Amos Gitai “History is not a linear story”

Gorik de Henau

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/5717>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.5717

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 2 April 2017

ISBN: 978-2-930953-00-7

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

“Amos Gitai “History is not a linear story””, *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 124 | 2017, Online since 30 November 2021, connection on 01 December 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/5717> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.5717>

Amos Gitai is considered as the most important living Israeli filmmaker, known for *Disengagement*, *Free Zone*, *Kippur* and *Kadosh* among many other titles. His films have been selected for the festivals of Cannes, Venice, Berlin, and Rotterdam. In 2008 he was awarded an honorary Leopard at the Locarno festival. Apart from feature films, he makes documentaries and video installations, and has been involved in book publications. He actively engages in public debate, generating controversy every so often with his views on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

→ By **Gorik de Henau**

The interview took place on 16 June 2016 at the Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels.

Our conversation with Amos Gitai took place at the Center for Fine Arts (BOZAR) in Brussels, where he presented his exhibition/installation *Chronicle of an Assassination Foretold*. The exhibition was made up of archive footage, pictures, and other documents Gitai collected over the years by way of preparing for *Rabin, the Last Day*, his 2015 docudrama about the assassination of the then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995. The film was the starting point for a wider discussion about his work, the position of artists and intellectuals in contemporary Israeli society, the peace process, and the importance of remembrance.

AMOS GITAI “HISTORY IS NOT A LINEAR STORY”

Mister Gitai, in *Rabin, the Last Day* you tell the story of how Yitzhak Rabin was murdered by an ultranationalist student because of the politician's role in the Oslo peace accords. Why did you want to make this film after so many years? Is there perhaps a hidden story behind the assassination?

Amos Gitai: Originally this was not so much an artistic endeavor as a citizen's project. It is not the first time that filmmakers, writers or other artists have used their medium as a way of speaking about what is going on around them. I found that the situation in Israel was

not improving and that Rabin, a dead man, presented the only alternative to the current chaos. Even if some people want to forget him, we should give him a voice. That is why I decided to make this movie and this exhibition. Artists have been doing that all over the world. People speak a lot about Picasso's painting *Guernica*. He was also a citizen, he loved his country. The *Luftwaffe* bombed the Basque village Guernica and he decided to make a painting about it. Today, the historical event of the bombardment is fading away, but the painting stays as a reference. Also, Picasso did not want *Guernica* to return to Spain. He said: “As long

... as Franco is alive, I will not authorize it to travel back to Spain.” When Franco died, the MoMA in New York was very sad to see it go back to Spain, where it now sits in the Reina Sofía. And Picasso is not the only one; we also have the record of Velázquez and his critique of the Spanish monarchy. Artists always have to use a critical edge to look at the world around them. *Rabin, the Last Day* is an expression of this.

What, in your opinion, have been the repercussions of his murder on the political situation in Israel? Or to put it differently, what would be different if he were still alive today?

A.G.: I think we lack a statesman with a vision. Reality is not just made up of all the negative forces that are around, you also need the will to move things forward. In that respect the absence of someone like Rabin is a problem.

Once again *Rabin, the Last Day* is a combination of facts and fiction, a choice which runs like a common thread through most of your work. How do you see the relationship between “truth” and “entertainment”, and where does this desire to mix the two come from?

A.G.: People who work in entertainment or show business have a problem with love, because they want to be loved by everyone. I don’t love everybody; it is a selective feeling. If I don’t love everybody, I don’t expect everybody to love me, which is fine with me. When I make a film or an exhibition, it expresses a personal opinion. I don’t necessarily want you to agree with me, so I’m not into what you call “entertainment”. I like a viewer who is also an interpreter, not just a consumer. Sometimes during an airline flight, I see a pleasant film which lasts two hours, but the next day I don’t even remember what it was about. Good works of art always leave space for your own interpretation. They have to trouble you, not just thematically, but also formally. They have to disturb you, so that you have to make an effort to figure things out. That, to me, is really interesting.

In a time when most artists refrain from making any political statement whatsoever, you are known for your outspoken opinions about issues concerning Israeli society and the peace process. Do you think it is an artist’s duty to comment on contemporary social and political themes?

“
**Artists always have to use
a critical edge to look
at the world around them.**
”

A.G.: I don’t want to use the word “duty”, because I don’t want every artist to start making political works tomorrow if they don’t feel like it. It has to be authentic. There are too many works that say nothing. We artists lead quite interesting lives, and it is a way of giving back to society. I’ve had incredibly moving experiences of showing my work, not just in Belgium or France or New York, but in India or Japan or Brazil, and those exchanges are always very interesting. Art has to be opinionated, but not in an easy way. There is the question of form and theme. Let’s say you do a “progressive” film, but with a reactionary form. In that case, for me the film will be reactionary. You have to try and do both, and this balance is always delicate.

On your website, you mention that at a certain point in your life you couldn’t work in Israel anymore and left the country. Was that decision related to the political climate at the time?

A.G.: I was doing one of my early documentaries, *Bayit* (*House*, 1980). By then, the political climate had shifted and Prime Minister Menachem Begin had taken power. The Israel Broadcasting Authority, the television station that produced the film, decided not to show my documentary, and at that time there was only one channel in Israel. I decided to go to Paris for a few weeks and ended up staying there for seven years.

Reportedly, you still divide your time between Paris and Israel. A few years ago, there was concern about the rise of anti-Semitic feelings in Europe. Have you noticed a change in attitude over the last ten years or so?

A.G.: I cannot say it is personal, because I was not confronted with it myself. I think Europe has a long

— *Rabin, the Last Day* (2015)

history of anti-Semitism, starting many centuries ago, nourished by Christian preaching against Jews. And then of course there is what happened in the twentieth century in Germany. There are still layers of indoctrination that need to be removed. I don’t think it is related to the presence of Muslim immigrants in Europe either, as some people claim. One shouldn’t make generalizations.

In what way was your own family affected by the Holocaust?

A.G.: My mother was born in Palestine. Her parents moved there very early, in 1905, when the pogroms started in Russia. They were socialist Jews, not religious. When my mother turned 18, she felt the place was a bit provincial, so she took a boat to Vienna with two girl-friends to meet Freud. They were kind of fearless, these girls (*smiles*). She stayed in Vienna from 1929 until 1932. In 1931, when she saw Hitler give a speech at Alexanderplatz, she decided to go back to Palestine. That was a wise decision, because otherwise I wouldn’t be sitting here. My mother’s letters were published by Gallimard in Paris.¹ Jeanne Moreau recorded all the

letters; they were aired in nine episodes on the public broadcaster France Culture. I’m telling all this because it is not a linear story. In order to return to Palestine, my mother took a boat to Italy. She was a good-looking young woman in her twenties. Across from her sat an Italian fascist officer. She was freaking out, because she thought: “This guy knows I’m Jewish, what is going to happen?” When she got off the boat in Rome, the guy followed her all the way to the hotel. He asked her: “Can I join you in your room?” Only then did she understand that this was not what she thought it was. History is like that, you know.

With regard to my father, that is an entirely different story. He was born in eastern Galicia, in a provincial city close to Lviv [currently in Ukraine], to a relatively traditional Jewish family, unlike my mother. The family moved to Silesia, because my grandfather got a job working for a German *Junker*. My father decided to study art at the Bauhaus. He was also quite fearless, you see, because he went from a provincial city to the most avant-garde art school. There he met Kandinsky, ...

(1) Gitai, Efratia, *Correspondance 1929-1994*, Paris: Gallimard, 2010.

© Agav Films

— *Lullaby to My Father* (2012)

... Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Paul Klee, and many others. However, Goebbels decided to close the Bauhaus, because he hated modernists. The Nazis preferred a kind of pompous architecture in the vein of Albert Speer, who also designed concentration camps like Auschwitz. They picked out four young students, one of whom was my father. They broke his teeth, threw him in jail and accused him of “treason against the German people”, even though he was only 25 years old. In 2012 I made the film *Lullaby to My Father*, in which I did a *mise-en-scène* of the whole event. It all happened quickly: Hitler came to power in January 1933, in April the racial laws were promulgated, and two weeks later my father was thrown in jail. However, because it was still a bit of a grey period, his lover, who was a non-Jewish German woman, used her connections to get him released. Together with other Bauhaus students, my father was brought to the border and reached Switzerland with the help of Paul Klee. Soon, the Swiss started handing the Jews back to the Germans. So far for Swiss neutrality! My father then faced a dilemma: most of his Bauhaus friends went to New York, while he was charmed by the socialist experiment of the kibbutz. He went to Palestine, where he met my mother.

Those are my two family stories. Most members from both sides of my family who stayed in Europe were exterminated, some in Auschwitz, others in Treblinka.

How important is the remembrance of the Holocaust for Jewish people today? Do you think this sad heritage is perceived differently by Jewish people living in Israel and those of the Diaspora?

A.G.: That is more a question for a sociologist. But I made several works about this issue. One of them is the film *Plus tard* (English title: *One Day You'll Understand*), with Jeanne Moreau, Dominique Blanc, and Hippolyte Girardot. It is based on the true story of the head of the Arte television station, a man called Jérôme Clément. He knew that his mother was Jewish. After she died, he found an *accusé de réception* (return receipt) for a letter that his non-Jewish father wrote to the *Préfecture* in 1941. It stated: “I, a Christian Aryan, am married to this Jewish woman” and so on. He was practically denouncing his wife to the Gestapo. Jérôme Clément was really shaken by this and he asked me to create a cinematic adaptation. I went to Jeanne Moreau for the part of the mother. And Moreau, to her great credit, said: “Yes, I’ll do it, because I can learn something from it that I don’t already know.” She’s not like most actresses who never leave their comfort zone, and I’ve worked with stars like Natalie Portman and Juliette Binoche.

In the Belgian media, the only news coming from Israel is stabbings in the street by Palestinians and the shaky political situation, with the government relying on religious hard-liners. Do you think western media offer an accurate picture of what’s going on in the country today?

A.G.: In general, the media don’t offer an accurate picture of anything, because these days the news is all about spectacle. But it is true that both phenomena you describe are actually happening in Israel.

“
Good works of art always
leave space for your own
interpretation. They have to
trouble you, not just thematically,
but also formally.”

”

One often gets the idea of a cultural war in Israel between the religious and the secular segments of society. What is your view on this? A cynical mind would perhaps argue that this conflict is the very *raison d'être* of the state of Israel.

A.G.: I think it is unfortunate, because Israel was created as a non-religious project, the political conclusion of the suffering of the Jews. In my opinion it was even an anti-religious project. Little by little, the religious influence has grown and is gaining momentum. And now, unfortunately, we have this very negative

government which is holding the reins of power [the coalition of Likud and a number of smaller parties].

The million-dollar question, then: what are the chances of peace with the Palestinians any time soon?

A.G.: If you find out, don’t forget to call me (*laughs*). ■

→ **Learn more**
www.amosgital.com

© Agav Films

— Jeanne Moreau in *Plus tard tu comprendras* (2008)