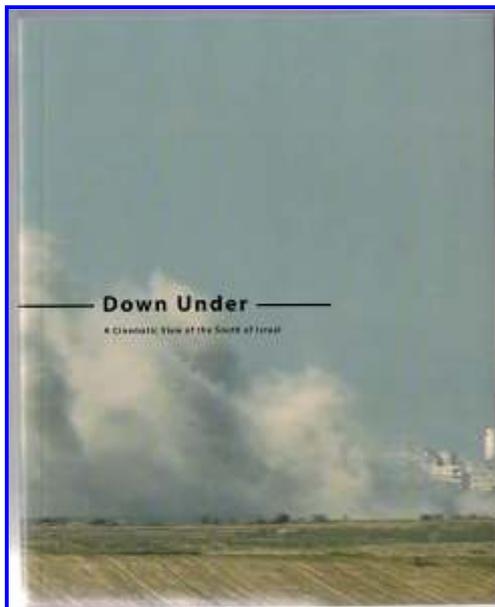


## Guerrilla Filmmaking: From Down Under: a Cinematic View of the South of Israel



### Guerilla Filmmaking

#### Uri S. Cohen

Mother: "It's far safer in a cage, no one can hurt you there."

Tom: "Only cowards have cages, I am not a coward."

(*Play Me Allegro*, directed by Alon Alsheich and Eran Yehezkel, 2008)

The war machine and the cinematic camera came to the world inexorably linked with each other. The connection between military and cinematic technology and between the cinematic conception of reality and the interpretation of war as a panoramic setting is almost self-evident. A picture is called a "shot," and the cross hairs on the rifle's sight are barely different from those on the camera lens. War, as depicted in the film clips released by the IDF spokesman, differs from its motion-picture depictions only in the outcome it exerts on human beings.<sup>[1]</sup> In the film *Lebanon* (directed by Shmulik Maoz, 2009), the soldier inside the tank looks just like a photographer, except that his sight is attached to a canon and not to a camera. This correlation is also evident when examined from a national point of view. The American war machine has Hollywood at its disposal, producing films like *Avatar*. The Israeli war machine, with its limited budget, has Israeli TV Channel 2 and films like *Beaufort* (directed by Joseph Cedar, 2007).

The Israeli war machine dominates the visual perception of "Israeliness" by means of a cultural establishment that serves its masters. Within this visual economy there is a place for a "South" – a marginal district of this Israeliness, a region unfortunate enough to be embroiled in a war not of its own choosing. While the Southern cinema that has evolved in the town of Sderot started out in this given state of affairs, it tries to turn the connection between the war machine and cinema upside down – that is, to turn its weakness into a strength, as Doron Tzabari, a major Israeli filmmaker and esteemed teacher at Sapir College, puts it. In other words, it strives to conduct a war by means of the cinema – a war against the representation of war, against the representation of the peripheral, of Mizrahi Jews and of the South of Israel; of all that is out there, not far from death. This cinematic South is first and foremost what it is not – it is not the periphery of the

center, but a center onto itself. It does not represent the poor in relation to the rich, and not even the poor per se, but a life worthy of compassion as such – like *My Family's Pizza* (Ronen Amar, 2003), which keeps overflowing beyond the boundaries of its tray. The opposing forces in these films are also unequal. In *Hula & Natan* (Robby Elmaliah, 2010), the brothers Aaron (Hula) and Natan run what would normally, in other places, be called a garage. Their lives are a constant reminder of the tumult that aims to destroy them. This mechanism is exposed when Hula appears on the TV news, describing the fall of a Qassam rocket nearby: while on the news he appears as a typical, stammering and terrified victim of war, in Elmaliah's film he is depicted as a complex, compassionate person.

The inequality of forces characterizes this cinematic genre as guerilla filmmaking. All these films share a resistance to the visual imagery which the ruling hegemony imposes on the South and on the Qassam war that unleashes neighbors on each other. Guerilla warfare is a form of struggle waged by local forces that have few resources at their disposal, against the war-machine of a foreign or dictatorial rule which cannot be resisted directly. Chairman Mao, "clear-sighted leader of the Chinese Communist Party," who developed this doctrine in the course of his own fighting, based it on two principles that are relevant to cinema. [2] The first principle relates to the hegemony of a power that tries to impose its views on people in a given territory. A guerilla war starts off by perceiving the contradictions inherent in that power, which are mostly political in nature. In the case at hand, this pertains to the array of contradictions inherent in the Zionist stand vis-à-vis anything that opposes it, a counter-opposition that Zionism maintains even at the peril of spoiling the image that it seeks to produce. Zionism is full of contradictions, which are visually expressed in the State's representation of itself in the cultural sphere. The disengagement from the Gaza strip was precisely such an attempt to remove from the bounds ("frame") of sovereignty all that cannot be symbolically suppressed.

A simplistic way of looking at things, characteristic of most rhetorical references to the current "situation," is liable to tag these cinematic works from the South as "leftist." This is due to the fact that any attempt at allowing the Palestinian Repressed into the cultural field of vision is considered, *prima facie*, a "leftist" political stance. This is only correct insofar as any representation of the complexities of truth assumes a political stance in a regime based on falsehoods and simplifications regarding the past, and increasingly also the present. The fundamental "guerilla action" of these films is to impart the complexity of the present by presenting multi-layered human stories that contradict the official stand. This could have generated a sense of artificiality, had it not been for the realization that "guerilla warfare is first and foremost the ability to change the cognitive state." [3] [Is this an accurate quotation from the English original? Doesn't seem right... it is a summary] When Natan talks about the situation with his brother and suggests that the solution is to address "Mr. Ismail Haniyeh" in Arabic, it is not a "leftist" suggestion, but rather one that overturns the prevalent world-view, all the more so since he adds the sad realization that "all this actually belongs to them."

The second principle of guerilla warfare is flexibility. By its very existence, guerilla action demonstrates the transience of the ruling culture. If ruling is all about controlling the perceptions of those who are ruled, then guerilla warfare need only point out the lack of hegemonic control of reality in order to succeed. Documentary films are the natural media for such actions, meeting head on the common media image of "news" of the South. Films ranging from Ronen Amar's refined *My Family's Pizza* to **Avner** Faingulernt and **Macabit** Abramson's *Matador of War* (2010) are evidence that the digital revolution's technological advance can change the world. With relatively meager means, strikingly similar to those of guerilla fighters, the Department of Cinema and TV Arts at the Sapir College in Sderot has generated a critical mass of films that project a different image of life along the Gaza battle line.

The flexibility of guerilla warfare is manifested first and foremost in its goal definition. It does not seek to impose an alternative point of view, but rather to attain a release from such impositions. Its concern is not political in the usual sense. This is particularly evident in the film *In the Freimans'*

*Kitchen* (Hadar Bashan, 2007), which was shot in the Freimans' kitchen during the final days before the evacuation of the Katif settlement in the Gush Katif area in the Gaza Strip. The magnitude of the schism experienced by these people, who are about to be evicted from their homes, touches the viewers precisely because the film does not lend itself to any of the common narratives usually imposed on such people. They may be fanatic settlers, but this film shows them mostly as people whose entire world has been shattered. By lending an attentive ear to the special tenor of the couple's relationship, this film maintains a humanistic viewpoint, without the blind voyeurism that informs the telling of "a local story." This too is an example of the flexibility of guerilla filmmaking, and of the alliances it is capable of forging with people whose story is left out of prime-time news editions and thus remains unheard.

The human aspect and life itself are at the focus of all these films. The cats and dogs that Hula and Natan feed indicate their care for the living, their attentiveness to the suffering of others. A similar concern is manifested in their car lot, a sort of hospice for cars that had been written off but got a new lease of life in Hula and Natan's yard. The center of this film, much like the center of Israel, is a weak one, supported by the strong backbone of the war-machine which, in the absence of a civic culture to steer it, dominates Israeli reality. This is most poignantly manifested in the inevitable dissonance between the delicate features of the softly speaking boys-turned-soldiers and the havoc-wreaking firearms they embrace with a terrible lust to "hit them hard." The power of the war machine is infinite and it can destroy the world, but that is also its weakness. In the absence of a culture that promotes life, the war machine grinds itself to death. Its emptiness is exposed for all to see in each of these films.

The resistance factor in the Sapir College films is therefore more than mere subversion against something; it is a conscious attempt by this southern cinema to propose an alternative way of life. This is manifested not only in the films' subject-matter, but also in their style. A good example may be found in the films' tense relationship with the image of war projected by the media. In almost every film there is a scene in which the mechanism of news production is exposed. However, these scenes do more than unveil that mechanism; they are deeply critical of it. This is best exemplified in a scene that recurs in more than one film, of Israelis standing on a hilltop, watching the "fireworks" display which is in fact the war in Gaza. All around reporters take their positions, delivering grave words against the backdrop of heavy IDF combat machines and the pyrotechnics of war. Sunburned men gravely utter words that are lustily consumed by the viewers, a performance mixing together cruelty and indifference to the human lives it tramples upon. The difference between the South as a "news item" and the South as depicted in these films stems from differing points of view. Instead of a "normal" center which regards the South's lack of normalcy as a "problem" that needs to be forcefully solved, these films offer a scrutiny of a way of life which, even when ironically viewed, nevertheless is full of love and compassion.

Such a scene serves as the closing sequence of the refined, ironic film *Hula & Natan*. Operation Cast Lead begins to unfold in front of the tired eyes of Hula and Natan, who are falling asleep in their housing-project apartment. A long traveling shot taken, so it seems, from inside their battered (Arab-looking) Subaru, passes by a commercial center which is the media's center of operations. The car, like the brothers themselves, exposes the clash between the aesthetics of war and its behind-the-scenes reality; between the flashy consumerism of a car-lease culture and a sort of vehicular ecology; between an economic system that tramples the dispossessed and a marginal existence that refuses to submit to the System ("Gee, you retards, a five-minute job takes you five hours, and at the end you only charge twenty Shekels... Get a move on, charge a hundred Shekels, and do the next car," a customer admonishes Hula). These are all different kinds of violence exerted against both sides in order to turn what was once a fabric of coexistence into life on two sides of a border. Elaborating on different types of bombs in a childish, indifferent show of knowledge, the security guard in *Matador of War* is already part of the apparatus that kills and tears up the fabric of coexistence in order to "protect" it. Such a scenario is the main concern of *Men on the Edge: Fishermen's Diary* (Avner Faingulernt and Macabib Abramson, 2005). The film is deeply empathetic towards this process which, while rooted in the political sphere and the

national economy, always relies on the wretchedness of people who live on the edge, who find it difficult to behave nobly when tempted by some supposed advantage over others.

The guerilla aspect of *Men on the Edge* is in showing how the fabric of coexistence between fishermen from Gaza and Jewish settlers from the northern part of the Gaza strip is torn apart – a fabric of life that turns by a government decree into an all-out war, destroying all that was once alive and well. The surprise in *Hula & Natan* is just how articulately expressed is the resistance of these two supposedly wretched brothers. Visually, it is spectacular; the impressive media communication center brings to mind the city that is set up in Uri Zohar's 1965 film *Hole in the Moon*, which is eventually burnt to the ground by the actors themselves. The soundtrack of official Israel is heard on the radio, providing the war machine's internal monologue as it proudly recounts the number of victims in Gaza. Heard inside the battered Subaru, through the two brothers' marginal existence, this soundtrack sounds like a Samson in the process of bringing down the gates of Gaza upon himself, reviling in the number of victims in a war that heralds his own demise.

Hula and Natan drive through town to a hill on the Gaza border. It is a familiar view of a city, just a city across the border. It is winter, and the few empty stretches of ground are green. Hula and Natan, in their blue Subaru, stand somewhat apart from a group of Israelis. Hula explains, his face painfully strained, that all the people over there are his friends, that they are hungry and poor, and that we should be sending them food and medications instead of fighting them. In the background, the spectators' handclapping grows stronger at the sight of bombs falling on Gaza. Well-dressed, smiling Israelis stand on the hill and count smoke bursts. "Wow, Wow, Wow," they smile, and one of them snaps pictures. Hula, passing nearby, utters: "Disgusting," and the film immediately cuts to another car-corpse being pushed into a garage near a deserted building. Immediately after that, the brothers prepare the garage and themselves for Independence Day celebrations. They hang flags, take a haircut, and wait for the fireworks display. There is nothing festive about any of this, only a reminder of the ease with which we accept destruction and killing. The juxtaposition of the scenes is not simplistic; it is a guerilla act that depicts the fireworks as stylized bombings, showing Sderot as a Gaza-with-a-hairdo.

The narrative of the South, or the southern narrative, constitutes the dark side of the Zionist narrative of a pioneering enterprise; one could say that this is, in a tragic sense, borderline cinema. The murderous presence of the State is no cause for celebration. No desert is conquered here, the only conquest is of whatever used to be beautiful, which is now destroyed. In some of the films we witness the process, as in **Avner** Faingulernt and **Macabib** Abramson's films and in *Play Me Allegro*. In others we see the results, as in Ronen Amar's films, which reverberate with destruction and a loving attempt to pick up the pieces. The refusal of Faingulernt and Abramson's camera to depict the aesthetics of the heavy machinery of war is absolute. The blurred image of this display of force activates our built-in mechanism for completing the picture in our mind, allowing us more comfort than befits an image of instruments of death.

### Epilogue: Shame

The cinema of the South is not necessarily belligerent or dogmatic. It is modest and not outwardly aggressive. But it penetrates our very perception of reality and tries to change it. In this guerilla warfare, shame is the central weapon. Sartre defines shame as the moment one is caught peeping through a keyhole. As long as one feels invulnerable and unexposed, one can derive pleasure from the vulnerability of the person observed through the keyhole, seen but unseeing. This is somewhat similar to the people on the hilltop who cheer when death hits Gaza. It is a moment captured by the Southern lens time and again, shaming us as it exposes the false feeling of immunity generated by the mighty war machine on the hegemonic side of reality. What is destroyed on both sides of the border constitutes a "blind spot" for the center and its power. At the end of each film it is us, the spectators, who feel shame. Ashamed of failing to bring about a revolution – a revolution

whose starting point would be seeing and being seen, promoting equality between people who are all equally deserving of life, living life as it should be lived.

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[1] Paul Virilio, *Cinema and War: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989). In Israeli cinema, Shmulik Maoz's *Lebanon* (2009) expresses a deep and disturbing awareness of this connection.

[2] Mao Zedong, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," in *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings, 1912-1949*, ed. Stuart R. Schram (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), vol. V, p. 481.

[3] Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea* (London: Faber, 1970), p. 19-21.