

Question #3 – The Depiction of The Holocaust and Holocaust survivors.

This article focuses on what is known as the “Post-Zionist” period of Israeli cinema beginning in the late 70s and follows the depiction of the Holocaust and Holocaust survivors in Israeli films up to today. Ilan Avishar in his introduction to *“The Place and Absence of the Holocaust in Israeli Cinema”* (1) says that: *“The Israeli films dealing with the Holocaust derive their meaning from the national ideologies at specific historical moments and the relation of filmmaking to public and political institutions.”* It is therefore important to briefly review the historical backdrop leading up to the 70’s. The Zionist films such as *“He Walked the Fields”* and *“Hill 24 Does Not Answer”* focused on building up of the heroic image of the “Sabra” (New Jew) in contrast to the Holocaust survivor as a symbol of the dreaded past – the Exilic Jew. The Eichmann trial of 1961 brought for the first time the horrific atrocities of the Holocaust to the conscienceless of the Israelis. After the Six Days War of 1967 and through the Yom Kipur War of 1973 Israel went on a voyage from euphoric invincibility to extreme anxiety and existential vulnerability that brought back the memory of the Holocaust.

Mennachem Golan’s 1977 *“Operational Thunderbolt”* depicts the heroic, daring and morale uplifting “mission impossible” operation that restored Israeli society’s pride and confidence. Yet the German hijackers remind us of the Nazis. The old Holocaust survivor Jew asking permission to go to the toilet reminds us of the meek exilic Jew and the hijackers selection process in releasing some of the hostages leaving behind only Jews and Israelis serves as a reminder of the grim reality of Jewish (and now Israeli) persecution.

It was not until the late 70s with the Right wing shift in Israeli politics that Israeli filmmakers (traditionally Left leaning) began to use the medium as a platform for political protest against the establishment. The Holocaust and its survivors were depicted as metaphors to challenge the moral fabric of the Israeli society, its aggressive policies and militaristic attitudes.

Ilan Moshenson's 1979 "Wooden Guns" is the story of Israeli children playing on the Tel-Aviv beach imitating adults war fighting. It culminates with the transforming encounter between the protagonists Yoni (the child who is injured in the mock fight) and Palestina (the seemingly insane Holocaust survivor haunted by images of the Holocaust). The care and warmth of Palestina's treatment of his wounds on the background of horrific Holocaust imagery causes Yoni to empathize with her as a victim and to feel remorse over behaving as a victimizer. The film thus advocates self-examination of the moral standards in Israeli society, subliminally in relation to the treatment of the Palestinians.

In the 1980's Israeli films continued their aggressive political agenda and the harsh criticism of the Israeli society. Second generation guilt ridden attitudes replaced former resentment and arrogance towards survivors. These films depicted the experiences of refugees and survivors immigrating to Israel only to find a different reality than (as Avishar puts it) "Healing and redemption in the Zionist State". Complex cultural connections to German roots, intolerant and indifferent treatment by the Israeli society, the misunderstood scars of a shadowy past of some of the survivors (e.g. the sexually abused survivors and the ex *Kapo* in *Tel Aviv-Berlin*) are all elements designed to challenge the traditional attitudes towards Holocaust survivors.

Chronologically understandable the depiction of Holocaust survivors in the 90's focused on the Second Generation's exploration of their parents and relatives Holocaust experiences. Up until well into the 80's there was a certain "taboo" on this topic. The survivors didn't want to talk about it, their children didn't want to hear about it and thus their children knew nothing about it. In the 90's, the appeal of the tough and rough "Sabra" image began to wane and Israeli born, including Holocaust survivors' children, felt the need to bridge the ideological gap between themselves and their aging Holocaust survivor parents. This genre is characterized by such films as the 1988 "*Avia's Summer*", by Gila Almagor, the 1988 "*Because of This War*" directed by Orna Ben-Dov Nir. While focusing of personal experiences of

survivors and the bonding effect on their children, many of these films were heavily critiqued as overly melodramatic, narcissistic, historically revisionist and incorporating subtle and not so subtle political agendas (e.g. unease over the repression of the *intifada* in *“Because of this War”*).

In the early 2000’s also chronologically understandable, Israeli films began to focus on the avenging of the Nazi atrocities by tracking down the few remaining aging Nazi criminals who escaped justice.

Thrillers such as *“Walk-on-Water”*, *“The Debt”* and *“Munich”* (in more of a symbolic way as it relates to the Holocaust) all of Hollywood production standards received high acclaim. They featured Israeli *Mossad* agents some who are also second generation Holocaust survivors on missions to kill remaining Nazi criminals. These films address with a great deal of integrity universal topics such as birth and redemption (*Walk-on-Water*), living with a lie and seeking revenge and redemption (*The Debt*) and the constant shadow of the Holocaust as it affects personal relationships and introspective self-examination of human frailties.

The second decade of the 21st century continues to deal with Holocaust survivors and the memory of the Holocaust is still imprinted in the Israeli psyche. *“The Flat”* is a new release of a wonderful “third generation” film. It proves that while the first generation didn’t want to talk about it and the second generation for the longest time didn’t want to hear about it, the third generation needs to know about it and forever preserve the trauma of the Holocaust and its implication on Jewish life in Israel and abroad.

Bibliography:

- (1) Efraim Sicher, *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, 1988, pp. 137-159
- (2) Judd Ne’eman, *Holocaust in Israeli Films*, *Independent Jewish Film: A Resource Guide (The San Francisco Jewish Film Festival)*.
- (3) Prof. Shemer's lecture on the Holocaust in Israeli cinema, which he gave at ECU in December of 2010.

Question #1 – The Depiction of the Israeli Sabra in Israeli Cinema

Historical review of Israeli Cinema shows dramatic changes over time from pure propaganda and deliberate indoctrination of the “National Ideology” to radical critique and protest in the post—Zionism era beginning in the late 70s. Throughout this period the Israeli Sabra the New Jew is the main protagonist in Israeli films and as such we can witness dramatic changes in its depiction.

The Holocaust and the birth of Israel signified the ideological victory of the Zionist ideology and the required transformation of the exilic Jewish image into the image of the heroic, independent assertive, Hebrew speaking “Sabra” initially on the background of the Kibbutz and later in Israeli wars of the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s. The “Sabra” was entrusted the leading role in the nation building project of a pioneering society built on a social democratic (but also European and Ashkenazi) foundation.

Beginning with the War of Independence the Israeli (male) “Sabra” was a symbol of heterosexual (some say chauvinistic) masculinity, bravery, heroism and resiliency. Over the years and owing to the changing attitudes in society, a different national discourse and the evolution of a multicultural immigrant society the Israeli Sabra image has evolved into a universal modern contemporary male (or female) figure. This article follows the history of the depiction of the Israeli Sabra through this journey.

The original vision of the founders of the “Israeli Project” was to create a “melting pot” society that is built on social democratic values and led by the New Jew – The “Sabra”. The most popular genre in Israeli Cinema was that of the war films beginning with the war of independence and through the Israeli wars of 1956, 1967, 1973 and the Entebbe hostage rescue. They include Films like *Hill 24*, *He Walked the Fields*, *Sinaia*, *Hero’s Wife*, *Every Bastard a King* and *Operation Thunderbolt* to name a few. In all these films the protagonist exemplified the stereotypical “Sabra” with arch type Sabra actors like Assie Dayan and Yehoram Gaon.

By the late 70s much of this has changed. Films like *Paratroopers*, showing how harsh training can break the spirit and life of a sensitive soldier, *Wooden Guns* critique of the militaristic attitudes entrenched from childhood, began to show the real, human and many times vulnerable side of the mythological image of the Sabra. The war in Lebanon in the early 80s became highly controversial. As first depicted in Uri Barbash's "*Beyond the Walls*" and later in retrospective films such as *Buford*, *Waltzing with Bashir* and *Lebanon*. In these films the protagonists are depicted as men who are trying to do their jobs and are not afraid to expose their human frailties, fears, anxieties and even dare questioning the integrity of their mission.

Even the last bastion of the invincible Sabra is brought down in the film "Walk-on-Water" when Eyal the Mossad agent is cracking up under the pressure of his job (essentially a professional assassin) and is no longer able to uphold the burden of the invincible Sabra. His rebirth as a devoted father helps him overcome his homophobic fears, rebuild his personal relationships, stop the killing and still remain a human Sabra.

Bibliography:

- (1) *Ilan Avisar*, The National and Popular in Israeli Cinema