

CHRISOULA LIONIS

# LAUGHTER IN OCCUPIED PALESTINE



COMEDY AND IDENTITY  
IN ART AND FILM

I.B. TAURIS





**Chrisoula Lionis** is a researcher and curator based in Sydney and Athens. She teaches at UNSW Art & Design (UNSW Australia) and is Curator of the Palestinian Film Festival in Australia.

‘This impressively happy-sad book tracks the development of artistic practices by Palestinians in their homeland and in exile. It is an ambitious book drawn from deep engagement and is testament to a kind of familiarity with one’s subject that is indeed very rare. The reading of works by Mona Hatoum, Raeda Saadeh and Emily Jacir is among the best I have seen. This book contains the bittersweet wisdom of a painful but uplifting joke – spread it around!’

**Nikos Papastergiadis, Professor, School of Culture and  
Communication, The University of Melbourne**

‘This book is a must-read for anyone interested in humour and/or the history of the Middle East conflict.’

**Sharif Kanaana, Professor, Department of Anthropology,  
Birzeit University**

‘Lionis offers a marvellous introduction to the way Palestinian art and cinema reflect the shifting dynamics of Palestinian politics,... Rich examples... reflect on how laughter in the face of trauma and political disappointment can actually sustain hope and solidarity.’

**Lila Abu-Lughod, Joseph L. Battenwieser Professor of Social Science,  
Columbia University**

# Laughter in Occupied Palestine

*Comedy and Identity  
in Art and Film*

**CHRISOULA LIONIS**

*National Institute for Experimental Arts*

**I.B. TAURIS**

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In memory of my father Dennis Lionis  
and for all those who find laughter through tears.





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## Foreword

When considering humour in the context of Palestine, the writers Ghassan Kanafani and Emile Habibi, two great names from the sphere of literature, immediately come to mind. It must be understood that the immediate association to Kanfani and Habibi should not suggest that humorous writing is commonly found in the recent history of Arab literature. This is perhaps not surprising given ongoing crises in the Arab world and the heavy weight of the Palestinian struggle that has resulted in a prevailing sense of collective trauma and sadness. Further still, there remains a common belief that humour contradicts both the sacredness of collective sadness and the reverence conventionally associated with literature and art.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the documented culture of Palestine was not void of humour (or as we say in Arabic, 'light blood'), that triggered one to laugh whilst also awakening and evoking self critique as a serious strategy in the face of unfolding realities, ideas and power relationships. Unfortunately, this sense of humour was only observed in literature and did not make its way into other art forms until more recent times.

Let us return to the example of Ghassan Kanafani, the renowned Palestinian revolutionary writer and intellectual, who chose to mask his identity by working under the pseudonym Faris Faris to publish various articles in *Assayad* magazine and the *Al Noor* newspaper supplement throughout the 1960s. Through his use of a pseudonym, Kanafani created for himself a space where he was able to escape his fame and readers' expectations, thus establishing an oasis where he was free to write about matters other than the Palestinian struggle and offer a critique through humour. Kanafani's pen, or rather the pen of Faris Faris, was life affirming precisely because it offered an emphasis on the value of freedom, creativity and art whilst at the same time offering a searing critique of frivolity, essentialism, backwardness and art that lacked substance and talent. The humour of Faris Faris thus generated laughter that came from our hearts.

Importantly, it was only through the use of a pseudonym that Kanafani was able to enjoy and escape the heaviness of tragedy, his revolutionary responsibility as a leading figure in the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and his reputation as the writer of *Men in the Sun*, *Returning to Haifa* and *Sad Mother*. Despite working at a time when Palestinians and Arabs were living through the trauma of the defeat of 1967 (and whilst working as editor of *Al-Hadaf* magazine), Kanafani was able to carve a space that utilised humour as a way to focus on the dysfunction, apathy and inertia of art and what he saw as a lack of talent. Within this new space as Faris Faris, the author was able to shift smoothly between various issues, including poetry, cinema, jokes, history and politics. Thus in this space he was able to both critique political and social realities whilst generating humour that exposed what he saw as ingenuous and vacuous art.

In Kanafani's work we see a clear difference between humour and facetiousness. Humour is at its core a serious art form and therefore humour that appreciates itself as such is emblematic of an authentic manifestation of culture. Given this understanding, one important question remains – why did Kanafani work under the pseudonym of Faris Faris? And as an extension to this question, why operate beneath a creative mask when Kanafani himself stated (through the voice of Faris Faris) that 'humour is not for entertainment and it is not a waste of time, but is an attitude and a commitment at the highest level'?

This question lingers and remains unresolved. However, it seems that the mask Kanafani wore generated an invisibility and cultivated a third voice that allowed him to write free of 'himself'; free from his official position and responsibility as a writer in the PFLP and free from the obligations of acting as editor in his revolutionary magazine. Crucially, operating under a pseudonym meant that Kanafani also separated the PFLP and its official political commitments from engagement and association with his artistic critiques forged through the use of humour. In such a way, Faris provided a point of balance between the political Kanafani and the artistic Kanafani without jeopardising the author's official political position. More importantly, what the story of Kanfani tells us is that the space created through the name of Faris Faris, is one that artists and critics need to create and to find for themselves, particularly in periods



when societies and populations are confronted by suffering, disaster, defeat or tremendous loss.

When society – any society – experiences adversity or immense defeat there is a resulting breakdown that affects all spheres of life. Although various studies have revealed the political, economic and (to a limited extent) the social impact upon Palestinian society that resulted from the 1967 defeat, a great deal of cultural side effects have been ignored – these include changes to Palestinian cuisine, clothing, storytelling, music, and importantly, changes to a collective sense of humour.

In contrast to Kanafani, the writer Emile Habibi (author of the masterpiece *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*) worked without reliance upon a pseudonym. Charging his writing with humor in texts such as *Luka Ibn Luka* (*Luka the son of Luka*) and *The Pessoptimist*, Habibi's humour created a style and fictional characters that are to a large extent rare in the history of Palestinian literature. His work depicted disorder and focused upon antiheroes that were able to accurately reflect and mediate upon Arab heritage, history and literature.

What is significant here is that Kanafani and Habibi, two of Palestine's literary giants, were practitioners that carved the way for later generations of Palestinian artists. The space they created was amplified with consequent political changes, in particular those that came as a result of the Oslo Accords. In the years that have followed the Accords, Palestinians have lived through an era when political slogans and answers have no longer sufficed and have ceased to capture the popular imagination. This has resulted in people living through confusion whilst inquiring and confronting this dramatic and disordered reality with humour. Humour has therefore become a means to unpack reality and give evidence to buried desires. Further, humour offers a transcendence of tragedy and pronounces clearly that art is a sphere of knowledge and enquiry where artists are now the players 'in the know'.

In *Laughter in Occupied Palestine*, Chrisoula Lionis provides a similar space to take us through the broader issues and strategies artists have created through contemporary artistic practice in order to both reconnect and disconnect to their cultural capital and heritage. The artistic practices she focuses on here are characterised by the fact that they operate without the need for pseudonyms or didactic metaphor. These practices are anchored

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in the belief and understanding that humour can sometimes be more eloquent than books, research or in-depth analysis, and, more importantly, that humour offers introspection, knowledge and hope for a better future.

**Khaled Hourani**  
**Ramallah, Palestine**

## Introduction: Why Humour?

‘Even in laughter the heart may ache.’<sup>1</sup>

St. John Chrysostom

In early 2008 I met with a group of Palestinians from a local Sydney community interest group. The purpose of our meeting was to organise an exhibition commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the occupation of historical Palestine, an event known as Al-Nakba, or the Catastrophe.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the course of our meeting, conversation meandered around various events in Palestinian history, drifting further and further away from the Nakba. At one point, discussion moved to the Lebanese Civil War and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Perhaps inevitably, the conversation’s focus then turned to the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut.<sup>3</sup> At this point, one of the gentlemen in the room proceeded to explain ‘the massacre was so horrible that we didn’t bother counting the dead, only the survivors’. To my bewilderment, everyone else in the room responded to this comment with an explosion of laughter.

I found myself falling completely silent in the face of this laughter; shocked by what I saw and heard around me. At the time, it was entirely beyond my comprehension how a group of Palestinians could ever laugh at the traumatic events of Sabra and Shatila. It was in this moment of my

silence – and their mirth – that I felt a profound sense of complete cultural outsidership. As a Greek-Australian, I was the only non-Palestinian in the room, and it was as if my silence only served to amplify further the reality of difference between my identity and experience and that of the others in the room. I left the meeting deeply troubled by what I had just seen and heard but equally determined to understand the phenomenon I had witnessed. I was affected so profoundly by the event that I began taking mental notes of all the incidents of humour I saw reflected in Palestinian visual culture, particularly in art and film. These mental notes sparked the germination of an enquiry that has culminated in this book.

The title of this book, *Laughter in Occupied Palestine: Comedy and Identity in Art and Film*, makes clear that my work here centres around the relationship between humour and Palestinian occupation and exile, or in other words, laughter and collective trauma. My more specific aim in this text however is to illustrate how art and film both shape, and are shaped by, changes in collective identity. To this end, my work here not only engages with examples of the impetus of humour and its consequences, it provides a critical account of the historical trajectory of Palestinian art and film to reveal how both mediums reflect changes in identity over the last century. By providing an overview of significant events in Palestinian history over the last century and mapping changes in both art forms, this book contends that Palestinian visual culture has arrived at a ‘punchline’. This ‘punchline’ is an outcome of the failure of the peace process, which ushered in a shift in Palestinian collective identity and experience, resulting in the employment of humour by artists and filmmakers.

Following from this, my analysis of art and film is interlaced throughout with a discussion of Palestinian history. My work here would not have been possible were it not for the enormous growth in publication of scholarship dealing with the history of Palestine in recent decades. This vital research is marked by a revisionism that aims both to unearth previously unpublished material, and to substantiate oral history by placing it in the historical archive. As such, it provides a historical account in order to explain the present political realities facing Palestinians. My project draws from many texts in its discussion of Palestinian history, including the seminal work of Rashid Khalidi and Ilan Pappé, two of the most notable historians working in the field.

The proliferation of texts dealing with Palestinian history has been mirrored by an increase in published material dealing with Palestinian art and film. The expansion of scholarship in this area has resulted from the growing international profile of both these art forms over the last two decades. The fact that Palestinian art and film now circulate in international screening and exhibition contexts is also of vital importance in this regard. This relatively new international profile allows art and film to function as a form of cultural export that offers international audiences a new perspective of Palestinian identity, culture and experience away from the media lens that has long dominated the representation of Palestine and Palestinians – this book is but one measure of the international impact of Palestinian cultural output. While scholarship in this area continues to grow, audiences ought to be aware that discussions around cultural output are always fraught with politics of who owns the right to narrate history. In other words, although the presence of art and film in international contexts also creates opportunities for analysis and discussion by writers and commentators from around the world, this in itself has already proved to be problematic.<sup>4</sup>

My work here owes much to the influential work of artist and art historian Kamal Boullata when dealing with art, and film theorists Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi when analysing film. Two recent texts written by these authors: *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* and *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape Trauma, and Memory*, are the most substantial scholarly enquiries into Palestinian art and film to date, and both uncover previously unpublished historical material.<sup>5</sup> Without such seminal primary research and its publication in English, projects like this one would not have been possible.

While building on the scholarship around these two Palestinian art forms, this book takes the hitherto unpronounced stance that in the last two decades Palestinian art and film have been marked by a distinct use of humour. Admittedly, in the early stages of my research I believed that laughter was, at best, too speculative a cultural phenomenon on which to focus energy, particularly given the ongoing trauma of exile and occupation facing Palestinians. This of course is a continuing struggle. As I write these words, Israel is again inflicting collective punishment on a blockaded Gaza – bombing schools, hospitals, mosques and Gaza's only power plant, actions tantamount to crimes against humanity. At times like these

it is difficult to forge a smile, let alone consider laughter. That said, I have found that the ideal way to overcome this struggle is to return to Palestine, or in the very least, remind myself of my first extended fieldwork visit to the West Bank where any residual concerns about the validity of research around humour quickly dissipated. The timing of this visit happened to coincide with the Gaza War of 2008–2009. Despite the tense political climate, I was confronted with laughter everywhere I travelled in Palestine. Although this laughter manifested in everyday exchanges and conversations rather than in art and film, I realised its importance was not only narrating the Palestinian experience in a charged political climate, but also in forging a line of intimate connection and communication between myself and the individuals I met.

As much of the laughter I encountered was directed towards the experience of exile and occupation, it was at this time that I realised that my own laughter in response to humorous provocation actually signalled a momentary solidarity with the individuals with whom I was laughing. In contrast to my attitude in Sydney, I felt the need to laugh for two reasons: because I began to *appreciate* the humour and because I understood that failure to laugh would indicate a sense of disapproval or disagreement. It was here, literally surrounded by the Israeli occupation, that I began to realise the discernible, albeit slippery, difference between laughing ‘at’ and laughing ‘with’ or ‘alongside’ Palestinian suffering under occupation. In short, I understood the social bond formed by laughter and the joint aggression it engenders against outsiders.<sup>6</sup>

What I came to understand, and indeed aim to illustrate in this text, is that laughter draws a line between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, and that this line demarcates a point of difference contingent on the appreciation of cultural references and signifiers that are employed to elicit laughter. A keen understanding of Palestinian history and culture is vital in regard to Palestinian humour, as an appreciation of laughter elicited from the works discussed throughout would otherwise be impossible. Many of the works explored in this book required that I rectify the gaps in my own knowledge of Palestinian history and culture. Laughter became my litmus test that exposed the gaps in my understanding, particularly when I did not get the joke or find something funny. Throughout this book I spend considerable time taking the reader through key Palestinian historical events,

thereby making clear the line of insider/outsiderness demarcated by laughter. However, an analysis of humour relied on more than an appreciation of history and cultural signifiers, it is also contingent on an understanding of the mechanics of humour, that is to say humour theory, or the field of humorology.

Although my analysis of manifestations of humour is inevitably shaped by my subjectivity towards the ‘funniness’ of the material discussed, a critical approach to laughter is maintained throughout. The elements of this critical approach are twofold. Firstly, all examples of humorous cultural output are framed by their relationship and dependence upon historical events and their surrounding social and political context. Secondly, works are analysed according to the discursive approaches of visual culture; employing memory, trauma and identity studies along with post-colonial and subaltern theory. This critical approach and my emphasis on Palestinian history marks an attempt to theoretically unpack the social biases and influences behind humour. I do this in the belief that there is no such thing as a distinctly ‘Palestinian humour’, but rather that there are examples of humour in cultural output that are informed by Palestinian history and experience. In this way, the book posits the idea that humour in Palestinian art and film is idiosyncratic insofar as the events that shaped Palestinian collective identity and experience are particular to Palestinians as a cultural group.

Working primarily in the field of visual culture, I began my research on humour somewhat guilelessly, assuming incorrectly that there would be a breadth of scholarly work on the subject. Clearly, I am not the only writer to have fallen victim to this assumption. As many authors have noted, laughter is a serious business, and though it takes a central role in our daily lives, it remains theoretically elusive.<sup>7</sup> This observation is frequently qualified by authors’ attempts to humorously convey the irony of their pursuit of critical engagement with the phenomenon of laughter. Given the following reflection, it would appear that I am not immune to this trend: it is often said that a person becomes a critic because they have failed as an artist, so too with humorological research, where it is proposed that theorists are drawn to the discipline only because they are intimidated humourists.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately what this might suggest in my case, is that as an author observing and writing around humour within a visual culture perspective is both lacking in creativity and seriously unfunny.

This ironic conclusion should however not dissuade researchers from taking a interdisciplinary approach, because this has the potential to locate unique insights into the meaning and consequences of humour in contemporary visual culture. This book aims to highlight this latent potential in the study of humour by analysing the meaning and consequences of humour in the specific case study of Palestinian visual culture. The decision to look at both art and film was also a deliberate one, because although several texts have been written about both art forms individually, these texts have neglected to put both art and film together to trace the common themes that run through these art forms over the last century. Throughout this book I refer to Palestinian art and film using the shorthand 'cultural output'. Although this term might initially suggest an emphasis beyond the mediums of art and film, other art forms such as theatre, literature and dance were intentionally omitted from the discussion. Although they are all important forms of culture, discussion of these art forms was not possible in a text of this length. Further, art and film are the two mediums that have proliferated most in international markets and exhibition spaces, making them arguably the most significant for scholarly analysis and discussion in contemporary discourse.

Throughout the text I analyse Palestinian art and film using a variety of critical and disciplinary approaches that come together through the field of visual culture. These disciplines include history, cultural studies, art history, critical theory, philosophy and anthropology.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note here that although visual culture is itself a multidisciplinary field, this text aims to highlight the benefits of broadening visual culture to include a humorological approach. The humorological theory discussed in this book is drawn largely from the humanities and the social sciences. Although much research on humour has been conducted in other fields such as behavioural psychology, neuroscience and evolutionary biology, these disciplines are both less relevant to my visual culture approach and beyond the scope of this book.

In terms of research concentrated on the relationship between humour and the fields of art and film, a large body of work exists on the genre of comedy in film; however, the same cannot be said of humour in art.<sup>10</sup> The scarcity of scholarship on the role of humour in art is



particularly problematic given the growing use of humour in contemporary art practice. Sheri Klein, the author of *Art and Laughter* (one of the few texts to engage with this theme), comments that this paucity of scholarship may come as a result of humour being defined too narrowly within art history.<sup>11</sup> Klein draws on the fact that though parody, irony, satire, absurdity and caricature, for example, have formed the basis of many art historical endeavours, until very recently few authors used a broad definition of humour in their discussion and analysis of art. The problem with these historical approaches is that they limit the scope of research by demarcating each humorous characteristic as distinct, thereby restricting the complexity of humorous phenomena that would be better understood if discussed holistically under the umbrella of the terms 'humour' or 'laughter'. For this reason, manifestations of laughter are denoted in this book by the words 'humour' or 'laughter'. Although various techniques of humour (mockery, absurdity, pastiche etc.) are referred to intermittently, I have deliberately called upon the umbrella term 'humour' to describe the elicitation of laughter.

That having been said, a primary question remains: why humour? Laughter is increasingly pronounced in Palestinian art and film and yet there is almost no scholarly research focusing exclusively on humour and its corresponding impetuses and consequences. This paucity of analysis is astounding given the proliferation of works of humorous Palestinian cultural output over the last two decades. The growing emphasis on laughter in Palestinian art and film also corresponds with the tremendous growth of the international profile of Palestinian cultural output over the same period. Importantly, the emphasis on humour in Palestinian art and film mirrors the interest and expectations of the global art world over the last twenty years. As will be shown in the chapters that follow, humour functions as a passport to international recognition because it is in keeping with wider trends in art that have increasingly turned towards the critical use of laughter. Although this may be the case, the scarcity of scholarly analysis surrounding the emergence of humour in Palestinian art and film is further amplified by a dire lack of scholarly research into humour in contemporary art and visual culture. This text thus marks an attempt to begin to fill this scholarly chasm and to urge others to follow this line of inquiry in future studies.

## Humorology

The pages that follow presuppose some knowledge of the history of humour theory which, although relatively under researched, spans over 2,000 years. For this reason, it is useful here to provide a brief account of the history of humorology, looking first to the three main theories of humour (Superiority Theory, Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory) and the pioneering work on humour by writers Henri Bergson, André Breton and Mikhail Bakhtin. The purpose of outlining these theories is not to provide an evaluation of each framework, but rather to illustrate the key concepts that emerge from each theory to form the bedrock of contemporary humorological research in the humanities. My process here is thus less concerned with an investigation of the validity of each theory as a stand alone framework, but rather their pertinence to visual culture, and for the purposes of this book, their relationship to the understanding of humour in Palestinian cultural output.

Superiority Theory is by far the oldest theory pertaining to the understanding of humour.<sup>12</sup> Though the theory of Superiority is often argued to stem from Plato and Aristotle, in recent times it has been more readily associated with the work of philosopher Thomas Hobbes and his text *Human Nature* (1656). Writers continue to draw upon Superiority Theory, adopting Hobbes's well known idea that laughter presents us with a 'sudden glory', arising from a conception 'of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly'.<sup>13</sup> For the last one hundred years, writers and theorists have drawn upon this theory to treat laughter as a controlled form of aggression, some going so far as to suggest its evolutionary role, where laughter is akin to the primitive baring of the teeth as a way of asserting one's prowess.<sup>14</sup>

Standing in contrast to more positive psychological analyses of humour, Superiority Theory maintains emphasis on the social order function of humour. In so doing, it concentrates on humour's role in the maintenance of power and ideological self-deception while challenging the now popular acceptance of humour as fundamentally 'good'.<sup>15</sup> Despite this contemporary relevance, Superiority Theory cannot be endorsed as an encompassing framework for all manifestations of humour and laughter. For Superiority Theory to be entirely correct two conditions must be met: a point of comparison to