

long as we remain constrained by the choice of rejection versus acceptance of the prescriptive authority of the tradition, we miss our main task: to incorporate the greatest intellectual change affecting Jews in the modern era—secularism—into a dynamic definition of what it means to be Jewish. The conflictual model that characterizes the whole of Jewish tradition allows—and indeed requires—us to

include *all* interpretations, including the secular, into our understanding of Judaism. This is the only model that allows for a dialogue between secular and religious Jews and between feminism and Orthodoxy.

In such a dialogue, participants frankly affirm contradictions and conflicts rather than sweeping them under the rug. Each side maintains its individual integrity, even as the very

dialogue creates an ongoing relationship between them. Thus, rather than seeking to harmonize feminism with Jewish tradition, it is necessary to recognize where there are real contradictions between them. This recognition is the only basis for a truly egalitarian marriage between feminism and the Jewish tradition. And we can expect that, like all such unions, this one will leave neither partner unchanged. □

FILM REVIEW

The Liberal Picture Show

Deborah Kaufman

In an opening long shot that contains every orientalist cliché a Westerner could conjure, the camera pans over a rocky and overgrown West Bank landscape. From a distant minaret, a muezzin calls Muslims to prayer, and we see a *kaffiyeh*-clad Palestinian with a child, languorously riding a donkey down a winding road. Suddenly the tranquility is broken: A sputtering European automobile careens, driverless, over the horizon as two screaming Israelis in uniform race alongside it, struggling to regain control of their vehicle.

One of the two soldiers, Rapha (Sharon Alexander), is on his way to a military base in the Occupied Territories, where he has been sent to investigate the suspicious death of a Palestinian during interrogation. When Rapha unravels and exposes the murder of this Palestinian, he in turn becomes the victim of a bloody attack by his brothers-in-arms, who are trying to silence him.

The plot of *One of Us* is rooted in daily life in a militarized state. In Israel, repeated revelations of soldiers torturing and murdering their Arab prisoners powerfully dramatize the corrupting nature of occupation and conquest. But between the realpolitik acknowledgment that a victorious army naturally brutalizes its vanquished

subjects and a deeply felt concern for the moral implications of this behavior lies a vast grey area of ambivalence. Israelis are expert at the denial of their own uncertainties and contradictions; *One of Us* dramatizes this by what's in the screenplay as well as what's left out. Not only the filmmakers but the characters they create are mired in the culture of occupation in a way that prevents them from creating a truly radical alternative or picture of transformation.

International organizations such as Amnesty International and partisan observers such as the U.S. State Department have documented routine human-rights abuses in Israel. These "incidents," as they are officially called, take on the proportions of scandals—more as symbolic rituals that cleanse the public conscience than as occasions for serious reform. Torture has become a permanent feature of the Israeli political landscape, from the Pinto Affair in the 1970s, in which an IDF lieutenant strangled four Lebanese prisoners during Operation Litani, to the Shamir-appointed Landau Commission report, which found that the Shin Bet had not only systematically tortured prisoners for seventeen years but lied to the military courts about its interrogation methods the entire time. The Landau Commission went so far as to condone "moderate physical pressure" in interrogations, even though it acknowledged that nearly half of all

interrogations end without charges being pressed against the suspect.

Only in the summer of 1991 did an Israeli court first punish Israeli torturers with a prison sentence, when two Shin Bet investigators were convicted of "negligence" in the death of a twenty-seven-year-old Gaza man in 1989. Each soldier received a mere six months' imprisonment. The State of Israel now acknowledges that torture is a crime, but the punishment it metes out is slight; the message is overwhelmingly one of ambivalence.

In his article "Talking About Torture in Israel" (*Tikkun*, September/October 1991), Stanley Cohen describes the internally contradictory pattern of denial and justification among Israelis: "It can't be happening here, but if it is, it must be all right." And where justification doesn't work, there is the (faulty) assumption that with public exposure, the system will correct itself.

Denial and ambivalence are not limited only to the Occupation's excesses; they are also typical Israeli attitudes toward the very fact of the Occupation itself. Even the occasional visitor to Israel is struck by the way Israelis deny the existence of the stress and fear caused by the political situation. It is impossible to live outside of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, yet it seems easier to deny it in order to function day-to-day. To live fully with the conflict means not only giving voice to multiple perspectives

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—including that of the Palestinians—in the political sphere, but accepting a subjective multiplicity of perspectives—confronting one's own mixed feelings and contradictions.

In *One of Us*, the writer-director team Benny and Uri Barbash have created an Israeli passion play in which Rapha struggles to overcome this ambivalence. The findings of his investigation force him to choose whether to remain loyal to the army and state by participating in the cover-up, or to face the consequences of remaining true to his conscience by making his knowledge public.

After Rapha arrives at the base, a long flashback begins in a training camp, where a macho friendship develops between Rapha, Yotam (Alon Aboutboul), and Amir (Dan Toren). The soldiers share the usual rigors of group exercises and increasingly painful and humiliating endurance tests under the tutelage of a sadistic platoon commander. Rapha's ulcer begins to act up, but he also lets his sense of humor get him into trouble when he anonymously distributes a photo he has taken of the commander defecating outdoors.

In the spirit of the unit's anthem "All for one and one for all," Rapha's buddies refuse to let him turn himself in, and they accept a group punishment, doled out with savage vengeance by the commander. But their solidarity breaks under military discipline. Rapha watches as his friends Yotam and Amir argue over the value of group loyalty under their increasing physical hardships. One by one, Rapha's comrades slowly ostracize him; eventually an anonymous informer turns him in. When the commander punishes Rapha sadistically, he chooses to transfer out of the unit. Yotam, Rapha's closest buddy, cannot understand what has happened.

As the film shifts back to the present, we find that Yotam is now the head of the unit. Amir was recently killed, ostensibly by the Palestinian prisoner whose death Rapha has come to investigate. Rapha wants to disqualify himself from the investigation because of his personal ties to Amir and Yotam. But Yotam, despite protests from his men at the base, his commanding officer Colonel Karny (Arnon Zadok), and his girlfriend Tamar (Dahlia Shimko), convinces Rapha to stay on. Tamar, in a traditionally

female, civilizing role, says to Yotam, "It's as if you owe Rapha an apology. You're waiting for him to approve of something you're not so sure about." Was Yotam the anonymous informer who turned Rapha in? Is Yotam "not so sure" of the moral implications of his actions on the base?

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Tension rises on the base when Rapha finds the tools of torture covered with fingerprints and hears about a "missing" tape cassette that had recorded the interrogation, torture, and killing. In a scene rife with repressed sexual tension, Yotam punches Rapha in the face, nurses his bloody wounds, and then tenderly holds him in his arms. Yotam reproaches him, with barely concealed guilt: "At least you'll shut your fucked-up mouth now." In a revealing response, Rapha answers, "It's not my mouth that's fucked up, it's my character."

Rapha is presumably speaking for all of Israel's doves who feel that by being in opposition they are "fucked up." They have internalized the venomous attacks of the Israeli Right, which equates criticism of the State with treason. In this nationalist worldview, doves are "wimps," just like diaspora Jews; neither has a right to challenge the status quo. Though doves in Israel have no political power, they carry all the guilt for the collective crimes of the State. At this point, Rapha is drinking Maalox by the quart to soothe the pain of his ulcer, but something far more serious is eating away at Israel's body politic. In fact, it is not Rapha who is "fucked up"; it is the character of Israeli society.

Rapha confronts Yotam with his discoveries and describes the torture and

humiliation inflicted on Palestinians by Yotam and his men. Yotam responds with the story of how he held in his arms the dying Amir, a victim of Palestinian terror. "All for one and one for all" has become an ironic national anthem that now rings with desperation. The two grown-up men with guns scream and grasp at each other across a political abyss; neither has an answer the other can accept.

The report Rapha makes to Colonel Karny on the "incident" he has come to investigate points out the degree to which Rapha is no longer "one of us." Rapha begins, "The deceased was shot." Karny interrupts, "You've promoted the terrorist to the rank of 'the deceased.' Next time you'll be saying 'of blessed memory.'" "I'm sorry," says Rapha. Karny warns him, "Don't be sorry, be careful." Rapha corrects himself: "The terrorist was shot."

This regulation of language's implicit political imperatives sets the stage for the frightening climactic sequence in which men from the unit attack, beat, and poison Rapha in order to prevent him from speaking ever again. This was the final scene in the original stage play upon which the script is based; but the Barbash brothers have refused the kind of despair the original script allowed, and have added their own ending.

In the Barbash brothers' extended filmic rendition, Tamar rescues Rapha from death at the hands of his fellow soldiers and reveals the only evidence of torture, the "missing" cassette tape. It is the female, outside and marginal to the man's world, who is able to break the silence. While Yotam, Karny, and the other soldiers wait nervously in a brightly lit room, the camera cuts to Rapha, alone, framed by a window as he types the report at his desk in the dark of night.

Rapha is carrying the incriminating report as he leaves the base early the next morning in the same sputtering European car, which now needs to be pushed in order to start. In an ambiguous denouement, he stops at a burning dumpster, stares across the flames at Tamar, who gazes back in recognition, and the two watch Yotam drive by alone in his military jeep. Fade to black. If Rapha has thrown his report in the flames, the film becomes an exposé of the corruption of the entire system and the impossibility of even an honest soldier escaping

contamination. If Rapha adopts the detached integrity of Tamar and indeed does submit his report to higher authorities, his act of individual courage may be laudable, but not terribly effective in changing political conditions in Israel. We will never know.

In the stage version, director Uri Barbash admits there was a bleak but decisive message: "Violence won't stop at the Green Line—if you can kill an Arab you can kill a Jew." There was no outside political pressure to soften the screen adaptation, Barbash says: "I meant the film version to be ambiguous. I don't want to do propaganda films."

The failure of the filmmakers to provide either a clear stand or a more effective resolution in many ways mirrors the limitations and failures of the Israeli peace camp. Screenwriter Benny Barbash, a lieutenant colonel who served in Lebanon, was particularly outspoken in his opposition to the war in which he fought. Uri Barbash has charged publicly that Israel is becoming another South Africa. Both are active supporters of Peace Now. But the Barbash brothers' overriding concern with the morality of Rapha's choice seems to avoid the more essential concern of territorial control and political power. In fact, *One of Us* never directly questions the policy of occupation or gives voice to alternatives. Instead, it internalizes resistance as individual acts of courage. Similarly, Peace Now is obsessed with maintaining respectability, and so does not challenge the structure or culture of occupation. At last October's Tel Aviv rally called by Peace Now to support the Middle East peace conference in Madrid, all of the supposedly oppositional speeches were in fact supportive of Shamir. The peace movement ensures its continued marginality by its inability to propose an alternative.

Ella Shohat, in her book *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (University of Texas Press, 1989), posits that the marginality and ambivalence of protagonists in contemporary Israeli cinema is "bohemian": "The identification with the marginal... in contrast with that of many Third World films, does not represent a form of mediated solidarity with the oppressed but rather a pretext for narcissistic self-contemplation." Shohat asserts that this is to a great degree because the Western Ashkenazi



Prisoners of liberalism? Israeli filmmakers Benny and Uri Barbash offer a tentative vision of Palestinian-Israeli solidarity in Beyond the Walls.

Jews of Israel cannot and will not identify themselves as Middle Easterners; they instead retain orientalist, paternalistic, and aloof attitudes toward Jews of Middle Eastern origin and Arabs. The result is that Israel's cinema of occupation offers only an analysis of guilt rather than proposing a radical shift in power.

Earlier collaborations of the Barbash brothers reveal the extent to which these tendencies haunt both Israeli narrative film and the political conditions that cinema reflects. Their two earlier screen collaborations, *Beyond the Walls* (1984) and *Unsettled Land* (1988), deal with some of the same issues raised by *One of Us*: the individual versus the group, moderates (doves or political leftists) versus extremists (the ideological right wing), and rebels versus authority.

When it was released, *Beyond the Walls* was the most controversial and popular film ever produced in Israel, and the first Israeli feature to deal directly with relations between Palestinians and Jews. In the film, Uri (Arnon Zadok), a stereotypically swarthy Sephardi Jewish criminal, teams up with Issam (Muhammed Bakri), a

thoughtful Palestinian "terrorist," against the divide-and-conquer strategy of a corrupt and brutal prison administration. The solidarity of the Palestinian and Jewish inmates made a bold utopian statement. The film won almost every award in Israel as well as the International Critics Award at the prestigious Venice Film Festival, and was nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Film. It was the first film ever to be screened before the Knesset, and it provoked pickets, demonstrations, and ultimately riots between supporters of Rabbi Meir Kahane and peaceniks in Israel. Although Warner Brothers released *Beyond the Walls* in the U.S. as simply a genre film about rival prison gangs, the film was a major political event in Israel.

The story is told primarily through the point of view of Uri, whose leadership and integrity, like Rapha's, set him apart from the group. His realization that the authorities will go to any length to retain control of the prison (they arrange for the murder of a Jew and blame it on the Palestinians in order to keep the prisoners at each other's throats) moves him toward understanding that all inmates, regardless of ethnic identity or nationality, will

share the same grim fate unless they rise up together against their common enemy. Unlike *One of Us*, in which politics tears friends apart, politics brings enemies together in *Beyond the Walls*. Uri must choose whether or not to overcome his prejudices and forge an alliance with the men he had called his enemies. The outcome is a prison strike that reveals unexpected depths of compassion and understanding between men trapped in a situation beyond their control.

The rebels in *Beyond the Walls* have moral authority but they cannot and do not take power. The film is a critique of the establishment, but like *One of Us*, it never offers an alternative. Director Barbash admits that the ending is ambiguous, and has just finished shooting *Beyond the Walls II*, scheduled for release in late 1992, in which the same characters attempt an escape from the prison.

In *Unsettled Land*, the Barbash brothers produced another genre film, this time using the classic Western to represent Israel's frontier period. Anda (Kelly McGillis) and her pioneer comrades from Europe arrive to build a utopian society in Palestine circa 1920; the inevitable confrontation between the "cowboy" settlers and Palestinian "Indians" impels the film's narrative. Like Tamar in *One of Us*, Anda is the civilizing influence and love-object of the men whose male-bonding rituals include smashing boulders with their bare hands and brandishing newly acquired firearms. Zev (Ohad Shachar), the titular head of the settlers, is fanatically devoted to building the new State regardless of the consequences; Amnon (Arnon

Zadok), on the other hand, the outsider and embodiment of humanism, is a Jew who speaks Arabic to his Palestinian friends in the surrounding villages. Anda's dreams of a just society are shattered as absolutists on both the Jewish and Palestinian sides encourage the violent destruction of the enemy.

Both *Unsettled Land* and *One of Us* are frontier films, set outside of civilization in that perilous zone where two cultures collide, where heroes are supposed to live by killing, and where the frontier man makes his own laws. But this version of the Wild West has a distinctively Middle Eastern twist. *Unsettled Land's* main characters, Amnon and Muhammed (Amos Lavie), the village *mukhtar*, urge their compatriots to compromise, but cannot prevent the start of the range-war that serves as the film's climax. Neither side can transform itself from within, and both Amnon and Muhammed are sacrificed on the altar of extremism. Both Amnon and Muhammed are individual men of honor in an intractably corrupt situation. They sing a love song to each other in Arabic, to the accompaniment of a European settler's charred violin, before they ride off together into a hail of Jewish and Palestinian bullets. The death of the moderates is clearly an allegory for the failures of their successors, who continue to work toward dialogue in later generations. However, by presenting the film from Anda's point of view, the Barbash brothers have rendered all perspective through the eyes of an enlightened occupier, an ambivalent liberal. In so doing, the filmmakers have foreclosed the possibility of directly challenging the Occupation.

A radical cinema in Israel might begin to challenge the Occupation by providing multiple points of view. Such a cinema could attempt to challenge the denial and ambivalence so prevalent in Israeli society by validating the subjective contradictions that exist for people in the audience. In the Israeli context, an acceptance of diversity could, in fact, be the first decisive step toward an alternative to the status quo. It could provide a cultural context that would allow a filmmaker to create an unambiguous scenario and conclusion without feeling that he or she is simply a "propagandist." The Barbash brothers' work has done much to raise controversial issues and point accusatory fingers in righteous indignation. The first generation of Israeli filmmakers in the two decades after Israel's independence raised the banner of aliya, pioneer settlements, and the struggle against the enemy. The auteurist New Wave swept Israel much as it did Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, and a culture of existentialist individualism downplayed the ideals of the first generation. The Barbash brothers represent a generation of new talent that works against both these strains. They have used film to relate stories of conflict and change without reducing their characters into mere metaphors. But they have portrayed the Middle East as seen by an ambivalent liberal mind—a brutal, violent man's world full of prisons, hostile natives, and pathological military units. Through their films we see a culture of occupation that has no script for transformation. They present a challenge to the next generation of filmmakers and activists who have yet to imagine or create a truly radical alternative. □

PALESTINIANS

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Hundreds and thousands of Palestinians from the local villages, refugee camps, and slums of Hebron, Nablus, and Gaza felt that they too were going to Madrid and continuing on with the delegation to Washington to meet with the heads of state. This mixture of academics, former security prisoners, and supporters in the Palestinian "street" forged a broad consensus behind the peace process.

At the beginning of the peace negotiations the Palestinians' political proposals were rather vague. The

delegation seemed to rely on the United States to do everything for them. Before the Palestinian representatives left for the first rounds of talks in Washington, Sari Nusseibeh, a lecturer in philosophy at Bir Zeit and the man considered to be Hussein's second-in-command in coordinating the activities of the delegation, said that he was very optimistic about the outcome of the peace talks. In an interview with the Jordanian newspaper *El Dustar*, Nusseibeh claimed that "the general outline of the peace agreement has already been worked out between the United States and Russia and it includes Israeli withdrawal and the fulfillment of our demands."