

Current Israeli Documentary Cinema: 101 years of Unsettled Negotiations
by Raya Morag

In today's media world, changes in the conception of "documentary" and the nature of documentary films and television programs are turning a tenable certainty into an uncertain challenge. Clear-cut trends, such as the viral contagion and intense influence of reality shows, in which the clear purpose of the whole micro-social event is to deliver fun on the one hand, and the sheer volume of feature documentary films which, since the late 1990s, have enjoyed theatrical releases on the other hand, expose contradictions. These contradictions attest to shifts in viewers' relation and proximity to what is defined as "real" and to shifts—on the part of filmmakers and viewers alike—in sensitivity to the ethical difficulties involved in capturing "real life." The increased presence of genres such as the docusoap and the mocumentary, the infiltration of digital technology and the rise in new platforms for documentary making, such as the mobile phone, as well as their distribution via the internet, require almost daily adjustment to media's changing faces. But more than anything, they require an ongoing redefinition of the "documentary value."

The challenges Israeli documentary faces in light of these changes are unique. Here, I am not referring to the financing, production and marketing difficulties that characterize any small-scale industry in the world, but rather to local hardships. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ongoing since the 1880s, i.e. since the advent of Zionist settlement to this very day, is the longest running ethno-religious conflict in the modern era. Since Israel's "War of Independence" and the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 until this day, the acute and chronic manifestations of the conflict have manifested in seven wars, two Intifadas, and countless military operations. In other words, on average a war or major eruption of violence every six

years. In 130 years of conflict, or, more exactly, since the first documentary film was shot here in 1910, i.e. 101 years ago, to this day, the conflict has been an inseparable facet of Israeli documentary.

As the films listed in this year's DocuShuk catalogue attest, Israeli documentary addresses a wide range of personal and social topics that do not relate directly to the conflict. Nevertheless, the conflict in all its ramifications — beginning with the occupation and the countless traumas it entails through years of suicide terrorism and culminating with the rise of both Jewish and Muslim fundamentalisms — has determined not only our national agenda but our psychological and creative ones too. In other words, to a certain extent, the representation of the conflict has become an ethical criterion for assessing Israeli documentary cinema. Despite what may appear to be a creative limitation, i.e. the incessant need to respond to the news-driven reality of occupation, the fact that this responsiveness has become a moral criterion for looking at our lived reality as Israelis past and present, enables Israeli documentary, unlike other cinemas around the world, to preserve the value of documentary “truth.” In other words, regardless of the issue at hand, in the reality of conflict and occupation, the Israeli documentary cannot supply truth as infotainment. Even when it flirts with lighter formats, or steers, like any cinema, toward new cinematic languages that enable greater access to wider audiences, the internal and external demands upon the filmmaker in relation to documentary “truth” are necessarily different.

In other words, the decline in the status of the truth, the conception of authenticity, and the meaning of performance, as well as the status of the director as a kind of docu-celeb, to name but a few of the clear-cut characteristics of documentary cinema worldwide — constitute a different kind of challenge for the Israeli documentary maker. The moral position we assume vis-à-vis the occupation and its representation, in particular the representation of the ethnic-religious-national

“Other,” comes to bear on documentary filmmaking. Moreover, it enables the nurturing of documentary production in the face of current tides, be they postmodern or capitalist-globalized, i.e. the sweeping pull to tune into the entertainment imperatives of the marketplace. In this sense, the demand for formats such as dock-activism or autobiographical films in the form of personal diaries, for example, necessarily entails a higher degree of self-reflexivity. Even if the film is highly personal, sensitivity to the value of “truth,” the ethical position, and the limitations of narcissism necessarily curtail the pull toward entertainment, or change it altogether.

The unique characteristics of Israeli documentary stand out in this year’s collection of films. Anat Even’s “Closure,” for example, presents the filmmaker’s personal story, as she mourns for her drowned brother. Over the course of a year, from September to July, she follows the reality that unfolds in the yard below from her second story window. That which takes place outside echoes of her inner mourning. The yard, laden with fruit trees planted by her brother who had his potting studio there, gets sold off to a contractor. The trees are brutally uprooted to clear the lot for the construction of a building, not unlike the new luxury high-rise overshadowing the pastoral neighborhood. Ironically, when her view unto the world is blocked, when the brick wall of the adjacent building under construction closes her in, that is, when the mourning period comes to an end, a chapter in the process comes to an end. The gaze turned outward, to the yard and the 100-year history of this Southern Tel Aviv neighborhood, is also an inward look. The construction and the documentation of the house’s immediate surroundings also expose, albeit implicitly, the capitalist power relations between north and south Tel Aviv, the contradiction between the Arab day laborers and the past neighborly relations between Arabs, Jews, Ottomans, British and German Templers in that very neighborhood. In this sense, her choice of showing only glimpses of footage elucidates not only the way that the past disappears never to return, but

also the evasive nature of memory. Moreover, the autobiographical story, true to the observer's perspective, effaces the boundaries between external and internal. In a poetic and beautiful manner, on the one hand, the memories associated with external reality fade away while internal reality remains vivid. On the other hand, the new internal reality is re-constructed by the destructive external reality —each story built in the adjacent building marks a phase in her closure. Her choice to interweave sparse images of footage from her brother's life and the neighborhood's history, accentuates the burden of dealing with time's passing. Finally, when the camera leaves its fixed position in the window unto the roof of the nearby high-rise, revealing a panoramic view of the city, the space and the movement hint at reconciliation and a hope, for both the filmmaker and the viewer.

Self-reflexivity and an ethical interweaving of the private and the public also stands out in the story conveyed in Arnon Goldfinger's film "The Flat." The film describes the process of dismantling his grandmother's apartment following her death. "The Flat" evokes the other, no less dominant theme in Israeli documentary representation, not that of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but that of the Holocaust. Here too, like in Even's film, the various stages of the flat's dismantling, from the first time the shutters are lifted upon the jam-packed flat until it stands empty, mark emotional changes in the director, a third-generation Holocaust survivor, but also his mother. But Goldfinger's narrative is also part detective story. Old Nazi periodicals found in the flat, impeccably preserved in Berliner fashion from the 1930s, lead him to uncover his family's unspoken past. "The Flat" exposes in thrilling fashion what Holocaust historian Dan Diner termed "negative symbiosis" between Jews and Germans after the war. Goldfinger travels to Germany to meet the daughter of an SS officer, the Baron Von Mildenstein, who worked for Goebles and was Eichmann's predecessor. Her parents, as it turns out from evidence uncovered

in the flat, were friends of Goldfinger's grandparents. The two couples not only maintained close relations before the war, they continued their friendship after it. Goldfinger, for his part, confronts both the Nazi's daughter and his own mother with this information. The drama gives rise to questions about inter-national and inter-generational relations. Both the Nazi baron's daughter and the director's mother grew up in an era of silence, repression and denial. Goldfinger's mother is prepared to face the truth, but cannot comprehend the negative symbiosis between her parents and their German friends, especially after she discovers that her own grandmother was murdered in Teresenstadt. Von Mildenstein's daughter, on the other hand, refuses to part with her denial. The detective story never really reaches a conclusion, for it isn't about "who-done-it?" so much as "why?" As such, the film raises far-reaching questions about the past without forcing oversimplified answers. It's uniqueness lies in exposing the denial of Jewish and German families alike, and pointing to the differences between the second and the third generation.

The excellent film of Netalie Braun and Avigail Sperber, "The Hangman," touches on the Holocaust in a unique manner. The encounter with Shalom Nagar, a 75-year old butcher who was also the man entrusted with hanging Adolph Eichmann, exposes another facet of Israel, as it tuned into the trial some 50 years ago and what transpired in the decades that followed. Nagar recollects and reflects upon the period when he served in the unit of wardens that guarded Eichmann. With exceptional humor, he draws a connection between his Yemenite origins and the fact the he was the man chosen to taste Eichmann's food to test if it had been poisoned. But the intimacy imposed on Nagar soon became an intimacy of horror, as he was ordered to kill the man whose wellbeing he had been entrusted with. The personal story of Nagar, who suffers the post-traumatic effects of his own acts, albeit carried out while in service, is exposed to the viewer

with sensitivity as a tale of transformations embedded in humanity and moral decision. Nagar is represented as battling his past with renewed adherence to his Jewish faith, yet is not blinded by it. He was one of the first people to settle the extremist Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba on the outskirts of Hebron, but was also the first to leave it after Baruch Goldstein massacred 29 Arab worshippers at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in 1994. Despite his proximity to the decisive moments of Israeli history, he remains true to himself. The camera's unmediated proximity to him reveals an exceptionally humane and morally driven character. The film's uniqueness lies in the fact that it places the 2011 Israeli viewer, in denial about the occupation and increasingly reactionary, squarely in front of a mirror that requires ethical interpolation, not just emotional identification with a fantastic story.

The project "Jerusalem Moments," an initiative of the NGO "Ir Amim: For an Equitable and Stable Jerusalem with an Agreed Political Future" under the artistic direction of Yael Perlov, includes a collection of short films by Israeli and Palestinian film school graduates. This time, Israeli-Palestinian cooperation spawned true ingenuity, both in terms of the visibility of Jerusalem, especially the eastern side of the city, and cinematically. Thus, for example, the Muslim cemetery in Mamilah, a no-man's-land between 1948-1967, whose tombstones have been desecrated, is exposed. And so are: "The Little Wall," a lesser-known remnant of the ancient Temple, where worshippers come to pray day and night; a Palestinian bus that departs from Damascus Gate to the outlying of the city; an ancient Hamam (bathhouse) contested for its proximity to the Al-Aqsa Mosque; the Qalandia Refugee Camp. This collection not only offers unusual sights but sounds as well. On the bus, one hears testimonies gathered by the NGO B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, concretizing the difficulties of traversing a blockaded city. Or the rhymes of Palestinian rappers

calling themselves “G-Town,” who convey the freedom (and lack-there-of) of Palestinian youth in the Shuafat Refugee Camp to express themselves as they please. Especially moving are the films co-created by Israeli and Palestinian directors, in which the heavy-handed feeling that a “Self” is struggling to portray an “Other” is eliminated. The gaze these “Jerusalem Moments” direct at the invisible and inaudible is loaded with the energy of youth who aim to show us another Jerusalem, where the shooting weapons are cameras and the ammunition is in words.

It seems that Israeli documentary is a cinema of constant struggle. Not only because this is the reality imposed on most of its protagonists, in various ways, or, for that matter, since it expresses that which fictional cinema fails to, but because this is the reality imposed on its makers as well. One hundred and one years of negotiations with no resolution force it to be so. Paradoxically, due to instability and ongoing conflict, it serves as an exceptional example in world cinema for preserving the value of documentary truth and a clear ethical position in a media world laden with compromise.

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