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Investigating the Israeli Soldier's Guilt and Responsibility

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- 1 The late 20th century's global world and its new media technologies have transformed our visual culture in general. Providing fresh, unedited images from live broadcasts, it challenges not only our knowledge of truth about specific events but also the notion of truth in general. This contention becomes even more critical when it comes to the representation of wars. What was once considered remote and invisible, i.e. behind the enemy lines, and could be reconstructed only on the basis of soldiers' recollections, is now represented on a multitude of sites in which millions of images compete with each other. This plethora of images which includes not only television broadcasts but also alternative and often unregulated Internet channels, has raised again the issue of the visibility and invisibility of war. Not only have the battlefronts come closer, but the multitude and repetition of broadcast images have created an opposite effect: the invisible has become visible and the visible – questionable. In spite of the fact, however, that in this constellation the question of truth has become more relevant than ever, the audiences have become alienated and developed a kind of indifference vis-à-vis the news they see broadcasted on their screen. The media representation of war seems to have reached a dead end, and the perpetual search for new images has led, among others, to a growing interest in subjective documentation.
- 2 This paper engages with one such form of subjective documentation in Israel: the "Breaking the Silence" testimonial clips, and seeks to evaluate their contribution to the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in various media texts. "Breaking the Silence" (*Shovrim Shtika*) began almost spontaneously some ten years ago, in 2003, when a small eponymous NGO arranged a photo exhibition in Tel-Aviv. The exhibition displayed original images shot by anonymous Israeli soldiers during their compulsory military service in the occupied territories. Focusing on the Palestinian town of Hebron, the exhibition revealed through the depictions of the low-ranking Israeli soldier's mission, the unbearable daily life of the local population. This was the first time that Israeli

citizens, who up till then had been mostly informed by the official Israeli media, were invited to look at the other faces of the occupation, including that of the role of the Israeli soldier (who could be the viewer's son or brother) in carrying out the Israeli occupation policy.

- 3 The efficacy and validity of these "confessions from the battlefield" (though the notion of battlefield does not really apply in the discussion of the implementation of the occupation policy in the everyday life of the occupied population), have been at the heart of many public debates. This is not the first time that IDF soldiers have talked. Already in 1967, shortly after the Six Day War, a group of Israeli soldiers from various kibbutzim published their collective testimonies about that war, *The Seventh Day: Soldiers Talk about the Six-Day War* (*Siah Lohamim*), in which they confessed their moral reservations and regrets about the brutal acts carried out during the Israeli conquest of the Palestinian land in 1967 (Gan, 2008). Soon after its publication the book became the formative text for generations of young Israeli men who adopted these representations of militaristic masculinity for the constitution of their identity. At the same time, there were voices in the Israeli public sphere that could not tolerate this duality of remorseful soldiers confessing their "sins" and this phenomenon gave birth to a new phrase: "The Shooting and Crying" soldiers. A few decades later, the first *Breaking the Silence's* testimonies was attributed the same pejorative title: another manifestation of the "Shooting and Crying" syndrome. The times were different, however, and so too the "Shooting and Crying" syndrome's impact.
- 4 In their article "Black and White and Shades of Gray: Palestinians in the Israeli Media during the 2nd Intifada" (2009), Tamar Liebes and Zohar Kampf contend that as opposed to the first Intifada in the late 1980s, the Israeli coverage of the second Intifada was much less biased and included a broad range of Palestinian faces and voices, sometimes directly accusing the Israeli occupation. I would like to add to their argument and suggest that this dramatic change in the Israeli media coverage in the occupied territories was made possible, among other reasons, thanks to the "Breaking the Silence" testimonies, which still today enjoy a growing popularity among those looking for other voices in regard to the conflict.
- 5 The non-professional shots that the IDF soldiers provided brought "Hebron to Tel-Aviv", as noted in the organization's official site, in an unprecedented way. Casting light on what had been intentionally obscured in the official media coverage of the occupation, these images introduced the insider's point of view regarding an unbearable and yet ignored situation, in which each and every Israeli is directly or indirectly implicated, and soon became an additional source of information on the occupied territories. The still photography format was transformed into video documentation which enabled its broadcasting on various alternative channels, including You-Tube. Providing the world with the complexity of the political situation in real time, these documentations became active participants in the Middle East war of images. These clips that competed with the hegemonic voice soon became the basis for a new archive for all Israelis, and turned into agents of memory. As such they provided the memory-scape, those visions necessary for the remembrance of what we have not personally experienced. According to Tamar Katriel and Nimrod Shavit (2011), the notion of memory-scape bears two main concerns: (1) interplay of archival memory as a depository of knowledge about the past and its enactment as lived or usable memory in the immediate or distant future. According to this vision, images constitute the past of any conflict documentation; and (2) role played

by personal memory in renegotiating public memory. This second point seems to me crucial to an understanding of the “Breaking the Silence” visual testimonies, as it blurs the boundaries between the personal and the public and invites the viewer of these personal testimonies to rethink the relation between the State and the individual.

- 6 The discussion on the *Breaking the Silence* project also implies another dimension suggested in the very name of the organization and having to do with the State's responsibility for the soldiers' lives, morals and ethics. ‘Breaking the Silence’ is a metaphor traditionally used to describe a victim's confession to a violent act endured in their home or other protected environment, such as rape or domestic violence. As such it usually refers to the weaker and more helpless population groups such as women or children. In adopting this title, the members of this organization subverted the well-established equation between home and the nation, and invite others to look into the acts carried out in the name of the homeland; acts whose victims are not only those defined as enemies but also the nation's own sons.
- 7 This speaking out against the crimes of the home-nation should be read as the dominance of the ethical personal dimension over that of the national discourse. It subverts the coherence of that discourse and reveals what was meant to have been kept secret: the condition of the IDF soldiers as victims of their nation. This representation provides an ethical and aesthetic breakthrough in its new depiction of the Israeli soldier's relationship to his commanders and to the State in general. Similar to children who have been victims of violence in the space they consider theirs, “Breaking the Silence” aims to reveal to the world these young men and women's painful realization of guilt and the ethical approach that they wish to implement through their confession to the camera.
- 8 This is why these testimonies contain an inherent contradiction: on the one hand they represent the soldiers' attempt to come to terms with their implication in immoral acts of war; while on the other hand these same soldiers expect that the very act of confession will in itself grant them moral recognition, or even absolution, as in a religious context, in which the act of confession and its ritual text are intended to wash away the “sins” and enable the “sinner” to continue his life afterwards as if nothing had happened. But the act of confession by definition allows acknowledgment of guilt with a certain taking into account of personal responsibility. And though many would claim that the public avowal of guilt does not absolve the guilty from responsibility, I would contend that indeed the vulnerability of a 19-year-old soldier at war – if the occupation of the West Bank can be called war, and I believe it can – does not enable a comparison of the soldiers' acts with those of other adult transgressions. Not only is the context different – since it is imposed on the soldier by his very being as part of an army – but it should also be read as part of the indoctrination process that the military considers as a component of the soldiers' training. The soldiers carry out what they have been trained to do. But at the same time the soldiers realize that something is profoundly wrong in their doing so. Their personal ethical values clash with the military ethics that they have been taught and this understanding leads them to confession, i.e. the documentation of their “sins” in real time. The footage they shot during their military service becomes both the individual's confession and as well as his testimony about something, as-if-private, which was kept hidden from the world. The result is a subjective documentation of a kind that is often absent in the official media coverage of the events. This is not just another “talking head” who recounts to an anonymous journalist what he has seen and whose commitment to

the truth is partial and circumstantial; but, rather, an individual's thoughts shot in real time with that same individual's own camera.

- 9 Besides the insider point of view it provides, the added value of such documentary footage resides in the combination of subjectivity and real time. There are neither specific addressees nor specific interests (national or other). The documentation simply exists as is for the national archive, constituting one more document for those future historians who will write the tragedy of the Israeli occupation in Judea and Samaria.
- 10 Therefore, though the "Breaking the Silence" testimonial clips cannot really be considered as real documentaries (since they were not directed and/or edited in professional ways), their strength stems from their powerful confessional dimension. Their combination of a confessional and a testimonial aspect has turned these clips into an appropriate political response to the prolonged involvement of Israeli soldiers in the occupied territories. Moreover, their unique approach to the Israeli occupation has given birth to the most successful Israeli feature films of the last decade – "Beaufort" (Joseph Cedar, 2007), "Waltz with Bashir" (Ari Folman, 2008) and "Lebanon" (Shumlik Maoz, 2009); all three dealing with memories of the first Lebanon War (1982) and reconstructing them in a new form of testimony/confession.¹ But there is a difference between testimony and confession. Susannah Radstone suggests that this can be formulated through the legal discourse: "The defendant/confessant's responses to the questions directed to them by the defense and the prosecution will concern themselves – their actions, their motivations. At stake in the discourse of the confessant is the question of their guilt or innocence.[...] [However] the witnesses may describe something that has happened to them – an attack, for instance, but for which they are held to have no responsibility or agency." (Radstone, p. 168)
- 11 How are we then to understand the "Breaking the Silence" clips? Obviously, like the above mentioned feature films, they bear in common a powerful argument: the denunciation of the abandonment of young Israeli soldiers in insoluble situations in the middle of a foreign land (and the case the Judea-Samaria is not different that in from Lebanon), and the revelation of the ethical dilemmas of the young Israeli soldier having to obey orders they do not always understand or, at best, that do not always fit their moral code. Therefore the *Breaking the Silence* clips should no longer to be perceived only as testimonies about the Israeli occupation in the occupied territories but, also, as confessions of young Israeli men who had become aware that they were being manipulated to act in a certain way, against their ethical principles, in the name of patriotism. This is why these clips should be read as political acts of resistance designed by the nation's elected sons, who suddenly realized that in the dreadful political theatre of the Middle East they were assigned the role of both victim and victimizer.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Susannah Radstone (2006). "Cultures of confession/cultures of testimony: Turning the Subject Inside Out". *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*. Edited by Jo Gill. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 166-180.

ABSTRACTS

While technologies of war reporting have been constantly improving, media images have been proliferating but also suffering from increasing lack of credibility. The Israeli NGO "Breaking the Silence", created a few years ago, tries to answer this challenge by documenting the daily life of soldiers in the occupied territories. The organization proposes filmed testimonies/confessions, which highlight the double role of the soldiers in Tsahal's military system, both persecutors and as victims. This double role, and this conception of the responsibility of the Israeli soldier, seems to have been the ethical basis of recent Israeli movies dealing with the first Lebanon War: "Beaufort", "Waltz with Bashir", and "Lebanon". It offers the intellectual infrastructure to a denunciation of the military manipulation of young men in the name of patriotism. This is why the documents of "Breaking the Silence" must be interpreted as acts of political resistance.

Alors que les technologies de la couverture de la guerre ne cessent de se perfectionner les images de medias deviennent de plus en plus nombreuses et de moins en moins crédibles. L'organisation non-gouvernementale israélienne "Briser le silence" qui a été fondée il y a quelques années, cherche à répondre à ce défi en documentant le quotidien des soldats israéliens dans les territoires occupés, sous la forme de témoignages-confession, d'où ressort le double rôle de ces soldats dans le système militaire de Tsahal – à la fois persécuteur et victime. Cette dualité vis-à-vis de la responsabilité du soldat israélien, qui semble avoir servi de base éthique aux derniers

films Israéliens à succès traitant de la première guerre du Liban – “Beaufort”, “Valse avec Bashir” et “Lebanon”, offre en fait l’infrastructure intellectuelle sur laquelle repose la dénonciation de la manipulation militaire de jeunes hommes au nom du patriotisme. C’est pourquoi il se doit d’interpréter ces documentations comme des actes de résistance politique.

AUTHOR

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Yael Munk is a lecturer of film and cultural studies at the Open University of Israel and at the Tel-Aviv University. She is the author of *Exiled in their Borders: Israeli Cinema between the Two Intifadas* (The Open University of Israel, 2012). In her research she explores Israeli and Palestinian cinemas, postcolonial theory and the critique of colonialism, the emergence of new and hybrid identities after the nation-state, and documentary filmmaking by women.