

C.VI.4. Defining Moments in Israeli Cinema

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This short overview of Israeli cinema presents some of its defining moments that have faithfully rendered the discourses on national identity, the lingering memory of the Holocaust and the diverse ethnic-cultural challenges that Israel has faced over the decades. A number of representative films of National Cinema will be referred to insofar as the films' perspectives serve to some extent as an allegory of Israeli politics and society.

Israeli cinema of the last decade has produced a crop of films that interrogate the country's past and present. During this „rebirth” of Israeli cinema, films such as Joseph Cedar's *Footnote* (2012), a bemusing story of father and son entangled in an academic strife, capped a string of nominations of Israeli films for the Best Foreign Film Oscar as well as numerous distinguished prizes. Established as one of the promising cinemas during the last decade, Israeli cinema has succeeded in transcending the one-dimensional perceptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict in western media by intriguingly portraying the often contradictory Israeli realities and its collective identities.

Rebirth and Identity Politics: 1948-1967

Post-1948 Israeli cinema was essentially the successor of pre-state Pioneer Cinema, which has purported Zionism's utopian figures, such as the inherently socialist Kibbutz and the heroism of the Halutz (pre-1948 Zionist pioneers). As film scholar Ella Shohat describes:

[...] the majority of the realist Zionist films, similar to the realist-socialist films, determined an idealization process, whether through a central heroic figure [...] or whether through interpretative, sentimentally dramatic music. [...] Similar to Soviet films [...], early Israeli films reflect a constant subordination of representation to ideological and edifying demands.¹

Similarly, film historian Nurit Gertz points out that post-1948 films were instrumental in forging the new-born nation's Zionist identity as a cohesive, masculine and active identity of „Hebrew Labor“.

¹ Shohat, Ella: *Israeli Cinema: History and Ideology*. Tel Aviv 1991 (Hebrew), p.30.

The majority of early Israeli films is not perceived as an independent art form but rather as a propagandist tool to promote Zionism as the Jewish renaissance in the Middle East by blurring any perception of heterogeneity as exemplified in films such as the iconic *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (Thorold Dickinson, 1955). The patriotic drama genre served to reassert the narrative of the dominant Labour Movement by negating not only the Palestinian population² but also the Jewish diaspora identity, namely that of Holocaust survivors and their reluctant need to be absorbed into the Zionist ethos by ridding themselves from their previous identity.³

By rearranging different identities, early Zionist discourse has established an „identity hierarchy” that facilitated the appearance of a hegemonic Zionist Ashkenazi elite and the Sabra.⁴ This was famously encapsulated in Ephraim Kishon's *Sallah Shabati* (1964), which essentially satirized Zionism's difficult task in metamorphosing the notion of a „Jew“ into an „Israeli identity“ while giving expression to the sensibilities of other sectors in Israeli society.⁵

The Ambiguity of Military Triumph: 1967-1973

The identification between the social-democratic ruling Labour Party and the Zionist project has become not only a sentimental issue, but an ideological one. However, the impact the Eichmann Trial (1961) had on the Holocaust memory as a pivot of national identity, and the political consequences of the Six-Days War (1967) gradually put the Labour Party under increasing scrutiny. Nevertheless at the same time, the popular Bourekas films – generic comedies that imitated Middle Eastern cinematic tradition – addressed the sensibilities of the multi-ethnic society, by emphasising their adaptation to modernity. Yet this collage of a heterogeneity of Israeli society was viewed through the prism of the Sabra.⁶

Paradoxically, the old model of the Zionist ethos was eroding throughout the 1960's. Despite the impact the victory in the Six-Days War had on Israeli society, the patriotic nationalist genre became rather anachronistic. Nevertheless, one iconic film resurrected the national ethos by negating again the stories of Holocaust survivors, as portrayed in the patriotic drama *He Walked Through the Fields* (Yossi Milo, 1967). Accurately translating Moshe Shamir's novel into filmic aesthetics, the film depicts

² On pre-state Israeli cinema see: Zimmerman, Moshe: *Signs of Cinema: The Story of Israeli Cinema between 1896-1948*. Tel Aviv 2001; Talmon, Miri/Peleg, Yaron. (Ed.): *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*. Introduction. Texas 2011; and Gertz, Nurit: *Holocaust Survivors, Aliens and Others in Israel Cinema and Literature*. Tel Aviv 2004 (Hebrew), pp.7-9.

³ Gertz, 2004, pp.14-16 and 77-81.

⁴ On the *Sabra* see: Almog, Oz: *Farewell to Srulik: Changing Values among the Israeli Elite*. Haifa 2004 (Hebrew). The *Sabra* is a term that refers to the first generations of Israeli who were born circa the 1930s and 1940s in mandatory Palestine and subsequently in Israel. They subscribed to the Zionist ethos of the Labour Movement and the communal ideals of the kibbutz.

⁵ Gertz, 2004, p.13. Featured nearly two decades after the Second World War, *Sallah Shabati* was an exception in Israel's movie industry, a rare version of comic relief for a country struggling with constant war. Kishon's depiction of an Oriental Jew's (Haim Topol) successful campaign against entrenched Labour Party's bureaucracy and Twentieth-century modernity transcended the Israeli predicament.

⁶ See: Kimmerling, Baruch: *The Invention and Decline of the Israeliness: State, Society and the Military*. Berkeley 2001.

the growing friction between the different set of values of the Kibbutz and those of the military and between the individual (namely the Sabra) amid the axiomatic political instability and uncertainty in the Middle East.⁷

In contrast, the iconic depiction, *The Wooden Gun* (Roveh Huliot, Moshenson, 1979), which details the conflict between native-born Israelis and the newly arrived European Jewish refugees, accurately deflected the re-incorporation of Holocaust survivors in the search for an Israeli identity.⁸ Taken together with films such as *Halfon Hill Doesn't Answer* (Assi Dayan, 1976), it marked the shift from nationalist genre towards a „cohesive collective which coalesces out of a diverse and contested multi-ethnic and multicultural steaming melting pot.“⁹

Fracture and Labour's Decline: 1973-1992

In the aftermath of the 1973 Yom-Kippur War, Israel's Labour elite – the *Ahusalim*, to borrow the term from the Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling – gradually dissolved, culminating in its first loss in the Israeli elections of 1977 to the nationalist-liberal *Likud Party*. It seemed that Labour's entire belief-system was seen as being anachronistic in the eyes of many Israelis. To a large segment of Israeli society, the Labour Party seemed to have developed a set of characteristics, which may have decayed into innovation-sapping and convention producing traditions, implying rather that Post-Yom Kippur Israel has become a prisoner of its very real 1948-1967 success. As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, the enumerated sequence of assaults on Labour's *Ahusalim's* hegemony were intensified by *Gush Emunim*, the ultra-Orthodox, the Mizrahi Jews, the Arab-Israelis and the shift from a national collective towards an American capitalist individual orientation.

At the same time, the military quagmire in Lebanon in the Operation *Peace of Galilee* in 1982 and the subsequent eruption of the Palestinian uprising (1987), served as the perfect backdrop for Israeli film directors, conveyed their socio-political messages in an overt manner, particularly mirroring the overwhelming weight the First Intifada had on Israel's socio-political fabric. A number of film directors sought to demythologize the Zionist Gestalt, in which the socio-aesthetic collage integrated several ingredients of Israeli reality (Jewish-Arab relations, sectorial tensions, the Holocaust etc.) reflecting the nation's inability to settle its contradictions. Films such as *Behind Bars* (Uri Barbash, 1984), *Avanti Popolo* (Rafi Bukai, 1989) and *Cup Final* (Eran Riklis, 1991) were direct in their criticism of the political situation during the 1980s.¹⁰

Realizing the fracture Israeli identity politics has gone through, the tragic drama *Life According to Agfa* (Assi Dayan, 1992) told freely of what he conceived to be Israel's faults with the same swagger that he flaunted in his invention of himself.

⁷ Gertz, 2004, pp. 37-48.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Talmon, 2011, p. xiii. On the film *Roveh Huliot*, see: Gertz, 2004, pp. 46-48. On the Bourekas genre see: Zimmerman, Moshe: Hidden from Eye Sight Films: The Canonised and the Popularized in Contemporary Israeli Cinema. Tel Aviv 2008 (Hebrew), p. 48.

¹⁰ On Israeli cinema during the 1980's see: Talmon, 2011, p. xv; Utin, Pablo: The New Israeli Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers. Tel Aviv 2008, pp. 15-18.

Dayan not only encapsulated contemporary impatience with old Labour values, but rather stimulated it. Ultimately however, Dayan's melancholic rendition does not give any overt indicators of a Labour-*Ahusal* (Sabra) decline and of other sectors in society who absorbed into the Sabra ethos.¹¹

1993-to-date: Between a Peace Process and Politics of Stasis

One of the central characteristics of 1990s Israeli cinema was an internalization as critique on the Israeli Establishment, notably on the I.D.F (Israeli Defence Forces) as in Haim Buzaglo's *The Strawberry Season* (1991); the marriage institution as exemplified in Buzaglo's *Fictive Marriage* (1989) and *Shuru* (Shavi Gabisohn, 1990); the hedonistic, secular and detached urban life of Tel Aviv as portrayed in *Life According to Agfa* and Irit Linur's *Shirat Ha'Sirena*, (1994), a romantic comedy about the first Gulf War in Tel Aviv. Moreover, despite the assassination of Israel's Premier Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and the victorious election campaign by Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, the majority of Israeli film directors kept their ambiguity towards a stagnated Peace Process, rather turning into subtle personal stories.

This trend was further amplified with the gradual demise of *The Oslo Peace Process* and the subsequent outbreak of violence in September 2000.¹² Critical, if often contradictory, comments on Israeli politics, particularly on the corrosive influence of collective memory of Israel's wars, filled film productions by left-wing, liberal Labour oriented directors, such as Amos Gitai. The director's documentaries are overtly edifying, yet his feature films, most notably, *Kadosh* (1999), *Kippur* (2000) and *Kedma* (2002), which mesh documentary techniques into a fictional form, encapsulate some of the intriguing axioms of this Middle East conflict in cinema with narrative drive.¹³

Israel's Disengagement Genre and I-movies

A number of successful films during the last decade conveyed rather a covert message about Israel's socio-political matters by turning from the „political“ to the „personal“. Eitan Fox's *Walking on Water* (2001), Riklis' *The Syrian Bride* (2004), Eitan Fox's *The Bubble* (2006), *Cedar's Beaufort* (2007) and Eran Kolirin's *The Band's Visit* (2007) all mesh different dimensions of national memory with individual sensibilities about Israel's wars and its relations with the Palestinians.¹⁴

A number of recent successful Israeli films translated Israel's disengagement discourse about the I.D.F's unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, the

¹¹ Zimmerman, 2008, pp. 69-77 and 86-95. On changes in the values of Israel's Ashkenazi and Labour elite see: Zimmerman, 2008, pp.15-17; Kimmerling, Baruch: *The End of Ashkenazi Hegemony*. Jerusalem 2001 (Hebrew); and Almog, 2004.

¹² Utin, 2008 (Introduction).

¹³ On Amos Gitai see: Klein, Irma/Gitai, Amos: *Cinema, Politics, Aesthetics*. Tel Aviv 2003.

¹⁴ Utin, 2008, pp. 97-155, namely Utin's conversations with film directors Udi Aloni and Eitan Fox. On Riklis' *The Syrian Bride* see: pp. 269-285. On Palestinian cinema I refer to: Gertz, Nurit/Khleifi, George: *Landscape in Mist: Space and Memory in Palestinian Cinema*. Tel Aviv 2006 (Hebrew).

building of the controversial Separation Wall in the disputed territories and the 2005 unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip into cinematic aesthetics and dialogues. Described by film expert Pablo Utin as a disengagement genre, these films correlate their directors' „aesthetics of narrowness“ and the political discourse as evident in Riklis' *Lemon Tree* (2008), an allegory of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The same internalized narrative is told in *Cedar's Beaufort*, a depiction of Israel's last days in south Lebanon, in which the enemy and conflict constantly remains outside the frame.¹⁵

The other dominant cinematic trend that has established itself predominantly in recent years, are the so-called I-movies, partly-documentary films that explore multiple facets of the director's sensibilities. The first-person film documentaries are a U-turn toward subjectivism, as exemplified in Avi Mograbi's modern classic *How I Learned to Overcome my Fear and Love Arik Sharon* (1997) and in Ari Folman's animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008).¹⁶

In explaining to what extent the director's purpose for the film as a whole determines whether the films are representative of a genre or the exposition of a methodology, Duvdevani argues that the common denominator in recent Israeli autobiographical films is that they serve as a vehicle of confessing deep-seated feelings of what he broadly and controversially terms „Zionist guilt syndrome“¹⁷. By focusing on Israel's historical tipping points such as the military interventions in the Lebanon, Duvdevani stresses that these cinematic variations have different narrative indicators and unique styles that belong to the shooting-and-crying syndrome, mirroring Israel's trauma rather than the Palestinian or the Lebanese.¹⁸

Between De-escalation and Re-escalation

Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* is a good example for the preceding assertion. Folman's reconstruction of his individual memory as a young conscript in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon burgeons with the national memory. It is particularly acute as the film draws to a close and the animation format changes into the newsreels of the massacre. In *Beaufort*, on the other hand, it is the human face of war through the aesthetically narrow filming strategy and ambiance design that enhances a multi-laired criticism on Israel's strategic policies in Southern Lebanon in particular and on the changing nature of modern warfare in general. Subtle and precise, both films articulate Israel's constant necessity to navigate between various antithetical directions and the need to re-prioritize issues such as national security and welfare amid the axiomatic instability and the certain uncertainty in the region.

To the degree that these observations have proved unhelpful in reaffirming the effectiveness of film directors' chosen mode of portrayal, the historical and social events treated by Israeli film directors do make room for comedy or drama to step in

¹⁵ Utin, 2008, pp.17-27. On „aesthetics of disengagement“, pp 31-75 where Utin discusses *Cedar's Beaufort*, David Wallach's *Summer Holiday* and Kurilin's *The Band's Visit*.

¹⁶ Duvdevani, Shumlik: First Person Camera. Jerusalem 2010, Introduction and pp.28-35.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 103-104.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp.12-15 and 84-103. On *Waltz with Bashir* and the „Shooting-and-Crying“ critiques see: pp. 107-108.

and make the themes resonate to a wider public than that directly affected. Taken separately or together, contemporary Israeli cinema presents us with a sombre portrayal of the diction of Israeli history and politics.

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