

Documentary practice following W. Benjamin's thesis's on the philosophy of history

It was in the mid 20's of last century that British filmmaker and theoretician John Greison evokes for the first time the notion of a "documentary film" in a short revue of Robert Flaherty 1926 nonfiction film *Nanouk of the north*.

A documentary film argues Greison is a creative treatment of reality.

In this respect I would like to invite you to consider this talk as a documentary fragment, and the reality that I intend to examine here (creatively I hope) is a text. A fragmented text by the great German Marxist Jewish cultural thinker Walter Benjamin entitled "On the concept of history", often referred to as "Theses on the philosophy of History". A mysterious 18 fragments text, supposedly written few months before Benjamin's suicide in 1940.

Scholars still argue on the aim, purposes and nature of these fragments, whether notes for a larger essay, a series of unfinished fragments or something else. In the absence of a firm knowledge of this text's nature I would like to suggest, or invite you to consider that in fact Benjamin actually left behind him the most sophisticated and challenging proposal for a definition and series of principals of the documentary moving images practice - the documentary cinema - or what we tend to call the non-fiction

cinema.

In his theses Benjamin focuses on the differences between historicism and historical materialism and more generally what it means when we talk / write, about History. The dialectic tension between historicism and historical materialism can be found in their different approaches to the story that History offers to us in the present; For Benjamin, historicism remains concerned with understanding the past in relation only to itself; or by the consideration that history relate to a specific time and by this he raises among other the question of what happens when the presentation or re-presentation of historical events renders them as singular and without relation to each other.

The historical materialist, however, views history as folded into different moments of time. The event is no longer isolated within itself; historical materialism then opens a space for the pain and suffering of the event to come to light. Historicism takes the victor's story as the story of the era itself. In historical materialism there is a redemptive story. It rejects the historicist's position of one seeing the past always from a set position.

The historical materialist takes the present seriously; its appreciation of time makes the present inform the past and vice versa.

Let us come back to the documentary practice. Like any film and image practice, the documentary cinema is enslaved to two

rigid, uncompromising and my I say totalitarian devises.

The frame, and the timeline.

The share existence of the image, any image depends on hiding on elimination on cutting out a fragment, a detail of reality in order to show.

Let me illustrate this.

So we could say that in fact the image or the frame is a device of hiding in order to show. A detail as would put it Benjamin reviling the all.

The second device is the time line.

This is how we edit a film, any film. In a linear, chronological way where shots or events follow one each other. there is no place for simultaneous action, events or moment. Here again the technical condition impose it self on the mode of narration. two events like for example the discovery of the new world by Christoph colobus in 1492, and the discovery of the white man by the native American population. I.E these two POV cannot exist simultaneously.

Of course this might through a light on the reason for which totalitarian, fascist, regimes and figures where such a cinephiles.

Isn't cinema in fact the share dream of totalitarianism? the desire to master both time I.E. history and space?

Thus Benjamin remind us that :

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism

wishes to retain the image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger.

In this regard we have to define the notion of memory in regard to cinema memory remind us Todorov. is not the opposite of oblivion to remember is not the opposite of 'to forget'. The terms that are opposed are 'to erase' or 'wipe-out' and 'to conserve'. Remembrance is an interaction between memory and forgetting, which is always a selection. Or, in Goethe's words, "*When I hear memory, I ask myself what was forgotten*".

Of the some 2000 films produced in Israel by Israeli-Jewish filmmakers over the sixty years since the establishment of the state in 1948, there are only about a dozen fiction films that are dedicated to the reality of life as it was in Palestine before the establishment of the state that brought about its destruction or, to distinguish, to the Palestinian catastrophe; the *Nakba*. An examination of Israeli cinema points to historic amnesia which infected, among other things, the representation of the formative event of "Israeliness" - the war which took place in the country in 1948. Indeed, six of the first ten movies produced in the newly established state naturally deal with different aspects of the war¹, but, as Israeli film critic Meir Schnitzer notes with some sorrow, "despite it having been the most crucial

¹ Most of the films are in the English language and only one of the directors was a resident and citizen of the country at the time his film was produced – Nathan Axelrod who directed "Dan and Saadya". The other films are "Ceasefire", "The Faithful City", "Hill 24 Doesn't Answer", "Every Mile a Stone" and "Pillar of Fire".

event in the history of the State, the War of Independence, has not kept its popularity as far as cinematic work is concerned." (Schnitzer 1994: 20).

We shall emphasize that the representation of the war, life in the country, and the *Nakba* are intertwined, as it is not possible to represent the destruction of a life which did not exist nor is it possible to stage life in pre-1948 Palestine without evoking the memory of its destruction. It follows that as long as the destruction and the fate of the refugees are denied, Israeli cinema cannot represent what has seemingly not been destroyed. It appears that Israeli fiction cinema gave up on the genre's uniqueness – and one might add, on the magic of cinema entirely – that is, the ability to enact on the screen that which no longer exists and that which has yet to exist. Although documentary cinema lacks this unique ability, considering the almost total exclusion of pre-1948 Palestine and the *Nakba*, from Israeli fiction cinema, a few but noteworthy documentary films which were produced in Israel in the past decade² and which tackle the representation of these issues, stand out. Their makers have picked up the gauntlet and simultaneously confronted both the challenge of representing the past and the meaning of the *work of memory* through the cinematic medium. In so doing, these artists present what Marc Ferro calls

² Including "Happy Birthday Mr. Mograbi (1999) by Avi Mograbi, "The Inner Tour" (2001) by Ra'anana Alexandrowicz, "500 Dunam on the Moon" (2002) by Rachel Leah Jones, "Yosef Nahmani's Diaries" (2005) by Dalia Karpel and "Preliminaries" (2006) by Anat Even.

a counter analysis through the filmic writing of History³ and offer independent, original and global interpretations of history which are more than a mere reconstruction of hegemonic perception. Thus they “contribute to the understanding of past phenomena and their relation to the present” (Marc Ferro 1993: 223).

However, an examination of Israeli cinema strengthens historian Amnon Raz Krakotzkin's assertion that “the [Israeli] national story was created on the basis of the active erasure of the *Nakba* (whether defined as an “expulsion” or as a “fleeing”) through obliterating the space and experience that existed prior to the establishment of the state, and on the ruins of which the state of Israel was established” (Raz Krakozkin 2005: 102).

While the 1967 occupation of the Palestinian territories is omnipresent in Israeli cinema and is imposed as the representation and landscape of Palestine, pre-1948 Palestine rarely appears in Israeli cinematic images. Very few Israeli fiction films deal with the representation of Palestine's landscape and its social reality as it existed before the creation of Israel in 1948 as well as with the representation of the 1948 war that brought upon its destruction and is known as the *Nakba*.

Despite the academic, political, activist and artistic interest which has emerged among Israeli Jews over the past decade regarding the process of the occupation and destruction of

³ In the original French Ferro uses the terms “Contrée Analyse” and “L'écriture filmique de l'histoire”

Palestine in 1948, we will find that Israeli cinema loyally reflects Krakozkin's discernment that "Palestine/Eretz Israel, the 1948 war, the *Nakba*, the refugee question and the "right of return", are topics which are not discussed here. This is also the great denial on which Israeli discourse relies and which is therefore, a source of constant anxiety." (Raz Krakozkin 2005: 103)

This paper addresses the question of the representation of Palestine's past and its destruction in contemporary Israeli cinema and seeks to examine the exclusion and denial of Palestine and the *Nakba* in Israeli cinema. It locates several films produced in Israel in the past decade by renowned Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai, who is widely considered to be *the* genuine representative of the cinematic expression of the Israeli "peace camp". Three of Gitai's films take place in pre-1948 Palestine and deal with the *Nakba* and are pivotal in illustrating Israel's liberal Zionist discourse. The paper demonstrates how the very few Israeli fiction films which actually represent Palestine, its ethnic cleansing and its destruction during the 1948 war, and as such, are considered critical of Zionist mainstream discourse, in fact encapsulate and perpetuate the hegemonic Zionist narrative, its Orientalist gaze and its self-victimizing attitude.

"We came, we shot, we burnt, we blew up, we pushed away, we expelled"⁴

⁴ Extract from "Khirbet Khizeh" TV Drama by Ram Levy, Israel 1978.

The novel "Khirbet Khizeh", by Israeli author S. Yizhar, was published in 1949,⁵ before the official end of the 1948 war. The novel is based on the author's personal experience as a fighter during the war and tells the story of a squad of Zionist soldiers tasked with taking over an imaginary Palestinian village by the name of Khirbet Khizeh, and loading its inhabitants ("a frightened flock, obedient, silent, sighing, who do not know to ask") onto trucks and banishing them across the border. The narrator, one of the soldiers of the occupying force, is burdened by questions and doubts regarding the essence of the mission ("We have no right to take them out of here"), its character ("We came, we shot, we burnt, we blew up, we pushed away, we expelled. What the hell are we doing in this place?!"), and its similarity to other expulsions ("What have we done here today really? We, the Jews, have banished to exile").

In the late 70's, 30 years after its publication, the story was adapted into a television drama by Daniela Karmi and Ram Levy. Levy also directed the TV drama which was produced by Israel's state broadcasting cooperation which was, at the time, the sole television channel in Israel. Following intervention by then Education and Culture Minister⁶ and the Knesset Education Committee, the broadcasting cooperation's board

⁵ Yizhar Smolenskin was an MP for Ben-Gurion's Mapai party. His novel was published by Sifriyat HaPoalim in cooperation with HaKibbutz HaArtzi, HaShomer HaTzair publishing (the labor party together with the Kibbutz movement publishing houses).

⁶ Member of the Religious National Party (Mafdal), Mr. Zevulun Hammer.

of directors was forced to ban the airing of the drama which had caused public outrage and angry protests.⁷ S. Yizhar responded to the decision to ban the drama he penned in an interview on the news using these decisive words: "Herein hides, in many people, a sense of guilt, for which they do not want an outlet, which they do not want to express and they do not want this thing to reach rationalism and see the light of day. This guilt tries to be repressed, hidden, and covered by all sorts of security taboos and other similar things. It is preposterous. There is no danger."⁸ Despite the fact that the film, following the novel, focuses on the dilemmas, guilt and traumatic experiences of the Zionist soldier himself in the face of the expulsion and plundering that took place in Palestine, even 30 years after the "Khirbet Khizeh" affair, the film's director and winner of the national "Israel Prize", Professor Ram Levy, remains the only Jewish Israeli filmmaker to use fiction cinema to directly confront the memory and denial of the Palestinian catastrophe – the *Nakba*.

Some ten years after the production of the drama Khirbet Khizeh, what was later dubbed "the new historian"⁹ school of thought emerged, followed by a revision of Israeli-Zionist historiography concerning the Israeli-Arab-Palestinian conflict in general and the war and destruction of the country in 1948 in

⁷ The broadcasting freeze of the film, the charged debate at the Knesset and the angry protests against the film created public outrage and only after TV employees blacked out the screen for 50 minutes and public uproar died down, did the drama finally air.

⁸ S. Yizhar in a TV interview with Dan Semama, Mabat newscast, February 1978.

⁹ Morris, Pappe, Shlaim, Segev and others.

particular. Unlike the official Zionist narrative, the “new historian” narrative confirmed an account of the events which the vast majority of the Jewish fighters of Yizhar’s generation kept secret. It also confirmed the testimonies of Palestinian refugees and the work of Palestinian researchers and scholars who had long since tried to make their voices heard, but to no avail.

In those years, following the first Lebanon war, and as part of the development of the “post-Zionist” narrative, Israeli cinema was swept by the “Palestinian wave” (Ella Shohat 2001-5), which dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and found expression in the appearance of the Arab figure on the screen.¹⁰ Indeed, as cultural studies scholar Ella Shohat notes, it was the “return of the repressed” (Ella Shohat 2001). Yet, it is particularly because of the interest Israeli-Jewish cinema took in wide aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the critical approach to war representation, the military, the reality of the 1967 occupation and various issues relating to the relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel, that the absence of films dealing with the fateful war of 1948, the Palestinian catastrophe and the destruction of the country in that year,

¹⁰ Among the films produced in those years: “Eastern Wind” (1982) by Dani Waxman, “Fellow Travellers” (1983) by Judd Neeman, “Beyond the Walls” (1985) by Uri Barbash, “On a Narrow Bridge” (1985) by Nissim Dayan, “Avanti Popolo” (1986) by Rafi Bukai, “The Smile of the Lamb” (1986) by Shimon Dotan and many more. Yet, as Ella Shohat notes, “The ‘Palestinian wave’ must be examined in relative terms. Since the demise of nationalistic-heroic films, Israeli cinema tended to repress the Arab issue on the screen” (Shohat 2005: 235).

stands out.¹¹ One of the reasons for this may be located in an important claim made by Shohat herself regarding the ideological subjugation of Israeli cinema to the perspective of the “peace camp” – the Zionist left, and to the fact that “more than they profoundly engage in the Palestinian question, the films focus on the situation and dilemmas of Israeli ‘doves’ themselves”. (Ella Shohat 2005: 248). Indeed, despite the historical research which has developed in Israel since the 80’s regarding the *Nakba* and the exposure of important archives which had, until then, been hidden from researchers and the public, and even after the Palestinian political term *Nakba*, penetrated the Hebrew lexicon in the late 90’s and has since come to be used by the entire political and cultural gamete in Israel, its cinema, for the most part, and particularly fiction cinema, continued to ignore the immense historic material, commentary, and updated narrative which has been at its disposal both as a source of support and inspiration. More than sixty years have passed since that war, but Israeli fiction cinema has yet to exhibit the *return of the denied*.

In the euphoria that swept the so called “peace camp”, immediately after the Oslo Accords, in the early 90’s, and with the policy of closure and separation that followed, Israeli cinema’s interest in questions relating to the Israeli Palestinian conflict waned, giving way to more personal films dedicated to

¹¹ Two fiction films which take place during the “1948 Independence War” were produced in the 1980’s, but they do not address the *Nakba*, “Himmo, King of Jerusalem” (Amos Guttman 1987) and “Crossfire” (Gideon Ganani 1989).

questions of individual and collective identity and social cultural internal Israeli issues. Dorit Neeman notes that at that time, Israeli cinema tended to handle geographic space in a manner distanced from tangible reality and from realistic style, and therefore took place in spaces with no geographic context. Fiction films produced in this period which actually tackled the conflict also avoided depicting the geography of the country and its borders (Neeman Dorit 2006). With the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada, the second Palestinian uprising, in the fall of 2000, the development of the checkpoint and roadblock policy, the accelerated building of the separation wall, Israeli film went back to the conflict.

Israeli documentary cinema flourished with the emergence of the "occupation film" genre, focusing on the wall's morbidly photogenic quality, the checkpoints and the "humanitarian" Palestinian suffering. These films quickly became a desired commodity among film distributors, broadcasters and television channels around the world. Following documentary cinema, Israeli "political" fiction cinema generated interest and gained respect and fame in international festivals, becoming an international success story.

The wave of "checkpoint films" did brand Israeli documentary cinema as critical and oppositional but it was, paradoxically, a clear expression of the success of the official separation policy. The country, which was "reunited" with the occupation in 1967, was divided after the Oslo Accords, which brought with them

the closure and separation regime and turned it into two units with separate names – Palestine and Israel. As a result of the focus on the West Bank and, to a degree, on Gaza which characterized films that took a stand “against the occupation”, that same geo-political separation of the 1948 territories, i.e. Israel which is within the Green Line and the West Bank and Gaza which were occupied in 1967, received prominent cinematic expression and enabled a dissociation between the occupation as the “State’s Act” (Ariela Azulay 2008) and as such a target for criticism, and the “ancient” history of the occupation of the country in 1948. In fact, filmmakers followed the politicians and avoided tackling the core issues – the “refugee question” and “the right of return”. They also avoided bringing up the past as a significant for the future, much less offering a genuine cinematic representation of a political vision.

The six fiction films¹² which were produced in Israel and handle, to some degree, representing the social fabric, geography and destruction of the land on whose ruins the state of Israel was established, support both Pierre Sorlin’s position that historic films are fictitious and Ferro’s claim that cinema, in general, expresses the hegemonic voice of the regime. It is not superfluous to note that in the case at hand, i.e. the Zionist

¹² “We Were Dreamers” (Uri Barbash 1988), “Rage and Glory” (Avi Nesher), “Berlin Jerusalem”, “Eden”, “Kedma” (Amos Gitai) and “Forgiveness” (Udi Aloni).

narrative, fiction and the hegemonic voice are one and the same.

Indeed, in these films, whose plots transpire in pre-1948 Palestine, or during the war itself, the country is depicted as empty, with the desert bareness serving to represent the space as it allegedly was. In addition to the desert being a quintessential Orientalist, colonial pattern, the representation of Palestine as desert, recalls, of course, the Zionist claim regarding “making the desert bloom” or “conquering” it and clearly directs to Yisrael Zangvil’s renowned and hackneyed expression “A land without a people to a people without a land.” In Israeli films whose stories take place before the establishment of the state and which do not address questions relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the story usually takes place within a confined Zionist-Jewish space such as a kibbutz, moshav or settlement, which is ethnically cleansed of foreigners, with no way of discerning the country and its space. Beside the use of the desert as a visual device to represent Palestine, the prominent discursive device is the Jewish soldier’s position as victim, or self victimizing.

Self-victimization, recalls philosopher Adi Ophir, was an important asset of the Zionist movement and later, of the Israeli state. Ophir therefore calls for an examination of how the position of the victim functions in Israeli culture and in state mechanisms (Ophir 2001:268). Indeed, an examination of the Israeli films which bring up the memory of the *Nakba* reveals

that in most if not all, the recollection of the Holocaust and the Jewish martyr are the condition for recalling the *Nakba*. This comes not as an analogy, but rather the Holocaust and the Jewish victim act as a memory screen which seemingly enables handling the memory of the social reality and the destruction of pre-1948 Palestine. The recollection of the Nazi genocide in fact also enables neutralizing the weight of the *Nakba*'s memory.¹³ Following LaCapra, we might speculate that the reason is "to avoid past or other traumas or assuage them exactly when they begin to formulate a clear voice" (La Capra 2006: 187).

Gitai as an allegory

Israeli director, Amos Gitai, is associated with 'liberal' Zionism or 'the left' known as "the Israeli peace camp", and openly identifies with it, is undoubtedly recognized in international film circles and among intellectuals in the European-American world as the ambassador and symbol of Israeli cinematic 'progressiveness'. Gitai, whose documentaries in the 80's pioneered the tackling of the 1967 occupation and the conflict¹⁴ is the only Israeli director who dedicated three fiction films to the 'reality' of pre-1948 Palestine and the *Nakba* events.¹⁵

Shown for the first time as part of the international competition at the Venice festival, Gitai's fiction film "Berlin Jerusalem"

¹³ On this topic see Prof. Yosefa Lischansky's important work.

¹⁴ "House", Israel 1980, "Wadi", Israel 1981, "Field Diary", Israel 1982

¹⁵ "Berlin Jerusalem" France, Israel 1989, "Eden" France, Israel 2001 and "Kedma" France, Israel 2005

(Amos Gitai, *Israel and Europe*, 1989) tells the stories of German-Jew expressionist poet Elza Lasker Schiller who escaped from Germany to Palestine with the rise of the Nazis and Mania Shohat, the Russian born, Zionist revolutionary who settled in the north of Palestine in the first decade of the 20th century.¹⁶ Gitai's film opens with a scene in which we can see a group of Eastern European Jewish immigrants marching across a barren desert on their way to the Promised Land. Filming in desert paths to depict the arrival of European immigrants in the country is, of course, a geographic absurdity and a historic forgery. Later in the film, when the immigrants who had just marched through the desert, continue their journey on horseback, the landscape is no longer barren and the pioneers even come across some local Arab girls tending to fruit on trees, which they offer to the guests as a "gift from our land". Yet, it is apparently so difficult for an Israeli to realistically portray farming life in the country, that in the film, the girls are picking fruit from trees in full bloom. Following this absurd scene, the viewer is shown a breathtaking view where the only sign of life are ruins on a hilltop on the horizon. It is in these ruins that the film's plot, depicting the life of a commune of Zionist Socialist settlers, takes place from this point on.

In her paper concerning the question of space and the representation of the border in Palestinian and Israeli cinema,

¹⁶ The Israel Film Service produced a documentary about the Mania Shohat's life in 1988, directed by Orna Ben Dor. "Mania Shohat – Travel Log" includes dramatic segments and documentary materials.

Dorit Neeman establishes that “contemporary Israeli cinema (particularly fiction film) often avoids placing itself in a recognized space” (Neeman Dorit 2001: 217). Indeed, the maker of “Berlin Jerusalem” locates the plot in a place which is not identified in any way in the film, as the ruins are situated on a hill far from any other settlement. Indeed, those who are familiar with the area will notice that the film was shot in the Migdal Afek castle and its surrounding area (now Rosh HaAyin). However, the average viewer is not given any clue as to the fact that at the time the plot of the film is supposed to have happened (the 20’s) and up until their destruction in 1948, this area was home to the Palestinian villages of Majdal Yaba, Ras el ‘Ein and Majdal Sadek, of which the ruins in the film are all that remain. Ruins of villages and buildings dot the country’s landscape throughout the film, as if they were part of the landscape of Palestine as early as the beginning of the 20th century – when the plot takes place and long before it actually went to ruin.

Gitai’s fiction film “Kedma” (Amos Gitai, Israel and Europe 2002) which was shown as part of Cannes film festival competition, is one of the only Israeli films produced in the last decade which directly deals with the 1948 war. The film tells the story of a group of Jewish immigrants, survivors of the concentration and death camps in Europe, who arrive in Palestine as part of the illegal immigration during the British mandate and end up as

soldiers in one of the battles fought during the war.¹⁷ After the film's opening scene, onboard the immigrant ship "Kedma" on the high seas, the country's landscape first appears. The viewer sees a sandy, barren expanse; the soundtrack in the beginning of the shot is silent, creating an impression of a desert, emphasized by the selection of the low shooting angle (sand height) and the careful framing of the shot. Like "Berlin Jerusalem", "Kedma" also includes many scenes filmed in abandoned agricultural terraces or among the ruins of dwellings. Thus, the abandoned terraces, the thorn covered Sheikh graves and the ruins of Palestinian villages become a part of the landscape of the country rather than the results of the war, which, as stated, was purported to be the subject matter of the film. Like early westerns (Frodon 1998), in this film too, the "good guys", the Jewish fighters, fight an unseen enemy and the only casualties are on the Jewish side.¹⁸

Much has been written about the instrumentalization of the Holocaust's memory in Israeli political dialectics. It serves as a regime of justification and a condition for discussion of the *Nakba*. This "gauntlet" constructs forgetfulness with the excuse of remembering and is, in effect, a 'memory for forgetfulness'¹⁹ (Eyal Sivan 2005). Israeli cinema does not deviate from such

¹⁷ Although it is not directly stated in the film or in the promotional materials for it, the inspiration for the screenplay is probably the Latrun battle which was part of Operation Bin Nun A and B in May 1948, in which Holocaust survivors participated as soon as they arrived in the country.

¹⁸ In Gitai's war movies also, such as "Kippur" or in later Israeli war films like "Beaufort" or "Waltz with Bashir", the Israelis fight an invisible enemy.

¹⁹ This expression is borrowed from the title of a book by poet Mahmud Darwish. Darwish Mahmud, *Memory of Forgetfulness*, Schoken, Tel Aviv.

use. On the contrary, reference to the Holocaust and its representation serve as a double regime of justification. On one hand, the standard use is to explain, justify and detract from, or relativize the Palestinian catastrophe and Zionist violence, and on the other, an authorization for the artist to “freely” express his criticism. In the few fiction films that deal with the representation of the 1948 war or the *Nakba*, such as “Rage and Glory” (Avi Nesher 1984), “Berlin Jerusalem” (Amos Gitai 1989), “Kedma” (Amos Gitai 2002)²⁰ or “Forgiveness” (Udi Aloni 2006), as noted above, the rise of Nazism and the Jewish Holocaust are the departure point and serve as the condition and the permission for the artist to recall the war and destruction of 1948. This proximity which seemingly serves as no more than historic contextualization of the plot, in fact determines how the events of the film are read, casts a shadow over the criticism it voices, and serves as an explanation-justification of the Zionist violence and Jewish terrorism which the films seem to address critically.

In Amos Gitai's “Kedma”, the joint discussion of the Holocaust, the 1948 War of Independence and the *Nakba*, are, as stated, the subject matter of the entire film. Immediately after a scene showing a group of vagrant Arabs or refugees crying for the loss of their land, we witness a conversation between Jewish

²⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate, but we shall note that “Musa”, the Palmah commander in “Kedma” and Lehi man “Edi the Butcher” in “Rage and Glory” are portrayed by a Palestinian-Jewish actor, Juliano Mer Hamis, who plays, in both movies, the role of the Jewish fighter who is ideologically convinced and lacks any doubt.

survivors who tell each other the stories of their rescue from the Nazi monster. Following this touching dialogue, the barren landscape of the country appears on the screen. In another revealing scene where a Jewish fighter politely asks a group of Arab refugees, the depiction of whom is lifted right out of the best of biblical Orientalist representations, "Where are you going?" The Arab politely answers: "We're running from the Jews." The Jewish response does not hold back: "We are also running, from the English." This conversation ends with a minor skirmish at the end of which the Arabs finally surrender and seem to accept the occupation of their land. Thus, from the very beginning of the film, the official Israeli narrative of the replacement of the population and its justification is established.

The position of self-pity and self-victimization which appears throughout Israeli cinema is clearly expressed in the monologue delivered by Yanush (Andrei Kashkar), the Holocaust survivor who had just participated in an attack on a Palestinian village and the expulsion of its inhabitants. This is also the longest text in the film,²¹ appearing at the end of the battle and expulsion and serving as the summation and conclusion of the story and the film. The Jewish refugee, shell shocked, in the throes of a nervous breakdown cries out: "We have no history. I don't know how you say it in Hebrew, but that's what it means. The gentiles have made our history for us, but we didn't want to be this way.

²¹ The monologue is taken from "The Sermon", written by author Haim Hazaz in 1946.

We wouldn't do this. They forced us to be this way, against our will. So because of this, I'm telling you, I am against this!!!" He shouts to the camera, on behalf of the director, and carries on with a tearful monologue about the suffering of the Jews: "What do we find in it [Jewish history]? Repression, slander, persecution, sanctification, deceit and victims [...] There is no heroism, or action. There are no heroes or conquerors, just a group of miserable, persecuted, people who always beg for their lives" and, as in the background the call "man down" is clearly audible, the Jewish refugee concludes, "We like the suffering. It's the suffering which makes us brave."

Conclusion

Udi Aloni's "Forgiveness" (Aloni, Israel-USA 2006), first shown at the Berlin film festival is the latest fiction film to handle the *Nakba*.²² Through direction which is not devoid of baroque, the film tells the story of David, a young American Jew who joins the Israeli army, and during his military service in the occupied West Bank accidentally kills a Palestinian girl. David then goes into shock and is committed to a mental institution located on the site where the Palestinian village of Deir Yasin, where an infamous massacre took place in 1948, once lay. A Holocaust survivor nicknamed "Musselman" who lives in the institution tells

²² Another short film, "My Father's House" was produced in 2008 as a final project for the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School, by young director Dani Rosenberg. The film tells the story of a Holocaust survivor who finds himself in a military post in the middle of the desert. One of the scenes does show an abandoned and destroyed Arab village in which the survivor finds the body of a Palestinian child. Note that this film too does not deviate from the rule which applies to representing the *Nakba* in Israeli fiction film as presented in this paper, i.e. the desert land and the Holocaust play a pivotal role in the plot.

David that the ghosts of the villagers who had been murdered are trying to communicate with him. David's father, who arrives after his son is committed, brings him to New York, where he falls in love with Laila, an American Palestinian whose daughter, Amal, looks like the girl David killed with his father's old gun used in the 1948 War when he was a Zionist fighter. "Forgiveness", which ostensibly "dares" to speak of a joint Jewish-Palestinian trauma, earned the title "radical" by film critics in Israel and abroad. Yet, "Forgiveness", which is as radical as all the other fiction films dealing with the *Nakba*, also incorporates the elements that appear to be mandatory for Israeli Jewish filmmakers in order to dare try and conjure up the memory of the occupation and destruction of Palestine and the expulsion of its residents. Except for a few scenes which take place in the Occupied Territories, Aloni avoids representing the landscape and the country, yet the "victim competition" (Jean-Michel Chaumont) between Holocaust survivors who have a face and a voice in the film, and the victims of the *Nakba*, whose faces are not seen and whose voices are not heard, cancels, as demonstrated above, the film's critical pretense and sting. The Holocaust trauma, personified in the figure of Musselman, the death camp survivor; the trauma of the Zionist soldier of 1948, personified in the figure of the father who killed a Palestinian girl in Deir Yasin in 1948 and the trauma of the Israeli soldier in the territories occupied in 1967, personified in David, turn the entire film into a

discussion of the suffering and self-victimization of the Jew as he finds himself in the position of perpetrator. Or, as Amos Gitai's protagonist says in the closing scene in "Kedma", "The gentiles have made our history for us, but we didn't want to be this way. We wouldn't do this. They forced us to be this way, against our will." Whatever the justification regime in use, a careful examination of Israeli fiction cinema gives the impression that the exclusion of life in pre-1948 Palestine and the sweeping denial of the *Nakba* point to an entrenched traumatic block which impedes the ability of Israeli filmmakers to imagine Palestine and deal with its destruction. As LaCapra notes, "the trauma gives way to the dissociation between emotion and representation. Man is lost when he feels what he cannot represent; he represents out of dullness what he cannot feel. The processing of the trauma involves an attempt to express, or re-express emotion and representation in a manner which may never surpass re-enactment/personification/ or the pagans or the dissociating separation, but which may, in some degree of stability, assuage its effect" (LaCapra: 62). Yet in the case at hand, the processing of the trauma involves a profound discussion of the fate of the Palestinian refugees and the right of return. This discussion goes beyond the narrow cinematic framework, of course. However, since the figure of the refugee lives between two cataclysmic events, his existence is inextricably linked to the idea of destruction. He is born from destruction – that of Palestine, and can find

"normalcy", i.e. emerging from the refugee status, in destruction – that of the Jewish state. His life goes by in the camp or in exile in an extemporal existence, going from destruction to destruction. Indeed, as historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin notes, in the Israeli-Jewish collective consciousness, the memory of life in the country that was destroyed and its destruction are perceived as a threat to existence. Therefore, "the memory of the *Nakba*, the memory of Palestinian destruction is the Israeli nightmare – and the very mention of the subject immediately brings up Jaffa, Haifa, Lod and Ramleh – the Arab cities whose destruction was a part of the process of establishing the state of Israel and turns them into visions of destruction." (Raz-Krakotzkin 2002: 103)

The mystification of perpetrator

It seems that victims' images fascinate. Victims' narrative is a recurrent issue of study. It seems to be justified by the *duty of memory*. Strangely this pretended duty is the duty of the victims themselves. Perpetrators are not subject to duty of memory. They are subjects of fiction. As an example, fiction cinema dealing with the nazi perpetrators uses, strangely enough, the prototype designed by the nazi aesthetics and more precisely by the nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstal. Except Lubitsch's and Chaplin's films, the cinema dealing with this period put on screen the SS as they themselves wanted to be shown. Showing and hearing the perpetrator, like Eichmann, is a starting point

to break the conventional cliché/icon of perpetrators' representation. If historians mostly used Nazis' documents to describe the process of destruction and to analyze the crime conditions, they however did not let the criminals speak. From the discovery of the exceptional audio-visual material created during the Eichmann trial, we decided in our film *"The specialist"*, to follow Primo Levi's spirit.

In his preface to the Rudolf Höss' memories – Levi invites the reader to discover a *"human itinerary which is, in a way, exemplary"* ²³ and considers this autobiography as *"one of the more instructive book never published."*²⁴

Focusing on the perpetrator as the main figure risks to create for spectators an analogical movement, a feeling of identification, comprehension towards the one that explains and justifies at length. This man who tells us his work, his joys, his sadness, looks like anybody. The technical problems he had to resolve, his conscience problems, the "duty" which obliges him to execute the orders are experience that every of us experienced. But it is precisely on this familiar feeling that we shall count.

It is in this tiny space, which divides identification, comprehension, and indulgence that we can choose to evaluate in.

²³ Introduction by Primo Levi to *"The commander of Auschwitz"* by Rudolf Höss

²⁴ *idem*

By using the regular icons to represent crimes as they are shown daily through the sufferings of the victims, thousand times seen, thousand times commented, they become clichés in the sense that Roland Barthes describes the *chock-photography*: "*Facing these images, we are deposed of our judgement. Somebody has tremble for us, though for us, judged for us. The photographer left us nothing. Juste a simple intellectual acceptance*"²⁵

I prefer to count on the power of imagination against the re-digestion of horror images. I do not share the idea of the denouncing power of these images. We hear that exposing the crime against humanity is already starting to fight it. This kind of euphoric clichés eluded the question of political responsibility by substituting the show of horror to the reflection about the horror. "*When the political event is reduced to a pathetic current affair, pity paralyze thinking and the aspiration to justice is reduced to a humanitarian consolation. Here you find the banalization of evil.*"²⁶

Using the images material in a secular attitude in a contemporary way should have the ambition of creating historical analogies or as writes Todorov: "... exemplary use of memory, (opposed to the linear one), allow to use the past in

²⁵ "*Mythologies*" by Roland Barthes, Le Seuil, 1957

²⁶ "*Eloge de la désobéissance*" by Rony Brauman and Eyal Sivan, Ed. Le Pommier 1999

view of the present. It can be used as a lesson of injustices which acquired in the past and to help fight the ones that take place at the present, to help to live one's self and to go towards the other"²⁷. It is the utilization -or the manipulation- which is done with the image that gives its exemplary dimension.

By working as the historical work, against memory, and by using all the tools that contemporary arts give us, we might uproot the moving images of crime and violence from their memorial one sense aim. Then we can bring these images to join our present to get a sense for our own environment. We can give to these materials a "*status of truth*" which will allow us to renew with a tradition of what can be called: political Art.

²⁷ "*Les abus de mémoire*", by Tzvetan Todorov, Arléa, 1991 p. 31-32