

Beyond Despair: Through The Lens Of Palestinian And Israeli Filmmakers

Shirley Goldberg

One of the weirdest climaxes in cinematic history surely has to be that of *Ice*, the legendary black-and-white, micro-budget film made in 1970 by radical, American ex-patriot Robert Kramer. The storyline involves an urban guerrilla cell holed up during the winter, planning a spring offensive. The mood is fraught with ideological fervor, revolutionary theory and hardcore violence including graphic scenes of betrayal, assassination and castration.

Only after the season changes and the ice in the river breaks up furiously, do we learn the nature of this spring offensive. The heavily armed cell members storm an apartment building, take all the occupants hostage, and force them into an auditorium where they will be required to watch a group of films about revolution and discuss them afterwards.

Why does my mind slip back to this cinematic joke as I start to write an article about the realistic and insightful ways in which feature filmmakers from both Israel and Palestine have dealt with the seemingly intractable problems of their entangled histories? Because, quite simply, at some level—like Kramer and his naïve young Marxists—I believe in the power of art to humanize, to generate understanding and empathy, and to change the world. For that reason I wish I could force everyone who has been responsible for allowing this near-hopeless impasse to develop to watch these films and think about them. As well as everyone who has stood by, let the settlements metastasize, the walls be erected, the rockets launched, the bombs dropped, and did nothing to prevent it.

The obscenity of the Wall is Israel's expression of despair—just as the Intifadas and suicide bombers are a measure of Palestinian loss of hope. At the heart of the tragedy are two sets of victims, two groups of ethnically related people who claim the same small territory as their spiritual and historic homeland. The major powers, driven by their own agendas, have mishandled the problem from the beginning. Sixty years of bad decisions, bad timing, missed opportunities, ignored infractions of international law, and the wrong people in power at the wrong time have created such a deadlock that a two-state solution has become politically impossible and a one-state solution psychologically impossible.

Meanwhile the suffering and oppression of the Palestinians continue while Israel pays a huge price in terms of its moral health and international standing. Human rights groups throughout the world are comparing

the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory to the South African system of apartheid and are calling for boycott, sanctions and divestment. The Jewish people, who suffered the incomprehensible horrors of the Holocaust, and who, in their historic role of outsiders, have traditionally championed human rights, are now perceived as oppressors. Meanwhile, too, Washington's unquestioning support of Israel has aroused Arab anger and set the entire world on a course toward global conflict. What can possibly turn this human disaster around short of the "divine intervention," which Palestinian director Elia Suleiman has postulated with dark absurdity in his film of that name?

Some of the strongest voices for reason and peace, voices with the greatest potential to be heard above all the white noise of ideological distraction are those of the Israeli and Palestinian filmmakers who are confronting the basic humanity of people who are caught up in the struggle on both sides. The feature film is a uniquely humanistic medium for intercultural understanding. In the one-to-one relationship with a screen close-up, there is no distancing, no veil of abstraction, no need for interpretation. Who can ever forget the grieving mother on *Potemkin's* Odessa Steps? Or the worried father's ravaged face in *Bicycle Thieves*?

The Foundation Myth and Other Narratives of Nationhood

The inspiring story of the establishment of Israel as a Jewish homeland is well known. It recounts how the battered survivors of the Holocaust, together with Jews from every part of the world, gathered as pioneers in this empty, barren parcel of land and struggled heroically to make the desert bloom. The trouble with this story—as with most national myths—is that it's only partially true. The land wasn't empty. Nor was it barren and unused. The holiday that the Israelis celebrate as Independence Day is the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) for the Palestinians.

The late Edward Said lamented the "embargo on Arab literature" (to which must be added an "embargo on Arab film"), a kind of cultural cold war stretching back to the Crusades that has tried to render the "other" invisible by denying access to his words and images or any information that might not conform to our preconceived stereotypes—that might, in fact, reveal his humanity. Aside from a handful of exotic classics, we have had very little exposure to the stories that Arab and Muslim cultures tell, their narratives of everyday experience, their constructs of

history and reality, their representations of self.

It took the Israeli social critic and filmmaker Amos Gitai to pit the opposing foundation myths against each other and dramatize the tragedy. For the countless audiences who have been thrilled by the visionary story and heroic musical score of Leon Uris' *Exodus*, Gitai's 2002 film *Kedma* will come as a grim shock. Gitai, long a thorn in the side of Israeli authorities, makes it clear that Palestine in May 1948 was not an "empty" land. When the *Kedma*, a small, battered cargo ship, loaded with exhausted concentration camp survivors, arrives on its shores seven days before the declaration of Israeli statehood, those who manage to go ashore are pursued by armed British soldiers, charged with orders to send them back to sea. However, many of the refugees are rescued by a secret Jewish defense force made up of earlier Zionist settlers. And in turn they are recruited to terrorize and drive the Palestinian farmers and families out of their homes and villages and off the land they and their ancestors had lived on for centuries. The traumatized Jewish immigrants have escaped one war only to find themselves embroiled in another. *Kedma* offers a tragic vision of displaced people on the move, victims pursuing victims, culminating in two long, prophetic rants—one by Janusz, a Polish Jewish survivor on the breaking point of despair, and the other by Yussef, an elderly Palestinian farmer fleeing with his donkey, who vows that his people will stay. "We'll write poems. Our demonstrations will fill the streets. We'll fill the jails with our pride. Our outraged children will follow us, generation after generation."

Filling in the untold story of those generations is a sweeping, four-and-a-half hour epic from Egypt, made in 2004—*Bab El Chams, The Gate of the Sun*, sometimes translated as *The Door to the Sun*, directed by Yousry Nasrallah, protégé of Egypt's great filmmaker Youssef Chahine. Based on an award-winning, Lebanese novel of the same name by Elias Khoury, the story is told in flashbacks by the bedside of aging, comatose Younis. It begins in 1948 and follows fifty years of Palestinian history, years of rootlessness, being driven out of ancestral homes and subsequently driven multiple times from one refugee camp to another, years in which young Younis is transformed from peaceful villager to refugee and freedom fighter. The vision is complex and humane. The style — which echoes some of the narrative wonderment of the *Arabian Nights* — encompasses a love story, dream sequences, vivid historical drama, and elements of magical realism. The gate to the sun is Younis' hideout, a cave in a fairy tale forest, in essence a gateway to a fantasy Palestinian paradise — a dream that is slipping away throughout the film. Reviewer Ed Gonzalez calls the film a "heart-breaking passion play about Arab perseverance" (*Slant Magazine*).

In this sad conflict everyone claims victimhood. A fundamental element of the Jewish narrative has been the Holocaust. How it inevitably shaped the nascent state

of Israel has been captured unforgettably in two powerful Israeli films — Eli Cohen's *Summer of Aviya* (1988) and its sequel *Under the Domim Tree* (1994). Together they tell the story of the thousands of traumatized children who had been orphaned by the Holocaust, relocated to Israel, and raised communally in Kibbutz-style villages. All their stories are tragic. Ten-year-old Aviya's father is missing in Europe and presumed dead, and her delusional mother has been institutionalized. The children relive their nightmares, and many secretly fantasize about one day being reunited with their family. In the sequel, the minimalism and misery of the earlier film give way to a lush landscape and a nostalgic golden glow as the children who are now teenagers begin to mature into the shining future citizens of the nation.

The Wars

Another fundamental strand in the national narrative of the Israeli state has been its wars with its Arab neighbours and its evolution into a military and occupying power. The story has inspired a whole genre of insightful Israeli war films—Amos Gitai's *Kippur* (2000), Eran Riklis' *Cup Final* (1991), Eli Cohen's *Ricochet* (1986), Joseph Cedar's *Beaufort* (2007), Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir* (2008). Overall—and there are exceptions — these films are anti-war without being specifically critical of Israel's policies. *Kippur*, based on the brief Yom Kippur War of 1973 in which Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on the Sinai and the Golan Heights, was a war in which the director himself had served. Stressing the confusion, chaos, violence, agony, and sheer awfulness of war, Gitai charts the brutal journey of a naïve, patriotic young reservist from idealism to cynicism. In the poetic and powerful *Cup Final*, a small, hopelessly out-manned PLO squad in Lebanon captures an Israeli reservist and tries against all odds to take him alive to Beirut for a prisoner exchange. The simultaneous World Soccer match in Barcelona triggers an awareness of their common humanity with results that are humorous, suspenseful, and ultimately devastating.

The starkly realistic *Ricochet*, which also takes place during the 1982 war in Lebanon, deals directly with the moral dilemmas faced by a platoon of Israeli soldiers confronting hostile guerilla fighters in a crowded civilian area. Unfortunately nothing much has changed in the subsequent decades. Nor has anything changed with *Beaufort*—a lean, classic, universal statement about the futility of war. A small group of Israelis are stationed on a hill in Southern Lebanon in a fortress built during the Crusades. After capturing the fortress during the 1982 invasion, Israeli forces occupied it continually until their withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. At the time of the film, the men are nervously awaiting orders to blow everything up and leave. The one road out has undoubtedly been mined. Hezbollah—anxious to make the Israeli departure look like

a desperate retreat—have increased their random shelling. Considering the lives lost in taking the fortress in the first place, occupying it all these years, only to give it up—one must ask, “What was the point?”

During the 1982 Lebanon invasion, some 3,000 vulnerable Palestinian civilians were massacred in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut. The slaughter was committed by Lebanon’s Phalangist militia, but in *Waltz With Bashir* (reviewed, Spring 2009, *Humanist Perspectives*), director Ari Folman explores his own complicity as a young recruit, and that of Israel. All of these films ask tough questions.

But the film that really probes the deep and troubling moral contradictions behind Israel’s military stance is a little-known but extremely revealing, five-hour documentary *Tsahal* (1994) by the legendary French director Claude Lanzmann. Lanzmann previously spent eleven years making *Shoah* (1985), which is nine-and-a-half hours long and generally regarded as the definitive film about the Holocaust.

In *Tsahal* (the Hebrew acronym for the Israeli Defense Force or IDF), Lanzmann traces—through many voices, many points of view—the evolution of Israel’s citizen army from its traditionally heroic, against-all-odds origins to the troubling questions of today: the occupation of Arab lands, the stubborn determination of settlers, even the development of an official code defining the allowable limits of torture during interrogation. It’s a textbook illustration of the moral cost of militarization to a society.

As the creator of *Shoah*, Lanzmann was singularly trusted. Doors flew open, and people spoke with astonishing candor. Officers recount the anecdotes and anguishes of their own experience: the War of Independence in 1948, the Sinai War of 1956, the six Day War of 1967, the War of Attrition in 1968-70, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and the Lebanese War of 1982—as well as decades of perpetual threat. They are charismatic, confident, talking comfortably about their fears, guilts, and bereavements.

As they speak, the unique nature of the Israeli dilemma takes shape: the shock of the Holocaust, broken families, dislocated people, the determination never to be victim again, the gift of a homeland in a hostile area claimed by other people, the small population surrounded by enemies, the basically indefensible nature of the territory.

The camera lingers on the faces of the witnesses and wanders over the contested landscapes. Lanzmann remains out of sight; and his part of the dialogue, unrecorded. Only as the story moves forward, do we become aware of his distanced, but controlling presence—first by people addressing him, then by occasionally hearing his comments, and eventually by seeing him in the frame. In effect the film moves from the objective to the subjective, the idealized history to the questioning of present poli-

cies.

While the earlier part examines the history of Israel’s militarization, the later part addresses the ramifications of that militarization. However, an alarm has already been sounded by a group of young tank soldiers training in the desert—a group that could readily be confused with the cast of HBO’s *Generation Kill* long before David Simon dreamed up his disturbing vision of the video-game generation waging a soulless real war in Iraq. One soldier in *Tsahal* declares that the tank is like a home to him—in fact, more so than his own home. He goes on to compare the shooting to music, and to a game: “When you shoot, you don’t think about the other side.”

The difference between his attitude and that of the older generation who fought in what are commonly considered Israel’s wars of survival is dramatically underscored by a subsequent speaker recalling his moral turmoil as a young tank soldier fighting for the first time in a town where he would be responsible for killing people and destroying homes.

Among the speakers are two dissident Israeli writers: David Grossman who identifies the war in Lebanon as the turning point since, for the first time, the nation’s survival was not at stake; and Amos Oz who likens the concept of a civil, righteous occupation to that of a friendly rape.

The two most troubling revelations occur near the end. In one, Major General Schlomo Gazit explains the Landau Report, which essentially justified the use of torture (always referred to euphemistically as “pressure”). Gazit seems chillingly confident of Israel’s moral position. In another interview, Avigdor Feldman, a lawyer defending Arab victims, counters passionately by arguing that when a government defines allowable levels of pain, “you can kiss goodbye to civilization.”

The final problematic interview is with a smiling settler, blithely intent upon building a new Jewish community on Arab land. In response to probing questions, he argues that he has every right to that land, that the whole world is against him settling there because the whole world is against Jews, and that he will never leave of his own free will.

No matter where one hovers ideologically in regard to Israel, or how entrenched one’s position may be, *Tsahal* forces reexamination. Lanzmann is not interested in assigning guilt. He tends to be overly idealistic about the concept of Israel, but he knows how complicated the issues are and understands the tragic mistakes that have been made.

The Settlers

While Amos Gitai drew a damning portrait of the Ultra-Orthodox in *Kadosh* (1999), few other Israeli films refer to that segment of society. Most of the filmmakers who are known in the West come from the secular and

progressive strata. For that reason, *Time of Favor (Ha-Hesder, 2000)*, Joseph Cedar's first feature film, is particularly interesting. Cedar, a modern, yeshiva-educated, Orthodox Jew, was born in New York City in 1968 but emigrated with his parents and six siblings when he was five years old to Jerusalem where he lived in the same areas, had the same friends, and went to the same schools as the young radical Egal Amir who assassinated Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin in order to disrupt the peace process.

Profoundly shaken by that blinding act of terror, Cedar created an intensely suspenseful and thoughtful thriller by combining his own image of young Amir with the actual details of a thwarted conspiracy to plant bombs in the underground tunnels beneath the Dome of the Rock (the holiest Islamic shrine in Jerusalem) and Al Aqsa Mosque, to ignite the entire Arab world. To write the script Cedar lived for two years in a nearby, self-contained, desolate Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank where the action of the story takes place. Not only does he criticize the Settler Movement, he also questions the role of a charismatic, messianic Rabbi (played by actor/director Asi Dayan, son of Israel's revered military hero Moshe Dayan) who has, perhaps unwittingly, inspired this devout and unstable student to institute a plot to reclaim the Temple Mount for the Jews.

Quantifying Despair: Khleifi and the First Intifada

Michel Khleifi's Palestinian trilogy of *Wedding in Galilee* (1988), *Canticle of Stones* (1990), and *The Tale of Three Lost Jewels* (1994) brackets the years of the first Intifada and charts a tragic trajectory of diminishing chances for an equitable political solution and declining hope, even, of cultural survival for the Palestinians. Khleifi, who was born in Nazareth and lives in exile in Belgium, is the preeminent chronicler of the Palestinian experience. The striking deterioration between the first and last of these three films is registered in a variety of narrative and cinematic strategies. In *Wedding*, viewpoint and characterization are manipulated to condemn the fact of the military occupation in which the players are helplessly caught up. The viewpoint shifts back and forth. Each side has its provocateurs, its pragmatists, and people of good will. Humane gestures emanate from both sides—as well as suspicions and inflammatory actions.

In *Three Lost Jewels*, the first feature film to be made in the Gaza Strip, the viewpoint is always Palestinian. The Israeli army has become the nameless, faceless, soulless enemy – its ominous presence insistently noted by tanks full of armed soldiers roaring by, shots ringing out near and far, helicopters swooping low.

The symbolic gender and family roles provide a second crucial contrast between the two films. *Wedding* depicts an intact, prosperous, extended Palestinian family of three generations trying to maintain its traditions—spe-

cifically the marriage ritual—under difficult circumstances. The dignified and honorable patriarch seems to have enough intellectual flexibility to cope with change and compromise. The generation of his elder son, however, has been badly damaged. The symbolic manifestation of this dysfunction is the son's inability to consummate his marriage. By contrast, the younger son—a beautiful male child of about twelve—is clearly the father's hope for the future. In off-screen soliloquies, the father speaks poetically to the sleeping child. At the end of the film, late at night with the wedding finally over, the army jeeps roaring off and the curfew reestablished, the child escapes in the confusion, runs off through the night to a favorite place in the countryside where he lies back, with a smile on his face, to watch the first streak of dawn in the sky.

The Tale of Three Lost Jewels, by contrast, shows us an impoverished, diminished family in a Gaza refugee camp. Halfway through the film, the father is released from prison – a broken man who sits crumpled on the couch letting out strange, inhuman sounds from time to time. The elder son, a member of an illegal guerrilla organization, is a completely non-functioning member of the society hiding in the countryside. His friends are either dead or in prison or on the run. Finally—and most troubling—is the calculated contrast in the fate of the younger son, again an extraordinarily beautiful 12-year-old who has been an enormous support to his mother and who obviously represents the hope for the future. He too at the end finds himself out at night alone during curfew. But, unlike his luckier counterpart in the earlier film, he is found by the military and shot cold-bloodedly.

However, this literal reading overlooks an ambiguity in the text that allows an alternative allegorical reading, focusing on the optimism and resilience of children even under the most brutal of circumstances. By this reading we see a story of magical realism featuring a mythical quest, a wise old man, a mysterious scroll, death and resurrection set against a backdrop of dark political violence. At this time alternate versions of the film are circulating. My comments are based on the original 1994 version, entitled *The Tale of Three Lost Jewels*, which I saw at the Vancouver International Film Festival and which I imagine must be truer to Khleifi's intentions than subsequent variations. A second version, entitled *The Tale of the Three Jewels*, of similar length, also written and directed by Michel Khleifi, came out in 1995. In a typical review this subsequent film has been described as “a pure and gentle depiction of growing up in an unusual place” —which is definitely not the film I saw. However, a clue to the transformation is supplied by a third and much shorter version of the film that has been shown on B.C.'s Knowledge Network. Distributed by Bullfrog Films, it is marketed as a “Fantasy Adventure” film for tenth to twelfth grade students. In this version the war and occupation go on, but everything that is negative towards the Israel-

lis or genuinely disturbing has been excised. Yet further evidence of the difficulty to find an outlet for a film that speaks honestly about the Palestinian experience.

Khleifi's women are the strong characters—as they tend to be in most Palestinian cinema. The mother figure, who takes charge and holds the family together, is played by the same actress seen as the mother in *Wedding in Galilee*. The bride in *Galilee* takes her own virginity to preserve her impotent husband's family honor with a display of blood-stained sheets from the wedding bed. The flirtatious, non-traditional daughter helps to prevent a stupid terrorist act plotted by the groom's friends. And the young, kibbutz-raised female soldier enters into a kind of symbolic communion with the Palestinian women. This focus on women reflects the classic pattern of oppressed minorities, with the strengthening of the female role and the disempowerment of the male.

In the middle film of the Intifada trilogy, *Canticle of Stones*, Khleifi's message becomes far more direct, his anger more overt. In a mix of narrative and documentary, shaped as an extended homage to Alain Resnais' classic *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, he catalogues the humiliations and oppressions of the Palestinians and tells the story of the Intifada. In Resnais' film, a French actress on assignment in Hiroshima has an affair with a Japanese architect. Their time is divided between sightseeing—especially of sites and ceremonies related to the bomb—and long, sensuous sessions in bed in which she struggles to understand the horror of that first nuclear strike and in which he tries to explain rather angrily that no one could possibly understand if he or she were not there.

In *Canticle of Stones*, a forty-something Palestinian couple, who had been separated twenty years earlier when he was imprisoned by Israel for political activities and she fled to the United States, are reunited in Jerusalem. He is now an agricultural consultant and she an academic studying the meaning of sacrifice in Palestinian society. Together they explore the ancient city in the midst of its current political turmoil. And, in bed, much of their dialogue is an almost direct translation from Resnais' film except that the Israeli occupation substitutes for the bomb.

Other Emblems of Despair

After sixty years of unresolved conflict, hope for a humane and equitable solution has drained out of the area. In the films of Elia Suleiman, despair has moved beyond anger to an absurdist detachment, reminiscent of Jacques Tati and Buster Keaton. *Chronicle of a Disappearance* foretells the disappearance of Palestinian culture. Returning to his native Bethlehem, the director whimsically illustrates the sense of exile and cultural erasure he feels within his own homeland. In *Divine Intervention*, Suleiman fights back against the endless frustration of the occupation and its barricades by floating a balloon adorned with the smiling face of Yas-

sir Arafat over the checkpoint and deep into Israeli territory. Later he fantasizes that his girlfriend—whom he can only meet in a parking lot because they live on opposite sides of a checkpoint—is actually a ninja warrior who can fly through the air and wipe out whole battalions of Israeli soldiers.

In *Paradise Now* director/co-writer Hany Abu-Assad takes on the controversial issue of the suicide bomber with objectivity and compassion. At the centre of the action are Said and Khalid, friends from childhood, working at a dead-end job in an auto mechanics shop in Nablus. At some time in the past, they have been recruited by a terrorist group for a suicide mission, and they have now been informed that it will take place in Tel Aviv within the next 24 hours. The process of preparation involves a shave and a haircut, dark suits and ties to make them look like settlers attending a wedding in Tel Aviv; detailed instructions; the strapping on of bombs; the making of heroic videotapes to be shown on TV later; and a ceremonial dinner—with “Last Supper” allusions.

Although they both accept the timetable and decision without hesitation, we inevitably wonder about their inner commitment. We know nothing about Khalid's personal life, but he seems the more cynical of the two saying “Under occupation we are already dead.” Said, slightly younger, more naïve, lives at home with a strong mother and siblings, and he has just acquired a beautiful, well-educated girlfriend who has spent most of her life in Morocco. As the daughter of a revered martyr, Suha would have preferred a living father. She argues with both of the men against self-martyrdom that she sees as contrary to Islam, as immoral because it harms innocent victims, and as counter-productive since it inspires retaliation.

Day dawns and the plan creaks into motion, but an important checkpoint connection fails, forcing a temporary retreat to Nablus, separating the two and offering an opportunity for reassessment. But—no more spoilers! You will need to see *Paradise Now* to find out what happens. It is an elegantly conceived film about an extraordinarily volatile subject. Hany Abu-Assad and his crew received threats from all sides for tackling the issue.

For the Palestinian writer/director filmmaking is an act of resistance—resistance against loss of homeland, culture, identity. For the Israeli the emphasis is more upon a nuanced and honest analysis of his own culture. In either case, these films need to be seen because they break down stereotypes, defy ideological impassés and help us think about old problems in new ways. Present strategies are not working. Art has an ability to cut through levels of denial, self-deception, misinformation and hopelessness. And, in the process, it clarifies the humane and moral imperatives of fairness and sharing.

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