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“Unsettled Returns: A Screening and Dialogue with Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan”

Negotiations: From a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace

review by Richard Fung

“People are saying, ‘be realistic, be realistic. We need two states, we need to separate: this is realistic.’ But realism has failed, so we should see what utopia can offer.” Thus reasoned Eyal Sivan during the lively question-and-answer period at “Unsettled Returns,” a cinematic and in-person dialogue between the Israeli filmmaker, best known for *The Specialist*, his acclaimed 1999 documentary on the 1961 trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann, and Michel Khleifi, whose *Wedding in Galilee*, the first fiction feature film directed by a Palestinian, won the 1987 International Critics’ Award at Cannes.

Sivan’s prescription typifies the provocative thinking that made *Negotiation’s* Saturday evening program one of the freshest and most defiantly hopeful events mounted in Toronto on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The event included the screening of an extended excerpt of a four hour and thirty minute, collaborative work-in-progress by Khleifi and Sivan, titled *Route 181, fragments of a journey in Palestine –Israel’* as well as an earlier short film by each of the directors.

Khleifi’s *Ma’aloul Celebrates Its Destruction* (1984) captures to great effect the fate of the Palestinian village of Ma’aloul, which was razed by the Israeli armed forces, its Christian and Muslim dwellers dispersed. Since then, the former inhabitants and their families have been allowed to return on only one day a year, the anniversary of Israel’s independence, when they hold a picnic among the ruins of their homes. Village elders recall the destruction of both their property and harmonious way of life, as youngsters scramble to savour and absorb their forbidden heritage in a single, precious day. Intercut with these scenes, a teacher in a Palestinian classroom explains to his teenage students the history of Palestine, the Holocaust and the creation of Israel. As the title suggests, the film’s tone is both wistful and biting ironic — and surprisingly generous.

By contrast, Eyal Sivan’s *Aqabat Jaber: Peace with No Return?* (1995), is sober and sobering. Sivan’s first film documented the Palestinian refugee camp of Aqabat Jaber just before the first Intifada, and now he returns a day after the Israeli military has left the region under Palestinian control. Its nominal status has changed but its inhabitants remain refugees



Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan in Toronto, 2003. Photo: Babak Salari.



Above: View of the segregation wall at Kalkyfia
Below: Israeli soldiers in Ramallah
Route 181, fragments of a journey in Palestine-Israel.
Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan, 2003, film stills.
Courtesy: the directors.

stranded in a camp. In one particularly wrenching interview, a young woman ponders her life and future, having known nothing but the dusty, desolate camp, devoid of facilities and entertainments, with all food and clothing rationed from the United Nations. Meanwhile, she yearns for the ancestral family home she has been barred from seeing. The film questions the prospects for peace without Israel's recognition of Palestinian refugees' right of return to their homeland, now within the state of Israel.

Route 181, the cornerstone of the evening's program, is a "road movie" that follows the directors along the imaginary borders proposed by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 for the partition of the British-ruled Palestine Mandate into a Jewish and an Arab state. Accepted by the Jews in Palestine, but neither by the Palestinian Arabs nor the Arab states, the Resolution passed by a majority of voting members, though it has been noted that in 1947, the year of its passage, much of Asia and almost all of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific were without voice at the UN, being colonies of Europe.

Travelling from south to north, the directors not only document the military apparatus and physical barriers deployed to separate Palestinians and Israelis, most notoriously the wall under construction by the government of Ariel Sharon, they demonstrate the contentious yet inextricable link between the two peoples. Unfortunately, the range of possible interactions seems limited, often taking the form of Israeli soldiers monitoring Palestinians at the frequent checkpoints, or Palestinian workers in the employ of Israelis, as in a candid interview with an Israeli archaeologist and his Palestinian work crew.

In the discussion period, Sivan used an anecdote to further illustrate how Israel functions as an "ethnocracy": approaching a checkpoint, the film's production manager, his sister, would stop only after being ordered to, and she would pull up right beside the soldier. Khleifi, on the other hand, would halt the vehicle 100 metres before the checkpoint and wait for the soldier to summon him. "This," Sivan explained, "is how [the soldier] knows who is Israeli and who is Palestinian." "But at the end of the shooting,"



Ma'aloul Celebrates Its Destruction, Michel Khleifi. Film still. Courtesy: Sindbad Films.

he continued, “Michel was acting like my sister. He drove through the checkpoint, shouting at the soldier, ‘you will say please.’ At that moment he stopped being Palestinian.”

Khleifi added, “This is not a problem of the soldier, but of the system... At its heart the Israeli system is a racist system, because it is an ethnic system.” He cautioned, however, against entrenched divisiveness and “dangerous ethnic, religious and racist developments [that are] not good for Palestinian or Arab society, nor for Israeli or Jewish society.” “The trauma of one is not against the trauma of the other,” he continued. “Two traumas can live together, but we must be able to express ourselves and be open.”

It is this commitment to justice and reconciliation that unites Khleifi and Sivan. They believe that progressive Israelis and Palestinians must work together, not in separate camps, to oppose the Occupation, to build a new project and to create a future in a bi-cultural, bi-national, secular state. This drives their art-making and, as Sivan explained it, the aim of

Route 181 “was not to give two visions, an Israeli vision and a Palestinian vision, but to try and give a common view of the space.” Yet, even this seemingly innocuous platform would be controversial among the ethnic and religious nationalists on both sides, not least among those committed to Israel as a Jewish state.

As this review is being written, the tentative truce between the Israeli government and Palestinian militants forged in the summer of 2003 is giving way to the familiar cycle of assassinations, suicide bombings, arrests and that peculiarly medieval Israeli practice of house demolitions — against which the rational, secular West remains mute. But if and when there is a just peace between Palestinians and Israelis, it will owe a debt to utopian dreamers like Khleifi and Sivan.

Richard Fung is a videomaker and writer, and teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

Notes

- 1 The film was screened under the tentative title *The Partition Line*. The film has since been retitled *Route 181*.