

Walk on Water a film directed by Eytan Fox raises more questions than it answers. Devoid of the Israeli (and German) centrality of the film it could well be classified as a member of the “Conflict and Redemption” genre with other films such as the “Lord of The World” or the “Constant Gardener”. As such it would probably not deserve my enthusiastic acclaim as masterpiece of Israeli cinema.

At its core it is a story about a covert agent whose professional responsibilities come into direct and almost irreconcilable conflict with his personal life and culminating in the suicide death of the woman he loved and who loved him. The world around him crumbles when he is hit by an emotional storm when he can no longer reconcile his grief, guilt and (professional) responsibility. His professional performance declines, his personal life is non-existent and at the point when both converge he fails to execute his professional mission. His tough veneer crumbles to reveal a sensitive vulnerable and conflicted shadow of himself. His emotional breakdown occurs at the very moment when he finds himself incapable of “pulling the trigger” when he remembers the words his loved one wrote in her suicide note she left him: *“You kill everyone around you”*.

A predictable ending ensues when he marries one of the protagonists he followed in the course of executing his last professional mission and in the closing scene when he holds his first born baby and comforts him in the middle of the night with such warmth and compassion – you can feel it – Redemption and Rebirth.

Examining this film from that generic point of view, without the Israeli centric themes does not help distinguish this film from other good films of this genre. The British Magazine Third Way of 2005 reviewer, must have watched the film from just this perspective when he makes an indirect yet not-so-complimentary reference to Eytan Fox’ film in a review of another film, “The Constant Gardener”: *Two recent UK releases immediately spring to mind when discussing this film. The first is the low-budget marvel Walk on Water, a flawed thriller set partly on an Israeli Kibbutz and partly in Berlin = all German*

and Israelis, a transnational movie with neither a Brit or an American in sight. The second is Lord of the World...

Enter the Israeli context and multiple layers of conflict are painted over and woven into the original canvas. Questions begin to arise across the spectrum of Israel's most traumatic experience and hopefully not experiment, in creating a homeland for the Jews on the ashes of the Holocaust. Only then do serious if not existential questions begin to arise:

Can Israelis ever forgive Germany and the German people for the atrocities perpetrated by their Nazi elders?

Can Israelis ever live in peace and harmony with Israeli Arabs or Palestinians and bridge the traditional disdain, distrust and disrespect?

Can Israeli men brought up on the tradition of the invincible "Sabra" macho peel off this layer and expose their vulnerabilities? Can they break away from the shackles of intolerance, homophobia, chauvinism that are masking their "softer belly" as human beings? And finally,

No matter how horrendous the crime, do we have the right to do God's work when we do not really have to?

These questions remain unanswered long after the closing scene. In fact it is left to each of us who watched the film to answer these questions for ourselves. It is for this, more than any reason that this film leaves such a mark on the audiences and it is this that, in my opinion, that makes it a masterpiece.

AZM Movie Review offers a concise plot summary for readers who did not have the privilege to watch the film:

Israeli Mossad agent Eyal is given a simple task to get his mind off his wife's recent suicide: track down and kill an aging ex-Nazi officer, Alfred Himmelman. In the guise of a tour guide, Eyal befriends his target's grandson Axel, who is in Israel visiting his sister Pia, who lives on a kibbutz. Eyal accompanies Axel to the Dead Sea, wines and dines with the siblings in Tel Aviv and escorts them to a nightclub recommended to the liberal Axel by a Palestinian waiter. Axel is gay, whereas Eyal thinks of himself as a macho Israeli man. Nevertheless, when Eyal travels to Berlin, believing the old man will resurface at his son's birthday party, he is uncertain whether he can go through with his assignment.

Eytan Fox weaves a number of electrically charged themes that turn a Conflict and Redemption platform into a complex web of Israeli (and German) specific dilemmas. This is how AZM –Movie Guide of 2004 describes the centric elements of the film: *“When Eyal, a tough Israeli agent, is given the assignment to kill off an aging ex-Nazi, he never suspects that this one mission could change his life. His interactions with characters such as the young Germans Axel and Pia, and Rafik, a gay Palestinian, yield powerful insights into the qualities of manliness, the fabric of personal relationships and the nature of forgiveness, Holocaust retribution; Second Intifada; responsibility of the individual within the culture of the Mossad (Israeli intelligence agency); Israeli attitudes towards Germans; stereotypes of Israeli men”*

The Holocaust and the Second Intifada are by no means on par in terms of their traumatic repercussions. However both periods have had lasting traumatic effect on the Jewish and Israeli psyche. In both cases, a breakdown of trust between the adversaries was involved and the animosities it evoked have been perpetuated to this day by their descendants. Two moral questions are involved in tying together these two periods. The first is retribution versus forgiveness. Second, to what extent can individuals be held responsible for the actions of the population as a whole?

For instance, Eyal has no evidence that the Palestinian waiter Rafik is a terrorist or in any way involved with terrorism nevertheless he carries over his feelings towards the Palestinians with his cold reception

of Rafik, treating him with great suspicion and disdain. This is how AZM Movie guide describes it: *"This movie examines the historical legacy of ethnic conflicts and the rigidity and lasting effects of the social prejudice they creates "*

Saul Austerlitz is a freelance writer in New York City. In his review he volunteers the following perspective: *" It's nice to see a filmmaker indulge his own obsessions as thoroughly as Eytan Fox does with his new film, "Walk on Water." Fox's last film, "Yossi & Jagger," was a gay romance set in the Israeli military, and his new work cooks with the same ingredients, adding in Israeli-German relations and the ever-present specter of the Holocaust to spice up the broth."* He offers an intriguing subtlety: *" In mingling all his variegated obsessions, Fox is on to something here; there is something profoundly similar about how Eyal and Axel interact as men, and how they interact as Israeli and German".*

In scholarly accounts discussing Walk-On-Water the main focus appears to be on sexual politics, Israeli trauma, or on equally shared trauma, of second and third generation thus constructing a misleading German generational succession in relation to the Holocaust analogous to the descendants of survivors.

In The book *"Narratives of Trauma: Discourses of German Wartime Suffering in National and International Perspective"*. (German Monitor) [Paperback], Helmut Schmitz (Editor), Annette Seidel-Arpaci (Editor) (p. 213) under the heading "The Miracle Workers" the author says that: *"the sacrifice that is performed by Axel reverses post Holocaust history at long last a German character no longer leaves the punishment to the (descendant) of the victim and thereby releases the Israeli from the militaristic masculinity he had to build for himself in response to the trauma of the holocaust. The "good consequence" that flow from the slaying is thus the inauguration of the new German nation taking responsibility for the past. Moreover the beginning of new German - Jewish/ Israeli chapter made literal in the birth of Pia and Eyal's child."*

The book quotes Raz Yosef who argues that Walk-On-Water: *“fails to listen to the trauma of the other. The film does not take ethical responsibility for the other's traumatic wound instead it channels the trauma of the other in favor of reconstructing the Israeli male heterosexual subjectivity. In this film the Israeli subject indulges in love affair with himself”*.

By contrast, this book suggests that it is not only Eyal that is traumatized and relating his loss by rescuing Axel and his queer friends who stand in for the new German. In Walk-On-Water the German siblings suffering and their emotional rescue of Eyal and thus Israel are equally at the heart of the narrative.

I watched this film at the Toronto Film Festival, 2009. At the end of the screening the director Eytan Fox explained that he wanted to imagine the two most opposite men possible and make them deal with each other.

Indeed the central character Eyal is the macho sabra, Mossad agent unable to discuss his feelings about his failed marriage, a child of a Holocaust survivor, tired with terrorist attacks and revenge. However in his final act he fails to execute the mission of terminating the life of the gravely ill Nazi criminal. What stopped him in his tracks? Has there been too much killing? Did his conscious get in his way? These remain open and painful questions for us to ponder.

Axel by contrast the soft spoken, gentle soul homosexual young German who is aware of the Nazi legacy and his grandfather's active role in the Holocaust, but is unwilling to carry the burden of guilt that characterizes his parent's generation. Yet in his final act of terminating his gravely ill grandfather's life he seeks redemption and forgiveness in an attempt to close this chapter in German history – But did it? Will it? These remain open and painful questions for both Israelis and Germans

AZM Movie Guide offers an important background of the film's creators that would likely facilitate a better understanding in search of the reader's own journey of discovery.

Many movies directed by Eytan Fox explore the themes of homosexuality and of Israeli-Palestinian relationships Fox himself is openly gay. His partner of over 18 years, Gal Uchovsky, has been involved with the scriptwriting for many of Fox's films, including this movie. A writer and journalist, Uchovsky has been one of the most influential gay men in Israel as a vocal advocate for gay rights. Fox's early films with homosexual undertones include his first short films Time Off (1990) and Gotta Have Heart (1997). In addition, Fox directed Florentine (1997-2000), the first Israeli TV show with gay main characters, which examined the life of young people in Tel Aviv before and after the Rabin assassination and won a TV drama award. Yossi and Jager (2002), Fox's breakthrough international hit, is the love story of two male officers in the IDF. Fox credits his awareness of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to his mother. When he was two, his family emigrated from New York City to Israel, where his mother became a community activist in Jerusalem's French Hill neighborhood and member of the Jerusalem Council. She died while Fox was making Walk on Water. After her death, Fox and his siblings visited Isawiya, an Arab village close to French Hill, and began a project to improve its living conditions in their mother's name. In addition, Fox revealed to the French gay magazine Têtu that he fell in love with a Palestinian man during his military service at age 18, an experience which he describes as having a significant impact on him. (July-August 2007 Bubble (2006), the story of a gay relationship between an Israeli and a Palestinian in Tel Aviv. In 2006, Fox was the first to receive the Decade Award, given to a filmmaker whose work significantly contributed to Jewish cinema over at least ten years.

Another interesting and significant fact relates to the film's commercial success:

Walk on Water was extremely successful internationally, making a total of \$7 million worldwide, the most of any Israeli movie. In the United States, it grossed \$142,000 in 29 theaters in one weekend (March 2005).

In conclusion Walk On Water is an excellent film for the general fan of emotionally charged relationship dramas, but for Israelis, Germans, Palestinians, and anybody with interest in the themes of the Holocaust, Israeli-Palestinian conflict and an insightful peek into Israeli culture – it is a must-see movie that will keep you thinking and searching for answers long after the credits rolled by and the lights came on.
