

## Sisters in Rebellion

By Raya Morag | 01/07/2010

With an intimacy rare in documentary cinema, one based on partnership and sisterhood, *Zuria* depicts the tragedy of rebellion against violent and humiliating ultra-Orthodox familial relationships and the irresolvable feeling of being torn from the families that accepted only total submission, forced a fabricated mental illness, and finally excluded the rebellious women.

Raya Morag reflects on Anat Zuria's film *Black Bus*, grand prize winner at the Haifa Film Festival, as it follows two young women who have left the ultra-Orthodox community.

Anat Zuria's extraordinary film, *Black Bus* (*Soreret*, in Hebrew *Rebellious Woman*) (2009), is unique in Israeli documentary cinema. The film traces two young women, Shulamit and Sarah, both struggling through the transition from ultra-Orthodox to secular society: from a life of violence and subservience to one of freedom; from an identity in which every detail is dictated in advance to a dynamic one that is re-formed every day anew; from life within a community and family to one that forced them to tear themselves away and sentenced them to loneliness.

As evidenced by the scathing reactions to the film and its protagonists on ultra-Orthodox websites, the label "rebellious woman" does not refer specifically to leaving a life of faith, but to the autonomous activism of the women. Their voices are heard because they are creators. Sarah writes a subversive blog, sharing her experiences with an entire community, and Shulamit takes still photos on the ultra-Orthodox street. In this sense, Zuria's film relates to another "rebellious woman" – the director herself – whose cinematic audio-visual voice is heard indirectly through the story of the two artists and mediates Sarah's words and Shulamit's visuals.

Can these three aesthetics stand up to the invisible so-called "modesty revolution" that has developed in the ultra-Orthodox community over the past decade? How should cinematic language describe the misogyny that rears its head, disguised as a mystical longing for repair of the world and *halakhic* (religious) norms?

Sarah is shown behind her writing desk. Thus she joins a long line of women writers – from the eighteenth-century authors of Gothic novels through the Bronte sisters and George Eliot and Virginia Woolf – who created out of frustration, depression, and anger over their lot in life. In her article "*La Cocina de las Escritura*" ("The Writer's Kitchen") (1982), Puerto Rican poet and author Rosario Ferré writes, "Words have allowed me to forge for myself a unique identity, one which owes its existence only to my own efforts. For this reason, I place more trust in the words I use than perhaps I ever did in my natural mother. When all else fails... I know the words are there, ready to return my confidence to me." [trans. Diana L. Velez, *Feminist Studies*, XII, 2 (Summer 1986): 227-242.]

Zuria's camera follows Shulamit during her endless wanderings through the streets of Jerusalem and Bnei Brak. Day and night, she obsessively photographs the society from which she was exiled. Her camera is directed mainly at her other "self" – the ultra-Orthodox woman. One of her subjects, who senses the camera's gaze, hurries to hide behind the baby carriage she is pushing. The photograph captures the crucial moment in which the oppressed, who has internalized the

oppression, acts in accordance with the rules of the oppressor, even in his absence. She expresses through her contorted body acceptance of the public space as one that is exclusively male, patriarchal, and rabbinic. The woman's body makes itself unseen, thereby effectively embodying what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed "symbolic violence," obedience based on the body's internalization of control.

### **The Healing Process**

In another scene, Shulamit and Sarah discuss a photograph of an ultra-Orthodox woman whose body is slouched and limp, with an opaque expression on her face. Her posture recalls that of the woman who hid from Shulamit's camera. Her submissive posture is a realization of social assimilation, and signifies belonging to a particular sub-culture. Zuria pans to this photograph again and again. "That's me with ten children," says Sarah about the photo. The tension between the different possibilities of "Me" lies at the heart of the drama. The sense that "I" represents "her" even though "she" has already given up is present in Zuria's discussions with Sarah and Shulamit about the past. The parents of both of the women tried to convince them they were mentally ill, and they are both still grappling with their unwilling internalization of past violence. Consequently, after Sarah took her children and ran away from her husband and parents, the first thing she did was request a psychiatric evaluation. Zuria chooses to distance herself from the details of the story; to her, internal, involuntary submission is the preferred space to document. She shows Shulamit as a still photographer creating a self-reflexive work based on attraction-repulsion to her object.

The choice of still photography has additional significance. As generally known, photography theory, especially since Roland Barthes, has dealt with the similarity between photography and death. Both freeze a moment, cut it off from time, are devoid of movement, and silent. In cutting moments of time and collecting pictures that document the frozen moment, Shulamit returns again and again to the act of photography as a symbolic alternative to killing and reviving the ultra-Orthodox world.

With an intimacy rare in documentary cinema, one based on partnership and sisterhood, Zuria depicts the tragedy of rebellion against violent and humiliating ultra-Orthodox familial relationships and the irresolvable feeling of being torn from the families that accepted only total submission, forced a fabricated mental illness, and finally excluded the rebellious women. The result leaves the protagonists with a torn and sometimes suicidal identity. Zuria leads the spectator to the realization that the oppressive and punitive mechanisms of ultra-Orthodox society are exponentially more difficult for those excluded from it. Even exiles or immigrants maintain an ongoing connection with their far away families.

Zuria juxtaposes the frozen time of the still photograph and the rapid dissemination of the blog against the movement of segregated buses in Bnei Brak and Jerusalem. In a quasi-return to racial discrimination in the United States pre-Rosa Parks, she constantly shoots women boarding the buses from the rear and men from the front. Occasionally the camera shows terrible crowdedness in the back and empty seats in the front. The segregated bus becomes a metaphor for the world through which it travels. A recurring element in the film, it embodies the paradox of movement that contains the frozenness of oppressive discrimination. The women's compliance with bus

segregation indicates, above all, the ways in which the ultra-Orthodox separatist movement has taken over the religious space in Israel.

As Sarah and Shulamit painfully describe, the modesty revolution forced a complete separation between the genders, which dominates every phase of life: the home, the family, the street, the bus. The rule against showing the female body is in fact subordinated to the perspective of the ultra-Orthodox man, who uses oppressive legal and illegal means to make the feminine invisible, non-existent, and, most of all, inferior.

*Black Bus* exposes only a tiny thread of a dark story. Given the radical policing of body and space in the ultra-Orthodox community, Zuria's casting of Sarah and Shulamit as the protagonists makes their radiant physical presence more than a mere symbol of subversion. Both Shulamit and Sarah are young beauties. Their attractiveness is emphasized by their clothing, short skirts, flowing hair, jewelry, and makeup. But *Black Bus* does not adopt accepted patriarchal norms regarding female representation in mainstream cinema or in popular visual culture. In contrast, the camera's gaze on Sarah and Shulamit's female bodies is neither voyeuristic nor objectifying. Rather, it embodies their struggle and serves as a means of exposing the tension between religious fundamentalism and secularism, submission and opposition, fantasy and reality, and invisibility and spectacle.

Beyond that, however, as part and parcel of opposing the modesty revolution, Sarah and Shulamit's presence on the cinematic screen at the height of their beauty means a process of healing. *Black Bus* offers them, and us, the option of a different look.

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