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**Engaging the Apartheid Analogy
in Israel/Palestine**

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Engaging the Apartheid Analogy in Israel/Palestine

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Abstract

The comparison of South Africa with the Israel/Palestine situation was not new when Locke and Stewart published Bantustan Gaza in 1985. A controversial analogy even then, it was as apt to stop argument as to promote deliberation. It has been no less controversial over the last decade during a time when the barrier in the West Bank was dubbed “apartheid wall,” and Desmond Tutu was disinvited as a university speaker because of statements connecting Israeli policy and apartheid. Yet the analogy persists and, like “Hitler” and “Nazism,” is a dangerous strategic choice that may be dismissed as slander and a demonization. Recent applications of the analogy derive from a video contest sponsored by the It Is Apartheid Collective (www.itisapartheid.org) and the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (www.stophthewall.org). Three winners, announced in January 2011, are posted on the web as part of an attempt by the organizers to virally spread their experience of Israeli apartheid. This paper examines the diverse ways three short winning films employ and attempt to justify their use of the analogy. Visual and verbal argument are utilized as the filmmakers seek to establish identification with the audience and an analogic perspective by incongruity that will sway audience understanding and break through any automatic rejection of the term as unwarranted and inappropriately hostile.

Keywords: Israel/Palestine, apartheid, analogy, argument, identification, *sumud*, Burke

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On 1 May 2012, Desmond Tutu published an opinion column in the *Tampa Bay Times* in which he asserts the ‘apartheid nature of Israel and its current government’ but acknowledges ‘that many of our Jewish brothers and sisters who were so instrumental in the fight against South African apartheid are not yet ready’ to accept that comparison. Tutu wrote as the General Conference of the United Methodist Church was meeting in Florida; boycott and divestment, two tools used by activists in fighting South African apartheid, were being considered for use by the church in response to Israel. Twelve hundred American rabbis had signed a letter contending the use of those tools would be inappropriately divisive. In effect, the rabbis rejected the analogy and therefore the strategies suggested by the analogy.

The comparison of South Africa with the Israel/Palestine situation was not new when Locke and Stewart published *Bantustan Gaza* in 1985. The application of the analogy both then and now may have been intended to set what Burke (1984) terms a perspective by incongruity, a shift in comparison that may seem to be an inappropriate linkage, but which encourages or even requires the hearer to see similarities where none had been expected (pp.69ff). A controversial analogy in 1985, the comparison of the South African apartheid system with Israel/Palestine was as apt of stop argument as to promote deliberation. It has been no less controversial over the last decade during a time when the barrier in the West Bank was dubbed “apartheid wall,” the publication of former President Jimmy Carter’s *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* led to resignations from the Carter Center, and Desmond Tutu was disinvited as a university speaker because of statements connecting Israeli policy and apartheid. Yet the analogy persists and, like “Hitler” and “Nazism,” functions as a demonizing term. Noon (2004) notes in his consideration of the dangers of the use of the WWII analogies in the post-Cold War context such analogies “characterize the world in a simple dualistic fashion that evades a critical engagement with history” (p. 339). In like manner, the apartheid analogy is a dangerous strategic choice as a persuasive definition. If accepted as fair and valid, the analogy has the potential to motivate action; but the analogy may just as easily be rejected and dismissed as anti-Semitic slander. Nonetheless, the use of the analogy proliferates, employed by groups ranging from B’Tselem, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and Jewish Voice for Peace to Code Pink and Artists Against Apartheid. Amnesty International’s statement to the U.N. Committee on Ending Racial Discrimination skirts the use of the term, but details the existence of the policy forms apartheid employed.

Recent applications of the analogy are found in a video contest sponsored by the It Is Apartheid Collective (www.itisapartheid.org) and the Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (www.stopthewall.org). Three winners were announced in January 2011; those winners are posted on the web as part of an attempt by the organizers to virally spread their experience of Israeli apartheid. All three films all employ a mix of testimony and action footage, but their ways of explaining the apartheid analogy differ widely. This paper examines the diverse ways employed in the films as the makers attempt to justify the analogy. Visual and verbal argument are utilized as the filmmakers seek to establish identification with the audience and an analogic perspective by incongruity that will sway audience understanding and break through any automatic rejection of the term as unwarranted and inappropriately hostile.

Kenneth Burke (1984) contends that ‘the great danger of an analogy is that a similarity is taken as evidence of an identity. Because two things are found to possess a certain trait in character which our point of view considers notable, we take the common notable trait to indicate identity of character’ (p. 97). Burke (1984) reminds us that such analogical perspectives are limited and limiting; they function as screens determining what we see and shaping how we understand as our ‘observations are moulded by the informing point of view’ (p. 99). This screening is central to the dispute over the use of analogy in socio-political argument such as the Israel/Palestine conflict. The question is one of substance: what similarities linked to the analogy are most crucial, most reflective of the substance, of the core matters, of the analogical condition? What constitutes a tipping point that justifies a claim to identity, a firm assertion that one circumstance should be judged as like another in ways that warrant condemnation? In essence, the Burkean question would be whether this analogy can be ethically applied. Burke’s concerns might lead us to ask for the essential characteristics of apartheid, the policy and structural criteria by which that system can be identified outside of its original context. Unless those concerns can be legitimately answered, then the apartheid analogy cannot be understood as a tool of potential, if seemingly incongruous insight, but merely as a form of demonization like the WWII analogies studied by Noon.

Global Winner: Supporting the Analogy

The longest of the winners, *Apartheid Road*, is a ten-minute set of excerpts from a full-length documentary that opened in spring 2012, *Roadmap to Apartheid*. The excerpt won the overall prize and the expert jury prize. It is the only one of the three winners to directly confront the analogical argument. The film opens with a visual assertion of the veracity of the analogy. The core subject is set with a scene of an Israeli soldier standing at a wall overlooking Jerusalem, recognizable by the Dome of the Rock in the background. For nearly fifty seconds without narration, the film then introduces the strategy it employs throughout, i.e. the intercutting of parallel scenes from South Africa and Israel/Palestine: lines of men, mothers with babies, tanks, soldiers checking documentation, civilians carrying the dead and injured, crowds of protestors. Each subject is shown in both contexts to visually establish the argument of parallel conditions. Throughout the film these twinned visuals are employed as evidence providing logical support for the claim presented by the analogy.

While the narration is derived from a range of testimony, much of it presented by South Africans who provide a set of criteria by which to judge apartheid: separation of peoples on the basis of identity, control of movements of peoples by pass laws and physical blockages, and control of resources based on identity. Within the film these criteria are witnessed by South Africans who remember the system they experienced and at times directly compare it to scenes they witnessed while visiting Israel/Palestine. This provides both the selected criteria and some applications of the criteria with the eyewitness credibility of the South Africans. Understandably expert in the conditions of apartheid and presumably neutral in the Israel/Palestine conflict, the South African assertion of the analogy carries evidentiary weight.

The comment by one South African that his visit to Israel/Palestine was ‘a crude reminder of our painful past’ is linked to the passcard system. As he describes the system, the film shows archival footage of the system in operation. This is followed

by a confrontation at an Israeli checkpoint in which a soldier instructs a Palestinian seeking to cross: 'Only residents of Beit Hanina are allowed. Tomorrow bring real estate papers that say Beit Hanina.' South African testimony underscores the settler bypass road system found in the West Bank as worse than South Africa, where 'we didn't dream that we'd have roads that were only for whites.' Combining visual evidence of separation and discriminatory travel conditions in Israel/Palestine with South African testimony classifying those conditions as worse than they had experienced, the film provides authoritative evidence to meet the criteria it has set for measuring apartheid conditions.

Verbally and visually the film presents apartheid as a structural system of discrimination. The character of the structure is developed through a visual metaphor ascribing a mechanical, inhumane core to the system. Palestinians are shown going through a massive metal turnstile with red and green lights governing their entry. Funneled like cattle to the turnstile, the people are treated as less than human in a massive, unfeeling mechanism.

The film closes with an examination of land confiscation and house demolition as part of the policy of apartheid partition. A South African introduces the partition system and directly links the two contexts. The moving of people and the destruction of homes are shown in twinned visual segments. A South African poet metaphorically recalls the human cost of the mechanical oppression of the apartheid structure:

The Boers are breaking down our house. Two bulldozers. And of course the house crumbled. I felt the pain. It was my blood. My bones. Our flesh that was being broken down...Our houses were not houses; they were human beings.

At this point the visuals shift from the interior of a simple, crowded South African home to the rubble of a destroyed Palestinian home with mounds of clothing strung out suggesting bodies and piles of cement and twisted rebar revealing the skeletal structure of the demolished home. The substance of the two peoples' experiences is again merged as against that Palestinian visual, the South African poet remembers, 'I saw bones, and blood, and brains, and veins.' The broken home becomes a broken body. The film closes with an Israeli activist asserting that Palestinian homes are being demolished because Israel wants their land and wants to confine them in little islands we call a Bantustan.

The film has opened with a twinned context, directly attacking the claim that the use of the apartheid analogy is oversimplified and lacking context. Through the use of visual evidence, South African criteria, and South African eyewitness comparatives, the film sets authority for the analogic claims. Logical evidence is linked with analogical emotion and perspective. The application of analogy that might initially be seen as incongruous, or certainly understood as controversial, is carefully structured in the film to seem apt and justified, not hypothetical, exaggerated, or inappropriate.

Neither of the other winning films directly argues the veracity of the analogy. Instead, both films focus on the wall/fence constructed by the Israeli government. While Israeli government language typically refers to the structure as a security wall or an anti-terrorist fence, Palestinians routinely call it the apartheid wall. In this analysis, I will adopt the more neutral language sometimes employed: the separation wall.

The two remaining films present that wall as an embodiment of occupation oppression, yet both films are essentially narratives of hope and resistance. Rather than defining an apartheid condition, these two films both offer responses to that condition. Both seek to win audience identification with the Palestinian sufferers in the narratives. For Burke (1969, pp. 19ff) identification is a central aspect of rhetoric. In identification the rhetor and the audience are shown to have common interests, values or pieties. This last term, for Burke (1984), is a societal understanding of how things 'ought to be' (p. 71), of '*what properly goes with what*' (p. 74, emphasis in the original). Pieties undergird and delineate the social order; to identify with another person, to express common pieties, is to share an understanding of how the world should be. Both of the remaining films address the apartheid analogy by examining cases that demonstrate the violation of commonly accepted pieties.

Palestinian Jury Winner: Identification, Piety and Family

The second film, *Confronting the Wall: Art and Resistance in Palestine* (Greig), is excerpted from a longer film of the same name produced in 2007. This short version, just over eight minutes in length, was selected for the Palestinian jury prize. [A current site posting (itisapartheid.info) of the winners reverses the labeling of the global prize and Palestinian prize winners, but an earlier announcement and posting indicates the selection as I have indicated. I confirmed the correctness of this earlier designation in a private e-mail (Colbath-Hess) from one of the contest organizers.] This film celebrates the essential Palestinian piety, *sumud* or steadfastness in commitment, as that piety is exhibited by a family living behind the wall. The film shows the wall as a central physical element in the policy structure that governs Palestinian life. Presented as punitive in form and placement, the wall is portrayed as an artificial construction that requires the destruction of the natural and further separates people from the natural communal condition of village life. The family confronts this barrier.

The film opens as two Palestinian schoolgirls hurry through a metal gate that a boy locks behind them. The image is recalled as the father of the family central to this narrative speaks of Palestinian life as being like a prison. He tells viewers that Palestinians live inside 'cells,' in 'rooms,' in 'sectors,' but all within a 'prison.' His description resembles the accounts of movement control related to apartheid in the first film, but no specific reference is made to that parallel here. The wall is simply presented as a massive physical blockage controlling population movement. For Palestinians the existence of the wall establishes the character of the occupation: the substance of the Palestinian ruled territory within that wall is not a freely governed state, but a form of prison. Palestine, in its many separated segments cut apart by the wall and other blockages, is a series of tightly controlled prison cells. It is left to the viewer to draw the further link to the Bantustans of South Africa.

In the film, one family's experience is made to exemplify the life of all Palestinians. The aptness of the story is clear from the selection of the film as a winner by the Palestinian jury. While this story would be the story for all Palestinians, the father calls for the audience to identify with his family, 'Anyone looking at our situation must think in terms of their own life.' He implicitly asks for a consideration of shared values: property ownership, the beauty of nature, the joy of children, freedom of

movement, freedom from fear. His story asks the audience to consider the loss of these things.

A family home is built in 1972. Six years later village land is confiscated for the building of an Israeli settlement. The father recounts that the settlers grew increasingly demanding, eventually calling on the Palestinian villagers to go away and leave the land to the settlers. The father describes a fear that drives these demands, in essence a settler belief that they must annihilate the Palestinians or the Palestinians will annihilate the settlers. The father dismisses this concern as groundless, thus asserting that the family has been effectively imprisoned because of an unreasonable fear.

The victimization of Palestinians is established with the story of the wall itself as the ultimate structure of oppression. The building of the mechanical, barren wall requires the destruction of the garden nurseries as well as the olive, citrus, and decorative trees that belonged to the family. Their green world is destroyed by the wall. Because the family refused to move, the wall in front of their home is in its most oppressive form: a block wall segment over twenty feet high and two hundred forty feet long. Beyond that strip it takes the form of a massive fence, but at the spot where the family lives the wall form seems designed to increase their sense of isolation as it renders their world barren and denies them a view of their village friends from whom they are now separated. The family is described as imprisoned in their own home and fearful that they will lose that home to the settlers. The narratives of land confiscation and house demolition familiar from the first film are represented in one detailed narrative here as this particular family is portrayed as the victimized Palestinian *every family*.

The story then shifts from a focus on oppression to resistance. The wall and the family's outlook are transformed when a nonviolent resistance group comes to paint a mural on the segment of the separation wall that blocks the family view. Although the painters are able to paint for only a few hours before the Israeli army orders them to leave, we are told the children now begin to play outside again; they are no longer so depressed. The painters return the following year for a few more hours of work covering bleak gray slabs with images of rolling green hills, fruit trees, and a blazing phoenix flying up into a bright blue sky. The painting stops again when the army threatens to take away the key to the small gate that allows the family to leave their imprisoned home. The mural painting has stopped, but the hope created by the mural remains as the once fearful mother, now takes the leftover paint of the mural's blue sky to paint the rooms of her house. A source of transforming hope has been found in the midst of the prison. The film ends with the assertion, 'To continue to live is to resist.'

A sign naming the wall 'a weapon of mass destruction' is included in one image of a child in the house. The narrative of the film reveals how art has helped a family resist that weapon. They have retained the Palestinian *sumud*, steadfastness, refusing to give up their home and their land even though it has been rendered barren by the Israelis in the building of the wall of separation. The family has found the hope needed for persistence and survival in an art that at least restores a semblance of the life and the land they have lost. The art enables them to continue to resist.

This is a quintessential Palestinian story, one with which many would identify as it portrays their love of family, their connectedness to the land, and their victimization. It is a narrative of loss, but also one of determination and hope. Whether an outside audience would necessarily agree that the film presents a depiction of apartheid is less

certain, although it clearly depicts the separation of peoples, the control of population movement, and the control of resources: the criteria set forth in the first film. Here the argument of the analogy is assumed, implicit. If the viewing audience is to see this as representative of apartheid, then the viewers must enthymematically make the links that are not explicitly argued within the film; the viewers must supply the understood values and knowledge that complete and legitimize the argument. This is a film chosen by a Palestinian audience for whom the enthymemes are automatic; it tells their story of their perceived apartheid. Confiscation, oppression, and resistance through *sumud* are the heart of their narrative.

Global Jury Winner: Identification, Injustice, and Resistance

The third film, winner of the global jury prize, is the almost seven minute long *Ali Wall* (Al Azzeh, 2010); it is a Palestinian production from the Lajee Center in a community greatly affected by the separation wall. Again the wall becomes the ultimate symbol of the apartheid structure that the film narrative understands to be imposed by the Israeli occupation. While *Confronting the Wall* focuses on one family's experience, *Ali Wall* is the narrative of one young man's life in response to the wall. It is again a narrative that invites identification as it evokes shared values and pieties that are challenged by the wall. The army, the Israeli justice system, and the wall itself are presented as the villains that are understood to unreasonably restrict Ali's life.

The film opens with establishing shots of a landscape of houses amidst olive trees and agricultural terraces; these are calm, open, traditional West Bank images reflecting life before the wall. The scene shifts to a Palestinian youth with a slight smile dressed in jeans and a windbreaker; he is walking down a narrow street talking about growing up in Aida refugee camp and playing soccer with his friends in land near the camp. The setting differs, but the essential story could be most any boy. As we see him innocently clowning with a friend on a street corner, Ali explains the boys spent most of their time in the field, but in 2002 'the Israeli occupation closed off the area with barbed wire to stop the workers and the people from harvesting the olive trees.' The occupation forces are named as an enemy other, referenced not as a people, but as an abstract force. That faceless group is presented as separating real people from their olives, a crop central to their life and culture. Implicit in the film, but perhaps unknown to many in the global jury that selected the film, is the unstated potential result of this land closure; by preventing farming in preventing the harvest, the land becomes subject to state confiscation as unused land. For Ali, the other Palestinians, and the peace activists who hear his story, the barbed wire fencing represents an element of apartheid: the takeover of land possessed by one group for use by another, more privileged group. For less knowledgeable viewers this might simply seem a case of misfortune; children everywhere lose beloved playgrounds for varied reasons.

At this point the story turns darker. The children, deprived of their soccer field, now throw stones at the soldiers after school. Play has been replaced with a more hostile and dangerous occupation: the boys throw stones, the soldiers retaliate with gunfire, 'and there were martyrs.' The separation structure inherent in apartheid is claiming victims in the narrative as the boys die.

Framed through a shot of massive blocks for the separation wall, a structure that symbolizes for Palestinians the restriction of movement and land confiscation associated with apartheid, we see construction equipment next to an olive grove. Again a story element familiar to Palestinians and activists is visually implied but not explicitly told: these olive trees, like many others in the path of the wall will be uprooted. Ali's narration parallels both the construction and the confiscation: 'We built a new playground, but they took the new one, too.' And the boys began throwing stones after school. The enthymematic invitation to identification is clear: presumably, if children anywhere don't have a constructive form of play, they may get in trouble. Ali's resulting trouble is distinct, constructive, and nonviolent; working with a friend, he builds a ladder that reaches the top of the wall. He then hangs a Palestinian flag on the wall. He presents this as 'a message to the occupation, that "Whatever you do, I will climb up the Wall!"' The accompanying visual image, a mural of a crane with a wrecking ball pounding into a human heart, underscores the oppressive character of the wall.

When the army comes to the family home a few days later at 4 a.m., Ali is taken. His narrative of the arrest seeks to build sympathy: he is only sixteen, too young to have an identification card. He is religious, linking the time of his arrest to the morning call for prayer. He is nonviolent; without the knife the soldiers expect him to have. He is threatened with automatic weapons and abused in jail for fourteen days before being taken to court where a judge sentences him to eight years 'just for putting our flag on the wall.' The visual cuts to the wall segment with its mural of the battered heart and another graffiti image of Hanthala, an iconic cartoon image of a Palestinian boy, looking toward a free Palestine beyond the wall. The youth Ali has become Hanthala: imprisoned, sometimes impudent, but hopeful.

Ali appeals his sentence and is told by the judge 'that if I were older, he would have given me at least 19 years.' When Ali objects that he had done nothing wrong, the judge asserts that he has, and sentences him to eight years. The implication is clear: the justice system is unjust. The sentence, eight years for hanging a flag it is no longer illegal to display, is unreasonable.

Ali stresses the punishment that accompanies imprisonment: 'humiliation' and 'torture' for him, 'disgrace' for visiting family members who will, despite youth or gender, be strip-searched. Again the stress is placed on an unnecessarily oppressive legal system.

Ali recounts that he was part of a prisoner release agreement after only two years. Amid scenes of village celebration with flags waving, banners flying, and men in conversation, Ali affirms,

If I have the chance to raise the flag on again on the wall, then I'll do it, and if I can I will raise it in my home village. I wish I could return to my home village. The village where my grandparents grew up.

With that reminder that his family has already been uprooted and removed from their land, the story ends. The credits roll past an image of two youths with a ladder at the wall and a flag at the top.

This film narrative, like that of the second film, does not directly assert the apartheid analogy. Instead, it assumes that certain characteristics will be understood as indicative of apartheid: confiscation of land, barriers to movement, degrading

treatment, an unjust legal system. Ali is established as sympathetic: clean-cut, likeable, the trouble he causes would typically be considered mischief rather than crime. He is neither violent, nor destructive. He seems like the perfect son and brother. In a system of Burkean piety, Ali's behavior seems appropriate, while the legal response is unreasonable and impious. Ali is the victim in a narrative of apartheid, but the story ends, like the second film, on a note of Palestinian *sumud*: Ali will again hand the flag. The resistance against perceived oppression will continue, and continue nonviolently.

The wall is the ultimate physical presence of the occupation, the quintessential symbol of an apartheid governing structure, for Palestinians. The clean-cut youth of the third film cannot tear it down, but he can mark it with a spirit of resistance. The nonviolence of his actions, the winsomeness of his manner and appearance, and the disjuncture of the punishment create a compelling narrative.

Conclusion

So, in what ways do the three winning films engage the apartheid analogy? Can they overcome the charge that such potentially demonizing terms result in a simple dualism without engaged history? Are their narratives, rooted in a controversial analogy, too limited in perspective to be believable argument?

In writing of the implicit moral weighting of speech when used by people acting together, Kenneth Burke (1984) asserts,

Morals, shaped by the form and needs of action, become man's most natural implement when exhorting to action. As implicit in censorial words, they are the linguistic projection of our bodily tools and weapons. Morals are fists. An issue, raised to a plane of moral indignation, is wholly combative in its choice of means. From this point of view, the moral elements in our vocabulary are symbolic warfare. To the handling of complex cultural issues we bring the equipment of the jungle. With the 'censorial appellative' of righteousness, one pardons or smites. (p. 192)

In the context of the Israel/Palestine conflict, the term *apartheid* is a fist, a very 'censorial appellative,' employed in these films in nonviolent, but very real warfare as the filmmakers struggle to make their judgment acceptable to a wider world. The term is a powerful label and a dangerous weapon, but the three short films offers ways through identification with shared pieties, linkage with twinned visual evidence, and unbiased eyewitness authority that the power of the term can be harnessed for public moral argument.

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