THOUGHTFUL FILMS AT TEL AVIV'S 2010 DOCAVIV FESTIVAL

Part I

Reviewed by Jaqueline Levitin

A professor of film at Tel Aviv University whom I met while in Israel attending the DocAviv film festival made an interesting remark. Some sixty percent of his students, he told me, made films about themselves. Twenty per cent chose to make films about Palestinians, and twenty per cent on Israeli social problems. His remark was intended to be disparaging of student naiveté, but I told him I found it encouraging—that 40% of young Israeli filmmakers are concerned about the political and social issues facing their country and are using film to do something about it.

That percentage of concern seemed better than the general average at the time I was in Israel. Not many people seemed interested in talking about politics. (Or they deemed me an inappropriate interlocutor—“You can't understand if you don't live here,” was a frequent comment.) Politics for many seemed too complicated to deal with (“What can you do with impossible coalition governments like these?”); or they were simply happy that no violence was taking place—for the moment. In contrast, DocAviv audiences seemed ready for political discussion, and the festival offered daily opportunities.

DocAviv is in its 13th year—a festival of strictly documentary film (plus ancillary events for Israeli filmmakers), and very popular. Screenings were well attended, running from morning to midnight, frequently with three screenings running simultaneously. The main location is the Tel Aviv Cinémathèque—a large modern building with one very large, and one not quite so large, screening room, plus screenings at nearby centres. TheDocAviv festival is a separate entity. Director Ilana Tzur, who initiated the festival, has announced that this is her last year. One hopes they will find an equally good replacement; her programming is excellent.

I am not able to mention here every film I saw (I saw some 30, and over 80 played in the 10 days). Rather, I will focus on a few political-issue documentaries, and especially on the Israeli films in this category. A few struck me as particularly interesting. (These were not necessarily the prizewinners, although some did win prizes, which I will indicate.)

הגיע זמן
תשובה

From *The Messiah Will Always Come*. Anti-occupation activist with placard, *“Higi'a Zman Tshuva”* (the time has come for repentance), referring to Jewish settlement in Hebron.

The Messiah Will Always Come (2010) offers an interesting perspective on religion and politics in Israel. The film's format is simple: Two women, old friends, drive through the occupied territory of the West Bank—an area the majority of the “national-religiouscommunity” in Israel sees as given to the Jews by God, and its settlement “a stage in process of redemption.” Hagit Ofran, the driver, is keeping track of the settlements for Peace Now. Lea Klibanoff, the woman behind the camera (only her voice is heard), is making a film about Hagit, though Hagit insists that rather, the film is about “the political situation.” For Lea, the drive (many “drives”—the film was shot over three years) is to understand what her old friend has been doing since the days they were both involved in a group of leftist religious Jewish university students.The group had come together to argue a different kind of religious response after the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a religious settler. They wanted Judaism to reorient itself to what Hagit calls “Torah with DerekhEretz” (manners). But Hagit has long since left the group for the secular Peace Now. She wanted to be on the “winning side,” she tells Lea; their group's message was not being heard in the religious camp.

The drive through the West Bank is an eye-opener. We do not have much opportunity to see images of what is happening in the settlements these days, not since the mid-1990s when, in accordance with the phased (interim) agreement, the Israeli government turned control over parts of the territory to the Palestinian Authority (the phases were never completed) and since forbids Israelis who have no business to conduct in these areas to go there. So we don't generally see what Hagit sees, that settlement “X” has enlarged their stake by planting five trailers now instead of the three that were there only months ago (“90% of settlements exceed the jurisdiction area assigned to them,” we are told), that 13% of settlement “Y” is on privately owned Palestinian land (as are 32% of the settlements and outposts), and that since 2005 at least 53 new roads have been created, part of them without permission. Jewish settlements now number 120 and outposts 100. Close to 300,000 settlers now live in the occupied territories. (How did it get to be so many!)

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These facts about the settlements and outposts emerge casually from the conversations between Hagit and Lea and the occasional settler they encounter, but especially as “entries” in Hagit’s notebook—hand-written notes, accompanied by the sound of pencil scratching, that from time to time appear in a corner of the screen. Other texts, too, occasionally figure on the screen—quotations from the Bible that argue the point of view of Hagit (and Lea) against the religious justifications of the settlers. “When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it,” reads one, “thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down for the man is the tree of the field, to employ them in the siege” (Deuteronomy 20, 19). The text appears after a scene where Palestinian grapevines are found—for the fourth year in a row, we learn with Lea—cut down by the women of the nearby Jewish settlement.

It is these quotations that particularly stuck me. The battle of interpretation over what Judaism stands for (and who is a Jew) is the essential internal battle being fought in Israel today. While most Diaspora Jews assume that the struggle is still the battle of Israel’s survival against her adversaries, in Israel today, being a Jew does not necessarily endear you to your Jewish neighbours, or even merit special favour. There seems to be no longer any sense of “tribal” unity: the secular hate the religious, who hate the secular and even those who are not religious enough. *The Messiah Will Always Come* focuses our attention on this ideological battle and its consequences.

The film’s title comes from the words of Hagit’s grandfather, the late professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz. “The Messiah will always come” means forever projecting into the future: justice will never be achieved, but at the deepest level, as with the messiah, we have to believe it is possible.

Deadly Honour

Deadly Honour (2009) is another film worth keeping an eye out for. Though not a strictly Israeli film per sé—the filmmaker, Lipika Pelham**,** is a former BBC journalist who originates from India and currently resides in Israel—its subject is squarely Israeli. Pelham developed the film from the extensive research she conducted for BBC radio. A newspaper article had caught Pelham’s attention: Eight honour killings of young women had taken place in a single Bedouin family between 2001 and 2007 in Ramle, a town populated by both Jews and Arabs a mere 20 km. from Tel Aviv. A woman (her image appears here) had bravely called an end to the code of silence that typically surrounds honour killing. Her daughter, who had fled the family home when threatened (of what slight was the teenager guilty?),had emerged from hiding because she missed her mother. The film tells us she had just fried herself potatoes for breakfast when her brother and his accomplices burst into the kitchen and shot the girl dead.

The killing was more than the mother could endure. She renounced her sons and reported the murder to the police. It was the first time that a denunciation had happened in this Bedouin community. But the mother is herself now in hiding. (Where does one hide in such a small country?)

Pelham makes an impressive effort to find people to talk to. The Imam is evasive. Only one other man will talk to her, but admits that he dare not say anything or risk violence himself. Israeli authorities appear by and large to abdicate responsibility. Pelham treads a careful path not to sensationalize, and criticizes no one directly.

Why are the Israelis reluctant to push the issue further? The Bedouin, a traditionally nomadic tribal group whose Islam predates contemporary practices, have been Israel’s partners militarily. They are free to join the army, and their ranks include several soldier heroes. But beginning in the 1950s, these nomads have been installed in cities by the government who did not like the unpredictability of their wanderings. In cities, males are frequently unemployed (while women more often find work); honour killing restores male authority.

Pelham’s approach includes protecting the identity of anyone who cooperates with the film. A television screening that was supposed to take place soon after the festival was postponed when *Deadly Honour*’s main character—the only young woman in the community to have survived a killing attempt (but the bullet that entered her head left her partially paralyzed)—decided she could not afford to have her face on screen after all. Pelham accommodated her last-minute wishes and postponed the film to allow for digital doctoring. Not every filmmaker would be that honourable, especially with a signed release already in hand. But for Pelham, the commitment was personal. Interviewing had already put her own safety at risk.

Pelham’s is an important and brave film, but it also presents an image that fits easily into Israeli ethnic politics, confirming what Israelis “already know” – that their treatment of women is superior to that of Arab culture. But the blame it hints at in regard to the Israeli government—the social situation of the Bedouin which it has created, and the lackluster response on the part of the Israel police—raises the stakes of the issue.◆