

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Side by Side: Israeli and Palestinian Cinema

(RADICAL TEACHER NO.95, 2012)

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"REMEMBERING OUR VILLAGE" BY BASHIR SINWAR, 1985

A short six-week course about Israeli and Palestinian film is a trying experience for many reasons. Americans mainly have a distorted, media-generated notion of the histories, politics, and cultures that inform these films. Standard class time does not accommodate screening whole films in class, which is important as a shared basis for feelings and discussion. A "side by side" pattern that puts the two national cinemas in dialogue with one another invites difficult comparisons that expose inequalities in the funding, professional training, critical visibility, and distribution that mirror the political, military, and economical inequalities afflicting the region. And finally, depending on the people taking such a course, emotions can run high.

Though this version of the course focuses on fiction films because of their combined emotional and analytic power, other versions can focus on documentaries or a mix of the two genres. The course outlined below provides just one option. It does not concern the most spectacular aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that leap to the Western mind -- war, occupation, and terrorism. Instead, it addresses these issues through narratives that mostly take place inside Israel's 1967 "green line" border. As such, they invite reflection about the relation between Palestinian and Jewish life inside Israel and the political consequences of these realities for the conflict that now extends well beyond that "green line" border.

Below is the skeletal syllabus I designed, with three films for each "side," including the directors' names and dates of production, followed by brief explanatory comments.

Week 1: Gila Almagor, *The Summer of Aviya* (1988)

Week 2: Michel Khleifi, *Wedding in the Gallilee* (1987)

Week 3: Joseph Cedar, *Beaufort* (2007)

Week 4: Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, *Ajami* (2009)

Week 5: Elia Suleiman, *The Time that Remains* (2009)

Week 6: Eran Kolirin, *The Band 's Visit* (2007)

Weeks 1 and 2 provide our springboard: Almagor's film probes the aftershocks of the holocaust while Khleifi's shows an early phase in Jewish control of Palestinian society. Both are set in a quasi-pastoral setting but show the dysfunction invading both groups during the early years of Israel's statehood as a prelude for what follows.

Weeks 3 and 4 focus on the military and civilian violence as a complex tangle of hate, fear, and social

disenfranchisements (economic, ethnic, religious, and gendered) that strain against the claims of social conformity within and across Israeli and Palestinian societies. Each concerns a standstill, a dead end.

Weeks 5 and 6 consider themes and strategies that use the protective devices of humor and irony to relax some of the tension. Kolirin spins a fantasy of Egyptian/Jewish encounter that charms viewers with its warmth and humanism. However, the film's "Egyptians" are stand-ins for the generic "Arabs," diverting viewers from the key issue of peace with the Palestinians. In contrast, Suleiman reviews six decades of Palestinian history through his alter ego's child's eyes traced through to his adulthood. The film's laconic episodic structure and bitter irony use suppressed expression to convey barely contained frustration and anger.

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