

Abstract

Cinema and Jerusalem

The aim of the current research project is to analyze the role of Cinema in shaping collective and political imaginations as well as in conveying social, religious, cultural and national identity messages. A preliminary survey on the self-representation and the representation of the others, from the point of view of the various religious and national communities living in Jerusalem, has been carried out with the aim of disclosing the themes and the *topoi* of the construction of respective modern identities, being them historical or cultural. Subsequently, we examined in depth the feature-length films centred on Jerusalem, directed by Israeli-Jewish directors and by Palestinians, both Muslims and Christians. Directors' biographies, producers' details and the choice of a targeted audience have been deeply analyzed in the attempt to widen the scope of the research and to enlighten the meaning of each and every feature in a distinct historical, political and social perspective.

In order to limit the field of the survey, the present work will focus, in detail, on the film production from the seventies onwards. We will proceed with a short analysis of the films shot in the city of Jerusalem and with a concise biographical profile of the directors. Nor the works of foreign directors nor the huge local documentary production, especially the Palestinian one, have been covered. Four films, particularly representative for our research purposes, have been taken under investigation: 1) *Michael Sheli* (My Michael, Dan Wolman, 1976) the film drawn from the founding book of the Israeli contemporary literature; 2) *Waqa'i' Ikhtifa* (Chronicle of a Disappearance, Elia Suleiman, 1996), European-Palestinian co-production, by the director Elia Suleiman from Nazareth, in voluntary exile, focussing on the sense of the Palestinian identity; 3) *Kadosh* (Sacred, Amos Gitai, 1999) French-Israeli co-production, film devoted to Jerusalem, part of the trilogy dedicated by the director to the cities of Israel. 4) *Al-Quds fi yom akhar* (Rana's Wedding, Hany Abu-Assad, 2002), Dutch production, by another director from the Palestinian Diaspora, on the roaming of the heroine in search for her love in the cities of Jerusalem and Ramallah, a metaphor of the search for her own identity. Here some general remarks on the themes explored in the paper. First of all, at the starting point of our survey, we come across an unexpected issue: the unusual absence of Jerusalem, as lively and authentic city, in the local cinematographic production. Rather than *how the Holy City is showed*, our first question will thus be to explore the role assigned to the city of Jerusalem in the selected movies; trying to understand, therefore, a feature which is far beyond the mere symbolic value peculiar to Jerusalem, whichever be the religious affiliations of the directors, the scriptwriters and the producers. This investigated 'role', in fact, cannot be but bound to the ideological, political,

sociological or religious backgrounds of the actors involved.

It is however unquestionable that the leitmotif of the movies set in Jerusalem is the constant search of identity. The city symbolizes this search, whichever be the inner afflictions suffered. Beyond any doubt, the pursuit of oneself implies the assumption of the other. Also a short stay, as the one I experienced, make you feel that the city is undergoing a continuous transformation process. And such a continuous transformation, which is undoubtedly political and strategic, represents the main obstacle in the effort of finding a common and shared pattern to understand the complex phenomena of the search of oneself, on both collective and individual level. Jerusalem becomes a *dream*, nostalgia of a *paradise lost*, as well as *myth of return*, regaining of the present and will to retain the memories of a recent past¹.

That same cinematographic production which depicts Jerusalem as leading lady can't avoid compliance with the conflict and with the reciprocal fear to lose definitely that identity desperately fumbled for *in* and *through* Jerusalem. Not only the above considerations but also the fact that that very absence of an independent Palestinian State does not allow a balanced role of the two components are easily understood by the experts of the recent history of Palestine. That's why the birth and the free development of a land-based Palestinian cinema are limited².

On one hand we encounter identification with western standards or exile, on the other the marginal position of a group without state and nationality. By analyzing critical essays, general filmography and through some informal talks, the general condition of the Palestinian filmmakers, daily facing a vast number of obstacles, emerges. First of all the limits due to the absence of a national financing body appear vividly, forcing the directors to ask for western funds in Europe and United States: the international productions have thus to follow western distribution principles, while the screenplays must come up and cope with alien expectations and market trends³. Independent creativity and the Palestinian directors' own history are often mortified: stories must address the demands of a Palestinian redemption, requesting for an eventual peace process, set in an awful scenario characterized by poverty and desolation and lighted up only, in accordance with the expectations of the western audience, by the ultimate hope of the future. Emergent artists are bounded to financial and technical obstacles; there is, in

¹ Bourlond, A., "A Cinema of Nowhere. An Interview of Elia Suleiman", *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, vol.29/114, 2000, pp.95-101.

² Alexander, Livia, "Palestinian Film: Representing and Being Represented in the Cinematic Struggle for National Identity", *Visual Anthropology*, vol.10, pp.319-333, 1998.

³ Since the early eighties, beginning with the Palestinian Film Institute directed by Mustafa Abu Ali, several and unsuccessful attempts to establish a Cinematographer National Financing Body have been made. At the present moment the Palestinian Ministry of Culture entrusted on this duty George Ibrahim, heads of the Al- Qasaba Theatre.

fact, a lack of governmental funding for the national Cinema; Palestinian directors inside Israel would not have free admission to films' funds, except to Israeli ones, requiring specific qualifying criteria in film-scripts. Moreover there is lack of equipment, skilled workers and crews, and all the technical devices necessary to edit a film. That's why Palestinian filmmaking is marked by an exponential growth in the documentaries production which usually allows a wider access to people at low production cost⁴.

On the background, we examine the history of Israeli cinema. Critical essays describe different stages starting from the pioneering period of the beginning of the XIX century marked by a strict adherence to Zionist ideals, passing through the myth of the building of the nation, followed by the development of an original film expression. In the period under consideration, the sixties and the seventies, old myths begin to face new realities in the artistic cinema: this early stage marked by a new sensibility and the creeping of identity doubts in everyday life, is followed, from the eighties, by a second stage in which the dichotomy between Palestinians and Israelis is not dismantled but enacts a cultural slippage between national identities, both expressions of a single subject, the Israeli one⁵. The cultural products that have transcended the Zionist narrative and its negative portrayal of the Palestinians remain outside the Israeli canon and have limited impact, though the groundwork has been laid for what is clearly a growing trend⁶. Observing new Israeli productions we have to note that they can't keep up with the cinema of the previous years. The recent movies, most of them produced with governmental funds, must fit to specific criteria, and often suffer of dull narration and prosaic style, while being, in addition, first works, immature and showing difficult relation with the camera operations. To fill the lack of productions, last year a new governmental fund have been started to support Israeli and international films shot in the Holy City: the *Jerusalem Film and Television Fund*. The Chairman of the fund is Rennen Shor, who also heads the Sam Spiegel Film and Television School in Jerusalem and the preliminary budget of the fund is about two million dollars. The fund, established by The Jerusalem Development Authority and the Jerusalem Foundation, will focus on feature films and TV-series, on condition that at least 50% of the shooting takes place in Jerusalem. The fund has been instituted after the Cinematographers Act established in 2000, and the Jerusalem Development Authority will oversee the entire productions. While Israeli cinema is predominantly Tel Aviv-based, for financial reasons as much as cultural ones, the Jerusalem located production counts just a film par year. Six local

⁴ Informal talk with Shaera Dirbas: born in Haifa, she's an independent director and filmmaker living in Jerusalem.

⁵ Gertz, Nurith, *Myths in Israeli culture: Captives of a dream*, London: Vallentin Mitchell, 2000.

⁶ Pappe, Ilan, "Post-Zionist critique on Israel and the Palestinians. Part III: Popular culture", *Journal of Palestine*

directors will be receiving grants to produce feature films from this brand new Fund. The committee of the *Jerusalem Film and Television Fund* recently completed reviewing the first group of applicants, and selected the winners, whose names have been announced at a ceremony at the Jerusalem Cinémathèque. Selected screenplays, each of the six as directors, are: Oded Davidoff, Nir Bergman, Aya Somech, Eran Riklis, Shemi Zarhin and Tawfik Abu Wael⁷.

The above considerations are meant as an introductory note to the topics we will deal with in our research, illustrating the mentioned core issues pertaining to the cinematic representation of Jerusalem.

Studies, vol. 26/4, 1997, pp. 60-69.

⁷ Nirit Anderman, "Jerusalem fund to invest NIS 5.5 million in Israeli filmmakers", *Haaretz*, 20/02/09.