Palestinian displacement.

Credits

Palestine/Denmark 2008, 5 min, digital, color, English

Director	Larissa Sansour
Producer	Søren Lind
Production Manager	Thomas H. Østgaard
DoP	Niels A. Hansen
Editors	Lars Lyngstadaas, Martin Friis
Costume	Line Frank
Tailor	Ditte Egerup Mathiesen
Grading & compositing	Virgil Kastrup
Sound design	Lars Halvorsen
Composer	Aida Nadeem
Music Mix	Gustav Niepoort
Focus Puller	Lars Krogsgaard
Lighting	David B. Sørensen, Jesper Priisholm
Astronaut	Larissa Sansour



Larissa Sansour – Sci-fi Trilogy

A Space Exodus (2008) is the first part of Larissa Sansour's science fiction trilogy along with Nation Estate (2012) and In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain (2016). Under the common themes of loss, belonging, heritage and national identity, the three films each explore different aspects of the political turmoil the Middle East. While A Space Exodus envisions the final uprootedness of the Palestinian experience and takes the current political predicament to its extra-terrestrial extreme by landing the first Palestinian on the moon, Nation Estate reveals a sinister account of an entire population restricted to a single skyscraper, with each Palestinian city confined to a single floor. In the trilogy's final instalment, In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain, a narrative resistance leader engages in archaeological warfare in a desperate attempt to secure the future of her people. Using the language of sci-fi and glossy production, Sansour's trilogy presents a dystopian vision of a Middle East on the brink of the apocalypse.

All three films are distributed by mec film, you can book them individually or as package. For educational purposes the trilogy is available at kanopy.

Film-maker Larissa Sansour

Born in Jerusalem, Sansour studied Fine Art in Copenhagen, London and New York. Her work is interdisciplinary, immersed in the current political dialogue and utilises video art, photography, experimental documentary, the book form and the internet.

Despite its stylised imagery, sterile futurism and high production value, sci-fi tends to allow for a specific kind of almost nostalgia framing of the topic at hand, even the situation in the Middle East. Sci-fi almost invariably carries within it a sense of retro, ideas of the future tend to appear standard and cliché at the same time as they come across as visionary.

Sansour borrows heavily from the language of film and pop culture. By approximating the nature, reality and complexity of life in Palestine and the Middle East to visual forms normally associated with entertainment and televised pastime, her grandiose and often humorous schemes clash with the gravity expected from works commenting on the region. References and details ranging from sci-fi and spaghetti westerns to horror films converge with Middle East politics and social issues to create intricate parallel universes in which a new value system can be decoded.

Sansour's work features in galleries, museums, film festivals and art publications worldwide. Recent solo shows include exhibitions at Kulturhuset in Stockholm, Galerie La B.A.N.K in Paris, DEPO in Istanbul and Jack the Pelican in New York.



She has participated in the biennials in Istanbul, Busan and Liverpool. Her work has appeared at the Third Guangzhou Triennial in China, LOOP in Seoul, South Korea, Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and PhotoCairo4 in Egypt.

Sansour's graphic novel *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel* - a collaboration with Oreet Ashery - first appeared in Venice Biennale bookshops and was since launched at the Tate Modern, UK, the Brooklyn Museum, USA, and Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Centre, Denmark. Her short film *A Space Exodus* was nominated in the Best Short category at the Dubai International Film Festival.

Exhibitions in 2012 include the Centre for Photography in Copenhagen, Galerie Anne de Villepoix in Paris and Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney.

She lives and works in London.

Filmography

- 2015 *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain*, 29', sci-fi, with Soren Lind
- 2012 *Nation Estate*, 9' 04", sci-fi
- 2012 *Feast of the Inhabitants*, 15'
- 2011 *Trespass the Salt*, 10', 3-channel experimental documentary, with Youmna Chlala
- 2011 *Falafel Road*, 60', experimental documentary, with Oreet Ashery
- 2009 *A Space Exodus*, 5' 24", sci-fi
- 2008 *SBARA*, 8'30"
- 2008 *Run Lara Run*, 2'
- 2007 *Soup Over Bethlehem*, 9'30", experimental documentary
- 2006 *Happy Days*, 2'30"
- 2005 *Bethlehem Bandolero*, 5'12"

Interview with Larissa Sansour in ART PAPERS

Space Oddity: The Possibility of a Palestinian Space Program - Larissa Sansour in conversation with Niels Van Tomme

Niels Van Tomme: There's a remarkable passage in *A Space Exodus*, 2009, your video that imagines a Palestinian migration into outer space. Following a dramatic landing on the moon, we hear a voiceover declaring: "One small step for a Palestinian, one giant leap for mankind." We then see you planting the Palestinian flag. As you recast a well-known historical event into the harsh reality of Palestine's political realm, the viewer experiences a double estrangement, in which the fantastic merges with the political, opening up a space of wonder and renewal of "the distribution of the sensible," to quote Jacques Rancière.¹ How did you arrive at such a playful imaginary?



Larissa Sansour: When it comes to the Middle East, something quite peculiar and contradictory is at play: mythologized perceptions of the region coexist with a certain stubborn insistence on its specific geography and localized politics. I often resort to the universal languages of film, gaming, and music as tactics to fictionalize the Middle East.

One could easily dismiss a reduction of politics to such modes of fiction as impotent and insist that they exclusively relate to imaginary and fantastical spaces, but this is exactly the point. If you rely exclusively on documentary approaches, you run the risk of accepting a given conceptual framework that more often than not, and certainly in the case of Palestine, fails to do justice to the complexity of the situation depicted. By contrast, fiction gives you the privilege to dismiss such a limiting framework. Fiction opens the door to an alternative space where problem-solving and deductions are free of the conceptual limitations imposed by matters of so-called fact. Fiction also allows us to reject the iconic images forced upon us and to create our own representations. Iconic images are crucial to the creation of the mental summaries of complex matters. They distill our take on them.

A Space Exodus plays on this line of thinking by reimagining one of America's finest moments—the moon landing—as a Palestinian triumph. The event is the same and yet there is a Palestinian touch, from the spacesuit's embroidered details to the curl of the boots. While A Space Exodus addresses a specific problem, it also comments on the power of images and codes, and their relation to how we perceive things.

Most of the elements in the piece are there deliberately to deliver a polished, powerful take on Palestinian identity, something one rarely sees. More often than not, Palestinians are the targets of documentaries. By recasting them as protagonists in a high tech space context, the video becomes a comment on power struggle.

NVT: The mischievous proposition of space travel and the establishment of a Palestinian state in outer space is a particularly powerful imaginative strategy. It contrasts heavily with the day-to-day reality of Israeli occupation, perhaps most significantly characterized by oppressive restrictions on movement and time. How does the medium of video allow you to negotiate the systematic suppression of Palestinian self-determination?

LS: In some instances, reality can seem so fictional that the only way to address it is through exaggeration. This is truly the case with the Israeli occupation of Palestine, where reality is stranger than fiction. As such, work insisting on rational grounding in facts, research, and documentation often fails to deliver on the surreal and absurd nature of occupation.

A Space Exodus references the exodus of 700,000 Palestinians from their land in 1948 and its ongoing consequences, with Palestinians facing ever more subtle methods of so-called "silent transfer" by the state of Israel. The film also references the biblical exodus and the Hollywood blockbuster The Exodus, 1960, each having done their share of damage in influencing international understanding of Palestine and lending credibility to Israeli mythology: "A land without a people for a people without a land." This, of course, has deeply harmed the Palestinian plight. Here, reality and mythology-building are very closely interlinked. Their interplay is fascinating to me.



NVT: This brings us back to the video's specific visual strategy and formal language. *A Space Exodus* differs significantly from your earlier work, such as *Soup Over Bethlehem - Mloukhieh*, 2006, which relies more on the documentary tradition. Are you suggesting that documentary forms have been exhausted in the representation of politically problematic contexts?

LS: The world has been immunized to the standard set of images from Palestine. The sheer longevity of the situation and the repetition of news and images have a disengaging effect on outside viewers. They know the story, which seemingly never changes. Tragically, this lack of nuance erases the humanity of Palestinians, which is crucial for establishing empathy. For me, it is much more important to tell an attention grabbing story than to show the truth. In saying that, I'm by no means arguing that the terrible facts on the ground in Palestine should not be documented. But sometimes fiction actually tells the story and conveys the essence of a situation better than documentary. In a context where truth is in reality stranger than fiction, starting with fiction might be a safer bet.

This push and pull between reality and fiction is constantly at play in my work. I feel that without both of these elements, I would be dishonest in my art practice. *Soup Over Bethlehem* presents a very straightforward conversation with a seemingly cohesive beginning and end. In relation to this film, I often get asked the question, "Is the dialogue scripted or real?" I find such questions particularly interesting. This is how *A Space Exodus*—whose approach initially seems very different from my other work—relates back to the same question and concerns.

We should think of the distinction in *A Space Exodus* in terms of the role of fiction as a stepping stone for a future reality on the ground, rather than the other way around. This is how I approach it in my own work. In our digital age, this distinction between reality and fiction is even more blurred. It is hard to know if fiction mimics reality or the other way around. After all, fiction is a fragment of our rational reality and maybe should be trusted even more.

NVT: Elaborating on the power of fiction to represent a distorted Palestinian reality, could you talk about the different iconographies that you use in this piece?

LS: I achieve this distortion by recasting certain elements that we all understand into a realm that is foreign to most. Here, the power of context is very important. The appearance of the Palestinian flag on the arm of a fashionable spacesuit gives it a new meaning; it elevates the standard from a symbol of helplessness to one of power. The Oriental boots and the planting of a big Palestinian flag on the moon all recontextualize Palestine and Palestinianhood. The costume is gender-specific and was designed especially for this video to include Traditional Palestinian Folkloric patterns. In this new context, however, even these folkloric designs are elevated to a realm beyond that of a marginal ethnic group. The music is composed by Aida Nadeem, an Iraqi musician I really admire. She reinterprets the soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, 1968, and adds a nice electronified arabesque punch. This recontextualization echoes a sentence heard in the video, "One small step for a Palestinian, one giant leap for mankind," which is of course a reworking of Neil Armstrong's



famous words. In order to reach a truer understanding of a persistent problem, we need new outlandish ways of looking.

NVT: The costume's gender-specificity seems important. In the video, you distinctly insert yourself into the predominantly masculine environment of space travel—as it has been portrayed in popular media. What did you want to accomplish by including a woman, yourself, into such a contested space?

LS: When I first started making films, I cast myself in the main roles because of budget restrictions. But somehow this became a recurring motif in my work. Without my presence onscreen, a certain performative quality would be lost. *A Space Exodus* came from an idea I had for a long time. It combines my desire to take art practice out of its traditional framework with my determination to turn an art piece into an instrument of change rather than a tool of reflection.

I originally wanted the project to involve a big fundraising campaign, aiming to gather enough funds to eventually send a Palestinian to the moon. The idea was that an event of this scale would draw tremendous positive attention to the Palestinian cause. I also thought that the Palestinian who would eventually be sent into space should be a woman. While the video is not really a comment on gender roles as such, it obviously tackles power relations and the reversal of power roles in general. I wanted to put the Palestinian in a context that we all associate with progress, might, and innovation. A Palestinian space program seemed to be the way to go.

NVT: Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi asks if "it is not possible that the Palestinian people will continue to exist indefinitely into the future...in a stateless limbo," addressing our obsession with the very idea of a state and our attempts to "place [it] at the center of the historical narrative."² Do you share his view? Does the ending of *A Space Exodus*—with its astronaut floating endlessly in the cosmos—perhaps suggest a similar feeling of loss and even nothingness? Does this imaginary exodus of the Palestinian people point toward the impossibility of ever returning home?

LS: The Palestinian experience is very much linked to migration and displacement, and the Palestinian psyche is a troubled one. Many Palestinians see themselves as citizens in flux, regardless of where they live, waiting for the right to return home. However, in *A Space Exodus*, my main objective was to posit a new standard for understanding the Palestinian condition. The work's aim is not to offer any conclusions but rather to provide a "what if" scenario in an attempt to understand a political dialogue that seems, once again and despite solid efforts to avoid it, to have reached an impasse.

In certain situations, the only way to proceed is to posit a theory or an alternative space. This can follow abstract terms, but it can also yield a greater understanding of the problem at hand; it can lead to a conclusion that would not have transpired without a fictional or abstract intervention.



Of course, the work reflects the fact that Palestinians are in limbo without a state, as their homeland shrinks like a spot on the horizon. Yet the sadness of *A Space Exodus* also mirrors the reactions to the US space program at the time, from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, 1972, and even David Bowie's *Space Oddity*, 1969. The moon landings gave rise to a widespread anxiety that, in leaving earth, we risked never being able to return home again. Yet because this anxiety is universal, it casts a diffuse, numbing shadow that negates the specificity of the Palestinian plight. The pain of the real, forced exodus of the Palestinians is doomed to remain a private grief, forgotten by the rest of the world.

NVT: Since *A Space Exodus*, you have staged two collaborations with the Israeli artist Oreet Ashery, *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*, 2009, and *Falafel Road*, 2010. What are you currently working on?

LS: I'm currently working on two new projects. The first is a three-channel video, a collaboration with New York-based Lebanese artist Youmna Chlala. The work combines two dinners that took place simultaneously in Lebanon and Palestine. Despite their geographic and cultural proximity, these two countries are divided by political borders. It's virtually impossible for a Lebanese to visit Palestine because of Israeli restrictions and for a Palestinian to visit Lebanon as a result of Israel's historical intrusion in the region. The video depicts these two dinners in one seamless video conversation that could only have taken place digitally. The work will be shown early next year at the International Film Festival Rotterdam.

I'm also working on a new sci-fi video that predicts the future of the Palestinian state. The piece will again set the dilemmas of the latest developments in Palestine and the recent Palestinian bid to the UN in a fictionalized space.

NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, New York: Continuum, 2004.
2. Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006, XIX. Niels Van Tomme is a New York-based curator, researcher, and critic. He is a Contributing Editor of *ART PAPERS* and publishes internationally in journals, magazines, and exhibition catalogues. (http://www.artpapers.org/feature_articles/feature1_2012_0102.htm)

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