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Zionism in the Cinema -3

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The War of 1948 as seen in Otto Preminger's *Exodus*, Amos Gitai's *Kedma* and Elie Chouraki's *O Jerusalem !*

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Representations of leadership in *Exodus* were carefully contrived to create support, in the United States and elsewhere for the State of Israel. It is for this reason that the plots and stratagems of world leaders who created the situation are conspicuously absent from the story. In *Kedma*, on the contrary, the absence of leaders and any characterization of leadership is designed to have an entirely different effect : namely the evocation of the hatred and human suffering caused when people are transformed into instruments in the service of political and ideological projects.

Other depictions of the war between the Zionists and those who fought them have been less successful either as exercises in propaganda or as calls to reason. In the first category would have to be placed the myriad of films that prepared the public for the racist prejudices underlying the *Exodus* screenplay. We can be grateful to Jack G. Shaheen whose research on anti-Arab stereotypes in the US cinema appears to be conclusive. [1] For over a period of twenty years, Shaheen viewed most of the more than 900 films or television series produced in the United States in which Arabs played a role. Although he found a few in which Arabs were portrayed in a positive way, Shaheen found that on this theme the cinema in the United States has been primarily a vector for the transmission of invidious stereotypes : "I came to discover that Hollywood has projected Arabs s villains in more than 900 feature films. The vast majority of villains are notorious sheikhs, maidens, Egyptians, and Palestinians. The rest are devious dark-complexioned baddies from other Arab countries, such as Algerians, Iraquis, Jordanians, Lebanese, Libyans, Moroccans, Syrians, Tunisians, and Yemeni." What we do not see in these films is perhaps even more important : "Missing from the vast majority of scenarios are images of ordinary Arab men, women and children ; living ordinary lives. Movies fail to project exchanges between friends, social and family events."

These images are entirely logical given the orientalist heritage of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Shaheen points out, Orientalism in the arts and letters performed a long-lasting service to those who wished to dominate Arab regions. "European artists and writers," he says, "helped reduce the region to colony. They presented images of desolate deserts, corrupt palaces and slimy souks inhabited by the cultural 'other' - the lazy, bearded heathen Arab Muslim."

It was, therefore, natural for United-Statesian filmmakers to indulge in such blatantly racist stereotyping. The "orientalist" notions that defined Arabs are part of a generalized conventional wisdom, of a now strongly rooted ideology that flatters "national" pretensions and justifies patterns of domination on all levels of human existence.

In the United States, receptivity to culturist and racist perceptions of "Arabs" has been facilitated by a kind of historical memory concerning the Native Americans. Clearly, an "Arab" was somehow akin to an American Indian, even if the differences could not be entirely ignored. Although the Arabs, it could not be denied, had managed to conquer much of the territory that had been the Roman Empire, they nonetheless had not developed the "rationalistic" culture that would eventually lead the "West" to achieve a higher civilization. Just as the plains Indians became the archetype for American Indians in general, so did the image of the nomadic Bedouin typify the Arab in the popular imagination.

In effect, there are a series of related historical conjunctures that seem to have called contemporary Arabophobia into existence. The "closing" of the "frontier" in the United States, officially announced in 1890, coincided with the virtual end of the military campaigns against the Native American tribes in the West in the 1890s. It was then that motion picture technology was invented and, by the end of the decade, began to be commercialized. Simultaneously, the Zionist movement was conceived and organized by Theodore Herzl during these years.

Another element in this picture is the European preoccupation with establishing, and justifying its presence in North Africa and elsewhere in the Arab countries. If France, where cinema was invented, had a special interest in Algeria, Tunisia and elsewhere in this regard, all the industrialized European countries were obliged to intrigue for influence in the Middle East because of the pressing need for petroleum resources so sorely lacking in Europe during the high tide of industrialization and the run-up to the First World War. Is it surprising, in this context, that Georges Méliès should have, during the first years of the twentieth century, pioneered the standard "orientalist" movies featuring cruel and dishonest Arab men and sexually provocative Arab women ? [2]

From the 1890s and throughout the 1920s, at the very time that Zionist propaganda was successfully imposing a new set of terms for referring to the residents of Palestine, the cinema cultivated cultural stereotypes which justified imperial ambitions. A revealing example is that mentioned by Allen Gevinson. Eleanor Roosevelt, the cultivated and (relatively) politically progressive wife of president Franklin D. Roosevelt, was receptive to the Zionist project for the judaization of Palestine because a nomadic people - the Palestinian "Arabs" - could be displaced without causing them significant hardship. [3]

This is the general historical context in which we must understand the *Exodus* project and why it was so successful. The success of Otto Preminger's *Exodus* can be explained by the cultural predispositions of the (Western) populations that it was intended to inform and entertain and the tremendous financial and technical resources devoted to its production and distribution. Amos Gitai's *Kedma* could never hope to compete on these terms. Even after the emergence of Israel as the most powerful political and military entity in the Middle East, the idea that the Jewish state is vulnerable because of its neighbors, and not because of the consequences of the ethnic cleansing that is essential to the Zionist project, is seriously accepted by millions of people. Still, there have been changes in the way the Zionist state has been perceived. The most important event in provoking a reassessment of Israel is probably the "preventive war" launched in June 1967. The "Six-Day War" came as a surprise to people who had come to think of Israel as a small and vulnerable country whose very existence is a miracle given the ruthless leaders and masses of Arabs surrounding it. The events of 1948 and the audacious attack on Suez in 1956 had not modified this image. *Exodus* as film and novel are in great part responsible.

In the wake of the 1967 war, more critical attention was drawn to the reality to the Zionist state. Logically, this new interest was often expressed as interest in the population of Palestine before and after 1948. For the first time in the popular communications media, the Israeli state was placed on the ideological defensive, especially in that the major consequence of this war conquering and occupation of the rest of historical Palestine, including East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights on Syrian territory. Suddenly, certain questions were asked by increasing numbers of people. Who were the Palestinians ? What had happened to them ? In 1969, the Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, aroused controversy by suggesting that the "Palestinians" have never existed. During the same period, the Palestine Liberation Organization gained notoriety by its difficult struggle inside and outside Palestine itself.

For all but the ideologically blind, it was difficult to deny the legitimacy of the Palestinian grievances against the Zionist movement and state. The existence and suffering of Palestinians became a fact to be dealt with, and the only question was how to deal with it. In 1973, the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization voted a resolution proclaiming, "Zionism is racism".

In 1972, the publication of a book, *O Jerusalem !*, by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre recounting the battle for Jerusalem in the 1948 war responded to the new situation. [4] The authors were two journalists, one United-Statesian, the other French. In this impressive historical account, based upon interviews of dozens of participants and survivors of the War, we discover the existence of Palestinian people of all social classes and religious confessions. Many prominent leaders, on both sides of the War, granted access to private and public archives, along with large amounts of time, thus enabling the authors' investigations. The result is an undoubtedly impressive and useful study.

The implicit thesis of their commercially successful, "bestselling" book (excerpted prior to publication in *Reader's Digest* and released in English and French) is that both sides had reasons to fight. In particular, the injustice done to Palestinians is clearly described. There is implicit criticism of some factions of the Zionist movement, Most prominently, the actions of the Zionist terrorist organizations Irgun (led by future prime minister Menahim Begin) and the Stern Gang (led by future prime minister Yitzhak Shamir) are shown to be fanatical racists bent on ethnic cleansing. The Deir Yassin massacre is fully discussed, to the point of detailing the summary executions of men and women, the murder of children, the rapes and the theft that it involved. We are not told, however, that hundreds of villages were destroyed throughout Palestine during this war. Still, it is to the book's credit that even the Palmach and the Haganah are revealed to be unconcerned with the human and proprietary rights of Palestinians.

Overall, the War is presented as a kind of almost inevitable human tragedy that should enlist all of our compassion and understanding. In addition, there is a distinct impression of even-handedness imparted as this book is read.

However, there is more than a suggestion of partisanship in the book. For example, the loss of a part of the territory included on the Palestinian side of the rejected UN Partition Plan is attributed to the weakness and rivalries among the Arab leaders. Although Palestinians are not dehumanized in this book, as they are in Leon Uris' *Exodus*, the cumulative effect of reading 600 pages of quotation, narration and analysis gradually reveals to the reader that Jewish or Zionist sources are considerably more present than those of Palestinians or of other "Arab" participants in the War. In addition, there seems to be a consistent underestimation of the Zionist military preparations and advantages, just as there may be over emphasis on cultural or psychological explanations for Arab failures. Most fundamentally, there is one essential premise that the book never challenges : the presumed right of Jewish people to migrate in massive numbers to an already populated territory.

The film French director Elie Chouraki made of *O Jerusalem !*, released 34 years after the publication of the book, is a melodramatic fictionalization which is only superficially inspired by the erudite history written by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre. Chouraki dramatized some real historical characters, and created others, in order to make an appeal for "peace" that carefully omits discussion of any issue except to say that both "peoples" have an historical claim to Palestine.

At times, Chouraki shows that certain revelations made by Collins and Lapierre, such as the terrorist bombing campaign against Arab residential neighborhoods in West Jerusalem, continue to be unacceptable considered from a Zionist perspective. This is because *O Jerusalem !* is a Zionist film in that it calls for an acceptance of the status quo without calling into question the foundations of the Zionist state.

The fact that self-proclaimed "republicans", in France, the United States or elsewhere, can continue to support the

idea of religious state while pointing with horror to the rise of political confessionalism in general is a remarkable phenomenon. It attests to the continued power of the Zionist idea that Jewish nationalism is both divinely sanctioned and a solution to anti-semitism everywhere. Both ideas lack real foundation. Chouraki's film shows that the ideology of Orientalism and of Zionist propaganda as expressed in *Exodus*, continue to support the occupation of Palestine and the oppression of Palestinians. Fortunately, there are voices, such as that of Amos Gitai, that doggedly persist in their efforts to be heard.

[1] Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs : How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Gloucestershire, Arris Books, 2003, p. 574.

[2] Saïd Tamba, "Propos sur le cinema colonial en tant que genre populaire," *L'Homme et la Société*, numéro154, 2004, pp 93-108.

[3] Allen Gevinson, *Within Our Gates : Ethnicity in American Feature Films, 1911-1960*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

[4] Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *O Jerusalem !*, London, George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972, p. 648.