THE FILMS OF AMOS GITAI
(IMAGES OF THE HOLY LAND)

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"The God Mother"
Mele 11/98

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I believe . . . that what I care about most is the freedom of man, the liberation of the individual . . . from the network of moral and social conventions in which he believes, or rather in which he thinks he believes, [but] which encloses him and limits him and makes him seem narrower, smaller . . . even worse than he really is. If you really want me to turn teacher, then condense it with these words: be what you are . . . discover yourself . . . To me life is beautiful, for all its tragedy and suffering . . . I am moved by it . . . I do my best to share this way of feeling with others.

Federico Fellini,
Fellini on Fellini

I began with the documentary. I abandoned it because every nonfiction filmmaker ends up realizing one day the boundaries that can’t be crossed—those beyond which we risk causing harm to the people we film. That’s when we feel the need to make fiction features.

Krzysztof Kieslowski
I am trying to change the world.

Jean-Luc Godard

I would like to briefly consider the evocative work of Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai. Uneasily received in his homeland and relatively unknown in ours, Gitai is nevertheless widely admired in Europe for his sober reflections upon diaspora and ethnicity and a keen sensitivity in documenting the paradoxes of history and time. The foci of Gitai’s films vary widely. Biblical themes (Esther, Golem: The Spirit of Exile), documentary (American Mythologies, Film Diary, The Arena of Murder), and history (Berlin-Jerusalem, Kadosh) are all incorporated within the unflinching scrutiny of the filmmaker’s camera eye. We are returned, inexorably, to landscape as point of reference, as we are pressed to consider the struggles, aspirations, and follies of peoples/races against the universal backdrops of nature and time—humankind’s fleeting, uncertain sojourn within space and eternity.

Uprootedness, exile, and violence (masquerading too easily as ethnic self-righteousness) are prominent among Gitai’s themes. Esther retells the well-known scriptural tale of ancient anti-Semitism. Shot conspicuously in an abandoned Haifa slum from which Algerian Arabs had been forcibly removed, the film’s ironic implications are impossible to ignore. During the reenactment of an ethnocentric text that revolves around persecution, resistance, and revenge, the ominous roar of Israeli jet planes can be heard periodically punctuating the biblical narrative. Time and myth are conflated. The camera wonders episodically from the sparse, almost biblical, setting to glimpse the modern urban scene.

The Jewish feast of Purim celebrates the collective memory of this tale, as Esther and her uncle Mordechai outwit the Jew-hating Hamen, prevailing in the final hour upon a distracted, ineffectual king in order to bring about a villain’s demise. Gitai, however, does not stop here with the Sunday school rendition but rather continues to relate the rest of the narrative as well. Mordechai, not satisfied with Hamen’s execution, would put to death each of Hamen’s sons and innumerable potential aggressors as well. In short, the once victimized now wantonly plunder and murder. As the film ends, the actors deconstruct into their truer identities, each in turn saying a few words about her or his own story, who she or he really is. Some of the actors are émigrés from Europe; others are natives of Israel and Palestine. The role of Mordechai is played by Mohammed Bakri, a Palestinian actor and director deeply influenced by “the suffering of the Jewish people” who has nonetheless grown increasingly frustrated in his efforts to effect reciprocal understanding. The sensitive viewer is drawn irrevocably into the radical complexity of things, finds him- or herself far beyond easy distinctions between good versus evil.

This, of course, is precisely Gitai’s point. He comments:

In many ways, this is a film about memory—memories which are reflected through image and songs, through tales and music; memories stored in the songs of the Yemenite Jews who crossed the
Arabian desert and reached Jerusalem about three generations ago; memories kept alive in Palestinian exile songs.

The truer narrative thus transpires on the far side of politicized slogans of the Israeli government and Palestinian Authority. The new sounds are there if someone wants to listen. Anguish is not ethnocentric, nor is violence.

Speaking at Harvard University’s Carpenter Center, Gitai states that the film received only a single screening in Israel where he was accused of having re-written the Old Testament in the interests of politics. The filmmaker, however, was prepared with bible in hand and verified that the story was, indeed, more complex and psychologically profound than the abridged adaptation on which most Jewish children are reared. Gitai had, in fact, left out the most horrible parts. Here is a man committed to vision and art and the documentation of truth, a reexamination of ethnic and ethical codes. There are, to be sure, no easy answers, but symmetrical hatreds and racial divides will lead only to heartache and death, rage and revenge, and still further heartache and corpses. Asked about his feelings concerning his native land’s neglect of his work, Gitai is focused and succinct: “I have my work to do. I will settle accounts with Israel later on.”

*American Mythologies* is a meandering, low-budget documentary, an assemblage of images made at the time of Ronald Reagan’s ascendency to power. The film interweaves conversations with Jane Fonda, Francis Ford Coppola, a Los Angeles fashion designer, a programming executive for NBC with sundry documentary clips as Gitai travels across the breadth of our nation. He interviews a Native American woman amid the squalor that surrounds her dilapidated home on the reservation, asks her about life and culture and what has been lost. She is spent by years of indignity and hardship, the pervasive emptiness of her life. Void of all spontaneity, this woman is unable to mourn or, seemingly, even to grasp the annihilation of ancient rituals and ways with which she, the descendent, has been long since unacquainted. Gradually, yet irrepressibly, the awareness emerges that America is neither so free nor well-intentioned as we would like to believe, that authoritarian free enterprise constitutes its own form of violence, mind and monetary control, corruption and greed. Packaging, Gitai implies, plays a crucial role in this country of ours. Blake’s “mind-forged manacles” somehow crossed the Atlantic alongside those freedom seekers of yesteryear, intruding insidiously into these modern times. The film ends in People’s Park in Berkeley as we listen to the jive, colloquial, ultimately intelligent, insightful rap of a young black man who articulates, effectively, precisely this point.

Gitai’s collage-like and elegiac *Arena of Murder* incorporates documentary reportage with poetry and memory, autobiography and history, graffiti and scripture as the filmmaker returns to the land of his birth in the aftermath of Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination. The Israeli rock group to which Gitai repeatedly returns seems a bit off-putting at first but gradually arouses admiration as the lead singer speaks through songs (and in between them as well) of his admiration for the slain leader, a man who had evolved from
war hero to pacifist. The youth meditates on the prospects for the future of the Middle East if respective parties are unable to carry forth Rabin’s vision of peace and, in knee-jerk reaction, return to the self-serving agendas and oversimplified ideologies of Nentanyahu, the Likud, and the rest. “If an old man like Rabin can do it, then we can do it, too,” he tells his youthful fans as he proceeds to sing a sort of love song to the fallen prime minister.

Clinton’s moving expression of sadness and affection in the face of Rabin’s death is surreally captured in a newscast monitoring room. This heartfelt yet eerily stylized outpouring of grief elicits a difficult-to-pinpoint discomfiture many of us had hoped the talented politician might some day allow us to outgrow. One senses that his convictions and beliefs, laudable as they may be, are neither as thoroughgoing nor deeply felt as were Rabin’s. There is not quite the sense of this man having wrestled with angels and prevailed. Still, his dismay is not insincere. Gitai captures this nuance and ambiguity with a single shot of a very long row of monitors all broadcasting that same poised, confident, and photogenic face. We are reminded that once we had a really good actor in the White House and lament that we have taken such a sizeable step down.

And so it goes. Gitai’s Golem—The Spirit of Exile transposes the biblical tale of Ruth into modern-day Europe, drawing inspiration from the cabalistic legend of the Golem as protector of exiles and wanderers. Set in Paris, the film includes a cameo appearance by Bernardo Bertolucci and incorporates the stunning cinematography of Henri Alekan—the great master who had worked with Renoir, Cocteau, and, more recently, German filmmaker Wim Wenders as well. Dialogue meanders back and forth between French, Hebrew, English, and Arabic. Palestinians as well as Jews become emblematic of the turmoil of dislocation and prejudice. The film, not unlike the text on which it loosely is based, implies that life itself is an experience of wandering and exile. Only a compassion that cuts across ethnic/racial/national divides can hope to heal the ontological breach.

Kadosh explores the interminable religious laws and shibboleths that obtain within Mea Shearim, an insular and ultra-orthodox section of Jerusalem. Here fanatically self-righteous and self-perpetuating mores and codes are invoked to break up a truly loving but childless marriage even as matrimony is foisted on another woman where sex is (there is really no polite way to say it) nothing but rape. It is instructive to observe the contrasts between sex scenes both within the film itself and across the director’s work generally. I am not aware that we Americans have anything to compare in authenticity, subtlety, or scope. The story ends in tragedy for a genuinely pious woman who is abandoned to loneliness and shame, yet more ambiguously for another who leaves her childishly obedient and violent husband, pausing briefly as the sun rises and sets over the Temple Mount. Perhaps she will find her way out of the myopia of mindsets and myriad rules of religions that, at their worst, delimit and level every facet of life. Perhaps she will emerge into the greater consciousness and world. As we behold the majestic beauty of this ancient and war-torn land and the indescribable nobility of its timeless religious structures, we recall
those paintings of Monet and his unwavering faith in Nature’s own code. Again we observe the wisdom of Jesus: there may be life after death after all.

Gitai’s latest film, \textit{Kippur}, is a semi-autobiographical retelling of the filmmaker’s experience in what is known, from this side, as the Yom Kippur War, a conflict in which the helicopter aboard which Gitai flew rescue missions over Syria was shot down by enemy fire. On the way to the front, Weintraub (a fictional representation of the filmmaker himself) discusses Marcuse and over-consumption with his friend Russo, less philosophically inclined, though clearly more sanguine and sturdy. As the conflagration erupts, chaos and confusion gradually ensue, as all refined thoughts and would-be heroics are obscured by the bedlam of war. What begins for Russo and others as a chance to defend their country by putting the Arabs forcibly back in their place gradually bogs down in a nightmare of stagnation, horror, and death.

It was in the aftermath of this experience (the downing of a helicopter in which the Gitai himself was called upon to try to do some partisan good in this troubled part of the world) that the director-to-be decided to exchange his degree in architecture for a camera as a means repairing the world. “I did not want to spend my life designing shopping malls in occupied Palestinian territories,” Gitai later reflected. If only adversity might more regularly yield such spiritual fruit. Dylan, of course, had said it as well: \textit{If God is on our side/He'll stop the next war.} It is a goal toward which we and the upper realms, in tandem, might conceivably work.

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Joseph Roth on the forgetfulness of being:

\begin{quote}
The German Jew had grown arrogant. He had lost the God of his fathers and acquired an idol instead: the idol of a civilizatory patriotism. But God had not forgotten him. And he sent him on his wanderings, a tribulation that is appropriate to Jews, and to all others besides. Lest we forget that nothing in this world endures, not even a home; and that our life is short, shorter even then the life of the elephant, the crocodile, and the crow. Even parrots outlive us.

Joseph Roth,
\textit{The Wandering Jews}
\end{quote}

Jesus said, “If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside you and it is outside you.”

\textit{The Gospel of Thomas}

His followers said to him, “When will the kingdom come?
“It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, ‘Look, here it is,’ or ‘Look, there it is.’ Rather, the . . . kingdom is spread out upon earth, and people do not see it.”

\textit{The Gospel of Thomas}
References

This essay has been excerpted/adapted from *Ethics and Lao-Tzu*.