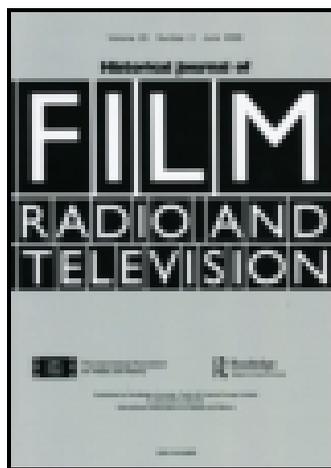


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Waltzing with Bashir: perpetrator trauma and cinema

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BOOK REVIEW

Waltzing with Bashir: perpetrator trauma and cinema

RAYA MORAG

New York–London, I. B. Tauris, 2013

288 pp., illus., £62.00 (cloth)

In the introduction to her book *Waltzing with Bashir: perpetrator trauma and cinema*, Raya Morag clearly summarizes the book's objective:

First, it proposes a new direction in cinema studies to deal with national traumas, one that for the first time recognizes a shift from trauma suffered by victims to that suffered by perpetrators. Second, driven by the emergence of new wave of Israeli documentary cinema [...] it analyzes second intifada cinema in light of this shift. (p. 3)

Indeed, Morag timely responds to a much needed task. To start with, although analyzing a variety of cinematic genres—fiction, documentary, literature and short films—this study is among the first English-language, book-length studies of new Israeli documentary (it is worth mentioning in this context Shmulik Duvdevani's *First Person, Camera*, 2010, in Hebrew). Second, it offers a meta-critical view of trauma theory addressing its repressed other, the figure of the perpetrator. And third, it attempts at theorizing a group of films that challenge both representation—the unrepresentability of the traumatic event—and the spectator's response and commitment to the unsympathetic figure presented.

Following this, the book offers a thorough research into second intifada and post-second intifada (2000–2008) Israeli cinema, which, with the rupture of violence—one out of many in the area—engendered a wave of films fiercely criticizing years of Israeli occupation and a constant state of war/trauma. Films such as *To See if I'm Smiling* (Tamar Yarom, 2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), *Z32* (Avi Mograbi, 2008) and others, were acclaimed by both Israeli and international audiences and confronted the spectator with unsettling stories of atrocities committed by Israeli male and female soldiers. In Israel, where war trauma and traumatic memory are vernacular grounds for national identity and being a soldier is a central socializing phase experienced by most Jewish-Israeli citizens, these confessions are hard to endure. They point towards a moral bankruptcy of Israeli society and retrospectively expose a repressed guilt for past evils. Morag inquires into these confessions, asking what subject position do they carve for the soldier-turned

perpetrator? What is society's role in perpetration and in the absorbing of the perpetrator's confessions into its ethical stance and knowledge of itself and its other?

Morag situates her research in the arena of new war, an arena which, as she explicates, destabilizes former binary definitions of war–peace, victory–defeat, beginning–end, moral–immoral, defense–offense, civilian–soldier, victim–perpetrator, us–them, warfare–terror, home–front. New war engenders new gender relations, new trauma models and new ethics. In the wake of new war, with its shifting of former paradigms, the body, as an ontological entity, becomes a battlefield, and the corpse, the abject, a charged, evasive means, the proximity of which draws new subject–other positioning. The book's first of two parts is devoted to defining new war's features, and its conceptualization of the body and of time. This part is dedicated to films produced during the second intifada, centering on a series of suicide bombing attacks that took place in the heart of Israeli cities. Morag notes that fiction films produced during that time failed to account for the horror of the intifada, displacing collective guilt or trauma with family and quasi-family dramas. In contrast, documentary films and a format she terms the short-short film portrayed a situation of constant violence, a chronic trauma. Morag anchors her argument in two ontological dimensions. First, she demonstrates how suicide attacks summons new encounter with the abject, producing bodies with no corpses (the body of the attacker) and corpses with no bodies (the victims' corpses, which were mutilated beyond recognition). Second, drawing on nuanced analysis of sound and the representation of time in the short-short film, she draws new war's 'time-trap,' a perception of time based on 'circular negativity' a continuous anticipation, arbitrariness and inevitability of the attack. The 'time trap' breaches trauma theory's models of before–after, belatedness, and post-memory. Instead, it presents a model oscillating between what Morag terms 'anti-memory' and 'pre-memory' (a concept that appears similar to contemporary critical use of screen memory), generating a state of chronic trauma.

While the first part, inquiring into the nature of trauma in new war, still remains within the realm of victim trauma, the second part of the book is dedicated to perpetrator trauma. Perpetrator trauma is characteristic of post-second intifada Israeli documentary, as Morag contends: 'The new current [of perpetrator documentary] attests to the difficulty Israeli documentary cinema encounters in breaching the repression and denial in Israel, which despite undergoing myriad internal political and ideological ruptures during these years (1987–2006) maintained its self-image of a victimized Jewish society' (p. 130). According to Morag, the new wave of perpetrator cinema revolved around a series of crises: crisis of evidence, crisis of disclosure, crisis of narrativization, crisis of the audience and crisis of gender. This set of crises emanates respectively from a difficulty to prove that perpetration took place, to fully expose perpetration and perpetrators, to bridge the gap between victim identity and that of the perpetrator, to appeal to a supportive imagined community, and to account for a new power relation, tackled by Morag's analysis of the portrayal of the female perpetrator. Here Morag points out that the female perpetrator is implied in two sets of hierarchies: her oppressive place as a female in a masculine militaristic system, and her role as oppressor in an ethnic-based occupation. In the book's last chapter, Morag analyzes perpetrator documentary literature drawing on Foucault's model of Parrhesiatic

speech: speaking for the sake of truth and at the risk of death, speaking truth to power. In this illuminating chapter, Morag defines the paradigm of perpetrator trauma as a shift from the victim's testimony, based on emotional, psychological and clinical truth, to the perpetrator's uncathartic confession, an articulation of guilt for the sake of ethics rather than personal redemption.

According to Morag, perpetrator trauma marks a shift from psychological reflection to ethical engagement; it brings out the contradictions and exposes blockages of the social moral conscience, rather than simply leaving society haunted by the traumatic event; it moves us from the volatile time of belated response, to the accountable 'being there' of the perpetrator's confession. Most important, perpetrator trauma does not appeal to audience compassion, but induces commitment to the other and calls for personal responsibility. Morag echoes a dominant voice that emerged in the post-second intifada era. Following the release of *Waltz with Bashir* in Israel, and its being short-listed for the Academy Award, Israeli film-makers, intellectuals and scholars all protested against what they termed the 'shooting and crying syndrome,' the covering up for evil-doing with the recalling of past (victim) traumas. The journalist Gideon Levy writes: 'The Waltz is founded on two principles: we shot and we cried, oh, how much we cried, and it wasn't our hands that spilled the blood. A few Holocaust memories [...] a pinch of victimization, and here you go, here is the tricky portrait of Israel of 2008' (*Ha'aretz*, February 20, 2009). The poet and publicist, Yitzhak Laor adds: 'The film makes things easy, it [...] adopts the Israeli entertainment industry's passion to sell what the outside can digest. It is made with the moral permissiveness that we have accumulated since the intifada of 2000' (*Ha'aretz*, February 27, 2009). The artist and writer Udi Aloni argues that 'the character of a soldier that suffers remorse and does not take criminal responsibility assists the west in making Israel look like a western country in the heart of the Barbaric Middle-East' (*Mouse*, September 17, 2009). Sticking to the trauma paradigm is keeping the injury. However, Morag maintains it because it has such a defining role in any articulation of Jewish-Israeli identity and its possible evolvment or emancipation. As violence culminates, maybe such economy of suffering needs to be reconsidered, leaving for Jewish-Israeli subjects positions other than the traumatic one.

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