

<https://divergences.be/spip.php?article280>



Larry Portis

# Zionism in the Cinema -1

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2024 - 2007 - N° 6 ( Mars/March 2007) - Arts et cultures - Cinéma/ movie - Zionism in the cinema -

Date de mise en ligne : mardi 27 février 2007

---

Copyright © Divergences Revue libertaire en ligne - Tous droits réservés

---

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

[<https://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L249xH375/9-4-c4924.jpg>]

The slogan "never again", as used in relation to the Nazi genocides during the Second World War, and those which have succeeded, seems empty when we consider the ethnic cleansing carried out in Palestine after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and after the Israeli occupation of the remains of historical Palestine beginning in June 1967. How can the "Western democracies" continue to participate in the genocidal punishment of a population while proclaiming the purity of intentions ? One of the reasons is the power of Zionist propaganda over those who lack alternative information and the political fear and hypocrisy that it can inspire in those who understand what is happening. Of the modern means of communication and the formation of consciousness, the cinema is pre-eminent and, in the case of the Zionist state of Israel, one film in particular has been remarkably influential.

Produced and directed by Otto Preminger, *Exodus* was released in 1960, and had enormous success. In evaluating this success, we are helped by the release in 2002 of another film, *Kedma*, directed by Amos Gitai, and, to a lesser extent by Elie Chouraki's film, *O Jerusalem*, released in Fall 2006.

The first two films treat the same subject-the clandestine arrival of Jewish refugees in Palestine in 1947 in the midst of armed conflict. This was the eve of the partition of Palestine, proposed by the United Nations Organization but rejected by the non-Jewish (or, rather, non-Zionist) population and states of the entire eastern Mediterranean region. Following the British announcement of their withdrawal from the protectorate established in 1920 by the mandate system of the treaty of Versailles, the stage was set for a defining event of the short, brutal twentieth century : the creation of the state of Israel and the population transfers and ethnic conflicts that accompanied it.

Comparison of the two films, both in terms of their genesis as artistic creations and as political statements, elucidates aspects of a complex process of ideological formation. Seen as depictions of the birth of the Israeli nation, the two films are extremely different. *Exodus* is a glorification of a certain type of leadership, at a certain level of decision-making. It works only at the level of strategic and tactical Zionist command within Palestine, immediately before, during and after the war for the creation of the state of Israel. The film is discrete relative to a higher level (higher in terms of power relations)-that of international diplomacy. Although decisions of the British military administration are implicitly criticized in the film, such criticism is not allowed to call into question Britain itself as an actor on the international stage. When either the British or the United-Statesians (and the French and Italians) are referred to, it is always as individuals, not representatives of overall national sentiments.

In *Kedma*, Amos Gitai was concerned to present an historical situation by depicting a single incident, the origins of which are not explained directly and, in the course of which, individuals are shown to be subordinate to developments over which they have no real control. The incident in question is the illegal arrival of a ship, "Kedma," on the coast of Palestine.

There is an important qualification to make before any attempt to compare these films. The problem is that discussing

the narrative content of Preminger's film *Exodus* would not be legitimate without speaking of *Exodus* the novel, written by Leon Uris. Not only were both film and novel tremendous commercial successes, they were conceived of as the two indispensable axes of a single project.

It was Dore Schary, a top executive at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) who suggested the idea for the book to Leon Uris. As Kathleen Christison explains, the whole project « began with a prominent public-relations consultant who in the early 1950s decided that the United States was too apathetic about Israel's struggle for survival and recognition. » [1] Thanks to Schary, Uris received a contract from Doubleday and went to Israel and Cyprus where he carried out extensive research. The book was published in September, 1958. [2] It was first re-printed in October the following year. By 1964, it had gone through 30 printings. This success was undoubtedly helped by the film's release in 1960, but not entirely, as Uris's novel was a book-of-the-month club selection in September 1959 (which perhaps explains the first re-printing).

The film was to be made by MGM. But when the time came, the studio hesitated. The project was perhaps too political for the big producers. It was then that Otto Preminger bought the screen rights from MGM. He then produced and directed the film, featuring an all-star cast including Paul Newman, Eva Marie-Saint, Lee J. Cobb, Sal Mineo, Peter Lawford and other box-office draws of the moment. The film also benefited from a lavish production in "superpanavision 70" after having been filmed on location. The music was composed by Ernest Gold, for which he received an Academy Award for the best music score of 1960. The screenplay was written by Dalton Trumbo. In spite of its length-three and a half hours-the film was a tremendous popular and critical success.

It is noteworthy that the release of *Exodus* the film in 1960 indicates that its production began upon *Exodus* the book's publication. It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose a degree of coordination, in keeping with the origins of the project.

In short, it was a major operation that brilliantly succeeded. It has been estimated that in excess of 20 million people have read the novel, and that hundreds of millions have seen the film. Not only was this success a financial bonanza, its political impact has been equally considerable. There can be little doubt that *Exodus* the film has been one of the most important influences on Western perceptions and understanding of the hostilities between the Israeli state and the Palestinian people. It is thusly illuminating to return to the message communicated by this film, in attempting to gage its role in ideological formation.

*Exodus* is the story of the Exodus 1947, a ship purchased in the United States and used to transport 4,500 Jewish refugees to Palestine. In reality, the novel and film take great liberties with the original story. Intercepted by the British authorities in the port of Haïfa, the real-life refugees were taken to the French port of Sète, where they were held, becoming the object of intense Zionist agitation and propaganda. Eventually they were transported to Germany and held temporarily in transit camps. Although this incident was used by Uris as the point of departure for his novel, the book is a work of fiction. Not only were the characters invented, the events did not correspond to reality except in the most general way.

In Uris' narrative, an intercepted ship (not named "Exodus") is intercepted on the high sea and taken to Cyprus where the passengers are put in camps.

Representatives of the Haganah, the secret Jewish army in Palestine, arrive secretly in Cyprus in order to care for, educate and mobilize the refugees. The agent-in-chief is Ari Ben Canaan, played by Paul Newman. Ben Canaan is

the son of Barak Ben Canaan, prominent leader of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish, Zionist community in Palestine. Tricking the British with great intelligence and audacity, Ari Ben Canaan arranges for the arrival of a ship purchased in the United States, on which he places 600 Jewish refugee children-orphan from the Nazi extermination camps and elsewhere. Once the children are on the ship, Ben Canaan names the ship the "Exodus", and runs up the Zionist flag. He then informs the British authorities that, if the ship is not allowed to depart for Palestine, it will be blown up with all aboard.

Before having organized this potential suicide bombing (of himself, the Haganah agents and the 600 children), Ben Canaan has met Kitty Fremont, an American nurse who has become fond of the children and, it must be said, of Ari Ben Canaan. This love interest is carefully intertwined with the major theme : the inexorable need and will of the Jewish people to occupy the soil of Palestine.

As it might be expected, the British give in. After some discussion between a clearly anti-semitic officer and those more troubled by the plight of the refugees, the ship is allowed to depart for Palestine. It arrives just before the vote of the United Nations Organization recommending the partition of Palestine between the Jewish and non-Jewish populations. As the partition is refused by the Palestinians and the neighboring Arab states, war breaks out and the characters all join the ultimately successful effort against what are described as over-whelming odds. Even Kitty and Major Sutherland, the British officer who tipped the balance in favor of releasing the "Exodus," join the fight.

Sutherland's participation, representing the defection of a British imperialist to the Zionist cause, is particularly symbolic. Why did Sutherland jeopardize his position and reputation, and then resign from the army ? His humanitarianism was forged by the fact that he had seen the Nazi extermination camps when Germany was liberated and, more troubling, his mother was Jewish, although converted to the Church of England. Thusly, Sutherland has had a belated identity crisis that led him, too, to establish himself in the nascent Israel.

The other major characters in the film similarly represent the "return" of Jewish people to their "promised land." For example, Karen, the young girl who Kitty would like to adopt and take to the United States, is a German Jew who was saved by placement in a Danish family during the war. Karen will elect to stay with her people, in spite of her affection for Kitty. Karen is also attached to Dov Landau, a fellow refugee, a 17 year-old survivor of the Warsaw ghetto and death camps. Once in Palestine, Dov joins a Zionist terrorist organization (based on the Irgun) and, in the book and film (but not, of course, in reality), places a bomb in the wing of King David Hotel housing the British Command, causing considerable loss of life.

The role of human agency, leadership and the nature of decision-making, are a dimension of *Exodus* that is particularly revealing of the propagandistic intent of the film. Most noteworthy is the fact that all the major characters are presented as exceptional people, and all are Jewish, with the exception of Kitty. However, it is not as individuals that the protagonists of the film are important, but rather as representatives of the Jewish people.

It is in this respect, in its effort to portray Jewishness as a special human condition distinguishing Jews and Jewish culture from others, that *Exodus* is most didactic. Ari Ben Canaan is clearly a superior being, but he merely represents the Jewish people. They are, collectively, just as strong, resourceful and determined as Ari. This positive image is highlighted by the portrayal of other ethnic groupings present in the film. The British, for example, are seen as, at best, divided and, at their worst, as degenerate products of national decay and imperialistic racism.

The most striking contrast to the collective solidarity, intellectual brilliance, and awesome courage of the Jews is, with the "Arabs." In spite of their greater numbers, the culture and character of the Arabs show them to be clearly inferior. Ari, who is a "*sabra*"-a Jewish person born in Palestine-and, as a consequence, understands the Arab character, knows that they cannot compete with determined Jews. "You turn 400 Arabs loose," he says, and "they will run in 400 different directions." This assessment of the emotional and intellectual self-possession of the Arabs was made prior to the spectacular jailbreak at Acre prison. The very indiscipline of the Arabs would cover the escape of the determined Zionists.

The Arab leaders are equally incapable of effective action, as they are essentially self-interested and uncaring about their own people. In the end, it is this lack of tolerance and human sympathy in the non-Jews that most distinguishes Jews and Arabs. In *Exodus* the novel, Arabs are consistently, explicitly, and exclusively, described as lazy and shiftless, dirty and deceitful. They have become dependant upon the Jews, and hate them for it. [3] In *Exodus* the film, however, this characterization is not nearly as insisted upon, at least not in the dialogue. Still, the way they are portrayed on the screen inspires fear and distrust.

---

[1] Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine : Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999, p. 370.

[2] Leon Uris, *Exodus*, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1958, p. 599.

[3] Leon Uris developments this characterization of Arabs in his book *The Haj*, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1984, p. 525.