

Talk is Cheap Some Notes on Freedom of Speech and the Ethics of Listening in *Route 181* by Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan

Freedom is hot verbal currency these days and much is claimed or done in its name; it has become what in French would be called a *passé-partout*, a key to all doors. George W. Bush used the word freedom 42 times during his second inaugural address as US president earlier this year; the speech lasted only 21 minutes which amounts to two freedoms per minute. As an abstract and modern notion (i.e. not physical freedom from slavery or oppression) freedom is a product or indeed aim of the Enlightenment project; it was sloganised during the French revolution in *égalité, liberté, fraternité* (equality, freedom and familial/national ties) and canonized in the same year in relation to speech as the first amendment to the US constitution. Thus freedom of speech represents something like an after-thought, a belated realization, or indeed, a Derridean supplement... Since then, freedom of speech has been promoted to a fundamental human right and is now embedded in many constitutions and charters worldwide, often bundled with the right to information. Yet this double freedom of expression and information is by no means an absolute one; there are many interests, be they political or economic, that it may not interfere with. Moreover, while speech – if it is permitted – can come about as a spontaneous act, access to information on the other hand – even if it is considered a right – always takes place in a controlled environment. Not only if speech is to be free and informed is it dependent on access and thus subject to various control-mechanisms; also on much more subtle levels, many conditions are necessary for freedom of speech to be possible in reality. These political, cultural, educational, social and economic factors evade easy quantification. In *Archive Fever* Derrida notes how access to archives can be seen as a measure of democratization.² In addition, I would argue that conditions need to be created where newly accessed information can also be circulated freely and sensibly, that is, without being used as a propagandistic instrument. In allusion to Benjamin's historical index of recognizability,³ one could speak of a historical index of utterability; a marker of moments in time and place when certain things can be said.

For decades, many facts of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict have remained unspoken, not only in both communities but also internationally. While the phenomenon of the so-called 'new historians' has begun to demystify certain aspects of official history, much remains still unspoken.⁴ Moreover, in recent years there has certainly been a lot of talk about Israel/Palestine, and indeed leaders of the two communities have also begun to talk to each other (if only intermittently). However, the absence of real freedom of speech on both sides of the conflict can still crudely and sadly be measured by the fact that speaking their mind can (and has) cost people their lives.

Defying this, Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan set out to hear people speak about their experiences in this complicated land, tell their stories, convey their understanding of the present situation as well as their ideas of the past, their hopes for or resignation vis-à-vis the future. Traveling from the south to the north of Palestine/Israel on a virtual line which follows the UN borders of the never implemented 1947 partition plan (resolution 181), the film-makers encountered anonymous Israelis and Palestinians freely speaking their mind. In the project notes of *Route 181*, the four and a half hour filmic document of their journey, Khleifi and Sivan write: "The voices of those forgotten by official discourse will, we hope, be heard – the voices of those who nonetheless constitute the majority in both societies, those in whose name wars are fought." Viewers might not agree with what people say in the film; we might be shocked, surprised, saddened and hopeful. However, one of the most powerful reactions the film provokes stems from the sheer fact of hearing people speak; they dare say things which might be considered treacherous by some in their own communities. What we witness first and foremost is the act of faith constituted by free speech.

In the first chapter of his *On Interpretation*, Aristotle writes: "Every sentence is significant [...], but not every sentence is a statement-making sentence, but only those in which there is truth or falsity. There is not truth or falsity in all sentences: a prayer is a sentence but is neither true nor false. The present investigation deals with the statement-making sentence; the others we can dismiss, since consideration of them belongs rather to the study of rhetoric or poetry. (350BC/1928)" This linguistic 'snobbery' (or descriptive fallacy as it is called) remained largely unchallenged for over two thousand years. Amongst the first to oppose the Aristotelian prejudice against non-judgmental language was Thomas Reid who began considering other types of sentence in addition to judgments. Reid's technical term for prayers, promissings, warnings, forgivings, etc., is "social operations". Sometimes he also calls them "social acts", and opposes them to "solitary acts" such as judgments, intendings, deliberatings and desirings, which are characterized by the fact that it is not essential to them that they be expressed and by the fact that their performance does not presuppose another "intelligent being in the universe" in addition to the person who performs them (1894/1969).⁵ Therefore, social speech acts are significant for two reasons: not only are they independent from notions of truth and falsity, they actually dismiss these as irrelevant categories or classifications altogether. In addition, they introduce a vis-à-vis into the speech act, an addressee. The ear of the other, the act of listening is the condition, the *raison d'être* of this kind of speech. While the rights or wrongs of solitary speech acts belong to the realms of information and morality, the social speech act operates in the mode of address, prompting an ethics of listening. Levinas describes the face-to-face encounter as the primal moment from which all language and communication springs. The face of the other in its expression and mortality summons me and pronounces that we are responsible for others. The appearance and

awareness of otherness as well as the emergence of ethics itself is thus localized in the face-to-face situation.⁶ Only face-to-face can my hearing become an act of listening. The other's voice commands me to listen, and by addressing me, makes me into a witness of its utterance. As a consequence I become answerable. This does not mean that I actually need to answer, but I am irrevocably drawn into the responsibility of having been addressed. As such, having someone who listens, rather than someone who answers can be considered as the first condition for dialogue.

Much has been made in Middle East commentary of the lack and/or promise of dialogue. *Route 181* exposes the false premise of this. The film-makers' aim is not to reconcile opposing sides, nor to make them talk to each other; what they do instead is more modest, but also more radical. They simply listen to what people have to say. And it is their act of listening which creates the very conditions for what is being said and how it is being said. Khleifi's and Sivan's presence and attention allows the people they encounter on their journey to address them and in turn address us, the viewers. The real exchange which thus occurs lifts the weight of communication under which the region (and the world) so agonizes; the informational, the solitary speech act is turned into an address, a social operation. What we hear is more powerful than facts or judgements; we are face-to-face with people's warnings, prayers, forgivings and despair. In *Route 181* the *mise-en-abîme* of official discourse modifies the quality of listening and implicates us, the viewers, in what is being said. Like the film-makers themselves who have rejected tribal allegiances, we begin to hear with the ear of the other. This creates a critical shift from what is being said to how we listen to it. Indeed, at a time when so much has been said about Palestine/Israel but much less has actually been heard, the quality of listening takes on crucial importance. What the encounter with the 'protagonists' of *Route 181* makes us realize is that we don't just need new historians or new histories; we also need an ethics of listening. Talk is cheap – the privilege and skill of listening is hard-earned.

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1 "If [the public] is only allowed freedom, enlightenment is almost inevitable. For even among the entrenched guardians of the great masses a few will always think for themselves, a few who, after having themselves thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will spread the spirit of a rational appreciation for both their own worth and for each person's calling to think for himself..." Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment* (1784)

2 "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation. A contrario, the breaches of democracy can be measured by [...] *Forbidden Archives*." Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

3 "For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time." Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

4 The new historians whose re-appraisal of official history and/or propaganda since the late 1980's has ushered in a Post-Zionist debate, include amongst others Baruch Kimmerling, Joel Migdal, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev and Avi Shlaim

5 cf. Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith, *Elements of Speech Act Theory in the Work of Thomas Reid* (History of Philosophy Quarterly 7, 1990)

6 cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1979)