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Zionism in the Cinema -2

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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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The contrast between the ethnic stereotyping exhibited in *Exodus* and the portrayal of characters in Amos Gitai's *Kedma* could not be greater. In *Kedma*, there is no discussion of strategy or tactics, and thusly no invidious reflections upon one ethnic group's capacity in relation to another's. People simply find themselves in situations, and attempt to survive. This is how the survivors of the judeocide perpetrated by the German government describe their experiences during the voyage, before the *Kedma* arrives. This is how all the characters-European Jews and Palestinians-react once the ship has disembarked its passengers. In *Kedma*, there are no leaders visible. Their existence can only be supposed. Their plans, strategies and justifications are unexplained. They remain in the background as part of a larger tragedy produced by forces over which "ordinary" people seemingly have little or no control.

Gitai's film expresses a lack of confidence in leadership and, in this way, *Kedma* can be understood as a reading (and viewing) of *Exodus*. There is, in fact, a remarkable parallel development of the two films. What is absent from Preminger's film-the moral misery, the existential despair, the doubts and confusion of the survivors of the Judeocide-is focused upon in Gitai's film. Conversely, what is absent from Gitai's film-the expression of Zionist ideals, aspirations and dogma, the glorifications of one ethnic group at the expense of others-is the very point of Preminger's.

This thematic inversion is particularly evident in reference to two aspect of the films : firstly, in the use of names and, secondly, in the dramatic monologues or soliloquies which end both films.

In *Exodus*, the use of names for symbolic purposes is immediately evident. "Exodus" refers to the biblical return of the Jews from slavery to the Holy Land-their god-given territory, a sacred site. This sacred site is necessary to Jewish religious observance and identity. Only here, it is explained in *Exodus*, can Jews be safe. Only here, it is asserted, can they throw-off invidious self-perceptions, imposed by anti-Semitism and assimilationist pressures, and become the strong, self-reliant and confident people they really are.

The vision of Jewish identity propagated by Zionism is implicitly challenged in Amos Gitai's *Kedma*. Again, the title of the film is symbolically significant. "Kedma" means the "East" or "Orient", or "going towards the East." The people on the *Kedma*-Jewish refugees from Europe, speaking European languages and Yiddish-were arriving in another cultural world an alien one, in the East. The result would be more existential disorientation and another ethnically conflictual environment.

The difference in perspective manifest in the two films is found also in the names given to the protagonists. In *Kedma*, an example is given of the abrupt Hebraizing of names as the passengers arrived in the new land, thus highlighting the cultural transformation central to the Zionist project. In *Exodus*, there is much explicit discussion of this aspect of Zionism, and some of the names given to central characters reveal the heavy-handedness of its message.

It is, of course, a well-established convention to give evocative names to the protagonists of a literary or cinematographic work. Where would be, for example, Jack London's *The Iron Hell*, without his hero, Ernest Everhard ? The answer is that the novel might be more impressive without such readily apparent propagandistic trappings. And the same is true for *Exodus*. Leon Uris's chief protagonist is Ari Ben Canaan, Hebrew for "Lion, son of Canaan." This role model for Jewish people everywhere is thusly the direct heir of the ancient Canaanites, precursors of the Jewish community in the land of Palestine. This historical legacy and patrimony established, Paul Newman had only to play the strong fighter-ferocious, hard and wily-with his blond mane cut short, in the military style.

The object of Ari's affections, however ambivalent they may be, is Kitty Fremont, played by Eva Marie Saint. Not only does the pairing of the earnest and ever-hard Ari, the "Lion," and the compliant but faithful "Kitty" imply a classic gender relationship, but the coupling of this prickly *Sabra* and the cuddly American symbolizes the special relationship between the United States and nascent state of Israel that has come to be called the "fifty-first state" of the USA.

The other major character, played by the baby-faced Sal Mineo, is "Dov Landau," the 17-year-old survivor of the Warsaw ghetto and Auschwitz. This name evokes the dove of peace and the infancy indirectly evoked by the term "landau" (baby carriage ?). The irony is that the angelic Dov, alights on Palestinian soil with the fury of a maddened bird of prey. He is the consummate terrorist-angry and bloodthirsty. Dov's conversion to Zionism as a collective project, as opposed to a vehicle for his personal vengeance, comes at the end of the story when peace has been (temporarily) achieved through unrelenting combat. Dov then leaves Israel for MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) where he will perfect the engineering skills learned building bombs in Warsaw and in Palestine. Peace means refining the technical capacity for the new nation's defense. In the meantime, the Arabs have cruelly murdered Dov's fiancée, the soft and sweet Karen.

Exodus and *Kedma* differ most notably in the latter's avoidance of the kind of crude propaganda that Leon Uris and Otto Preminger so heavily developed. Rather than forcing his viewers to accept a vision of the birth of Israel founded upon caricatures, distortions and omissions from historical reality, Amos Gitaï chose to simply place characters (who we see briefly) in a specific situation, which is the real focus of the film. Whereas Preminger symbolized the destiny of a people in a story of strong characters, Gitaï illustrated the tragedy of an historical conjuncture in which the historical actors were largely incidental. We see this aspect of Gitaï's thematic inversion of Preminger's film in the soliloquies delivered in both films.

At the very end of *Exodus*, Ari Ben Canaan delivers a speech at Karen's graveside, in which he justifies the Zionist project as the just and prophesized return of a people forced to err in a hostile world for 2000 years. The resistance encountered to this project, he explains, is only the result of evil, self-interested individuals (such as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem) who are afraid of losing their privileges once the Arabs learn that Jewish settlement is in their interest. Ari concludes : "I swear that the day will come when Arab and Jew will live in Peace together." This said, the film ends with a military convoy receding into the distance, towards a new battle in the just cause.

In *Kedma*, there are two soliloquies, delivered not by strong and self-composed leaders, but rather by distraught, frightened people, caught in a web woven by the apprentice sorcerers in the background-the real architects of the situations in which destinies are sealed and lives are broken. A middle-aged, Polish Jew makes the first speech. Appalled by the new cycle of suffering he witnessed upon arrival in Palestine, he shouts that suffering, guilt and martyrdom have become essential to the Jewish character. Without it, he cries, the Jewish people "cannot exist." This is their tragedy.

An aged Palestinian peasant, pushed off his land, fleeing the combat, makes the second expression of despair. Disregarding the danger, he says : "we will stay here in spite of you. Like a wall, and we will fill the streets with demonstrations, generation after generation."

How to reconcile the fascist judeocide and the *Nakba* (the Palestinian « disaster » caused the Zionist ethnic cleansing) ? Gitai's *Kedma* places the contemporary dilemma within its historical and existential context. Preminger's *Exodus* did everything not to provide moviegoers with the elements necessary to informed understanding. This is the difference between, on the one hand, demagogy and propaganda and, on the other hand, a call to reason and justice.