



Old Wine in New Bottles

Tekumah, an Israeli resurrection of social change?

Dorit Naaman

The relationship between historical events, historical narratives and documentary cinema are complex, and at times problematic. Historical narratives give verbal accounts to events, while films represent those events visually, in a medium that is generally considered more authentic, or veridical than language. In the case of documentary films about the past, the documentarist must choose how to construct the visual data in the film, that is, from what material to draw, as she has not been there to document the events as they took place. The choices of found-footage, photographs, maps, etc., and their organization within the context of interviews and other materials create the evidential tone of the film. While historical biases are currently an issue of hot debate in historical narratives, the issues become even more

complex when the agenda of the filmmakers is masked under the cinematic conventions of documentary film practices, amongst them assumptions about the veridical indexical value of images.

In Israel, these issues came to the fore when public debate exploded over *Tekumah*, a television documentary series commemorating the 50th anniversary of Israel. The production of *Tekumah* capped ten years of debate over Israel's historical narrative, a narrative vigorously challenged by the new historians and their scholarship.

In 1988, following the publication of two books - Benny Morris' *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*¹ and Ilan Pappé's *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951*,² - an academic debate erupted. The debate was historical at heart, and pertained mostly to information released in the 1980s by Israel's foreign ministry, which shed light on the events of the 1948 war.³ The debate took an interesting turn, however, when in 1994, Israeli fiction author Aharon Megged published an attack on these "new historians" (entitled "The Israeli Suicide Drive") in the weekly magazine of the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*.⁴ The move to the daily press by an academic author took the debate well out of its original historical bounds. What started as a debate about facts and interpretation was now a political controversy about the identity of the nation. The result was the emergence of post-Zionism, a movement towards divorcing modern Israel from the very national movement that gave birth to it.⁵ Unfortunately, post-Zionism and what became known as the "new historians' debate" are now often collapsed in public discourse into one and the same thing - a rejection of Israel's right to exist. Megged's article is one example of such conflation, and since his article, disputes have continued to flare up in the general press.

In 1998, the Israeli government-sponsored TV station (Channel 1) produced the documentary series, *Tekumah*, to commemorate, summarize and critically examine the 50 years of existence of the state of Israel. The series (comprised of 22 one-hour episodes) had a chief editor and was directed by 19 directors, each responsible for an episode or two. Aesthetically and formally, the episodes are somewhat different from one another, giving the impression that Israel exists in a state of multi-cultural bliss. But the series was directed only by Israeli Jews (even those episodes on Palestinians and Israeli Arabs), and the content was heavy-handedly controlled by Gideon Drori, chief editor and initiator of the series. While definitely not a linear narrative, the series as a whole crystallizes some of the historical and political discussions in contemporary Israeli society, including the debate over the new historians and post-Zionism. The producers anticipated a three to four percent viewing ratio, but within a few weeks it was clear that the two weekly broadcasts of each episode were attracting the attention of about 30 percent of the nation.

In the press too, the series was widely reviewed, criticized, and discussed. While initially hailed as a very important project, as the series progressed, its content managed to aggravate the right wing to the point that two ministers were asking that the series be removed from the airwaves.⁶ For instance, after the screening of the episode "The Optimist" on Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, and in anticipation of the episode featuring the Palestine Liberation Organization's Lebanon years, "Biladi Biladi," some critics called the series Palestinian propaganda,⁷ and connected it directly to the new historian and post-Zionist debates.

I argue that *Tekumah* (literally meaning "resurrection") manages to incorporate a



pluralistic appearance, but in essence still reiterates the same old Israeli myths about the foundation of the state, and its moral justification. Since the new historian debate pertains particularly to the 1948 War, I examine the first three episodes of the documentary, those discussing the War of Independence, in greater detail than others. I will show how the films allow for the expression of voices previously unheard, but also how the diversity of opinions is eventually subordinated to a non-threatening hegemonic perspective. Aesthetically then, the series incorporates a pluralistic (multi-cultural) look, a postmodern view of history, and an awareness of identity politics. But these aesthetics only mask a positivist, non-problematic view of Zionist ideology. While the new historians debate has actually made a difference in the Israeli political map,⁸ the show enables the average Israeli to ignore serious challenges to their traditional ideological and political assumptions. Despite the charges that it is a post-Zionist, pro-Palestinian show, *Tekumah* actually only repackages old Israeli wine in new bottles.

The New Historian Debate

Israel was established in 1948 after the United Nations voted on November 29, 1947 in favour of partitioning British Mandate Palestine into Israeli and Palestinian states. Merely three years after the end of WWII, and the realization of the horrors of the Holocaust, many Jews and Gentiles found a Jewish state necessary as a safe haven. While Zionism as a national movement had existed since the late 19th century (it emerged in tandem with other European national movements), and while the Zionist movement has been actively settling the "Land of Israel" since 1881 (then a part of the Ottoman Empire, and after 1917 under British rule), Israel's establishment effectively resulted from the Holocaust. Benny Morris writes:

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The essence of the old history is that Zionism's birth was an inevitable result of Gentile pressures and persecution, and that it offered at least a partial solution to the 'Jewish Problem' in Europe; that the Zionists intended no ill to the Arabs of Palestine, and that Zionist settlement alongside the Arabs did not, from the Jews' point of view, necessitate a clash or displacement, but that Israel was born into an uncharitable, predatory environment; that Zionist efforts at compromise and conciliation were rejected by the Arabs; and that the Palestinians and the neighbouring Arab states, selfish and ignoble, refused to accede to the burgeoning Zionist presence and in 1947-48 attacked the Yishuv with the aim of nipping the Jewish state in the bud.

A crucial aspect of the old history is that the Palestinian refugee problem was born from Arab calls for Palestinians to abandon their homes, clear the path for the Arab armies and therefore that Jewish militias (and later the army) cannot be blamed for the expulsion. In other words, the old historian account paints a picture in which Israel and its institutions were not morally wrong, and were not in ethical conflict with regards to the Palestinian inhabitants of the country. At every crucial point, says the old Israeli narrative, the Arabs were the ones to make a choice for which they would pay dearly, while the Israelis were eager to live amicably together.

The new historians set out to challenge at least some of these assertions. Morris, in particular, is a key researcher in exposing the semi-systematic expulsion policy, which Jewish forces did not officially embrace or impose, but more than occasionally exercised.⁹ In addition, Morris charges that Israel at the end of the 1948 War, and leader Ben Gurion in particular, rejected peace



efforts from other Arab countries.¹⁰ Morris not only paints the war in a new light, but also casts a shadow on Israel's moral standards, and its self-image as peace seeking or always defending itself rather than initiating aggression.

But the new historians not only provided a new account of history, but also criticized the old historians' methodology. While excusing the old historians for not having access to the archival material released in the 1980s, they still had other problems with the group. Morris writes of the old historians, that, "In reality they were chroniclers, and often apologetic, interested chroniclers at that. They did not work from and upon a solid body of contemporary documentation and did not normally try to paint a picture that offered a variety of sides of a given historical experience."¹¹

The attack on the old historians was not left unanswered. Many debates have ensued about historical facts, documents, interpretations and such. But most interesting was the debate on methodology; the new historians, much like the old ones, are positivist in their research tactics - that is, they rely on documents, facts, and attempt accurate understanding of the past. Moreover, some of the new historians admit that their history (i.e. the facts they discuss) is not so new. Avi Shlaim points out that, "Many of the arguments that are central to the new historiography were advanced long ago by Israeli writers, not to mention Palestinian, Arab, and Western writers."¹²

Efraim Karsh, a self-proclaimed old historian, recently published, *Fabricating Israeli History*,¹³ an attack on the new historians. In a chapter entitled "New Bottles - Sour Wine" Karsh claims that the practice should be called "new Israeli distoriography."¹⁴ The book sets out to show how facts and documents are being misread by new historians, how this research is partial and

does not include enough Arabic sources, and most importantly, that the new historians are set on a trendy Israeli-bashing trip, one influenced by the anti-Orientalist work of Edward Said. While throughout the book Karsh argues with the positions, documents and interpretation of Morris, Pappé, Shlaim and other new historians, his criticism boils down not to historiography (good or bad), but to ideology and politics. Karsh writes:

In other words, more than anything else the "new historiography" is a state of mind, or rather, a fashion. What unites its practitioners, by and large, is subscription to the all too common perception of Zionism as an offshoot of European imperialism, or at the very least as an aggressive and expansionist national movement. That is the part of the ocean in which the "new historians" have chosen to fish and the tackle they have chosen to use; the rest flows from there.¹⁵

And while it is true that Pappé is a postmodernist who embraces relativism, and believes that it is the duty of historians to bring their political beliefs into their work, Morris adheres to traditional historical practices of truth seeking and objectivity. "I am not sure that writing history serves any purpose or should serve any purpose that strays beyond the covers of each book and beyond the desire of practitioners and readers to penetrate the murk of the past," he writes.¹⁶

Can the historian be objective? Should he or she even attempt to? Postmodernism, identity politics, and in the case of the Middle East, postcolonial studies too, have all cast heavy doubts and criticisms on old social science practices. These theoretical movements have also criticized and questioned the filmic documentary practices of "objective" truth telling conventions.



Polyphonic Documentary

The first documentary films were produced (and later commissioned) by the Lumiere brothers. They were called *actualites* or real life moments, actual (as in non-fiction) film, and eventually took on the familiar format of the newsreels.¹⁷ The Lumieres sent dozens of cinematographers worldwide, and the footage they shot was processed and screened all over Europe. But the first documentarist to go beyond the short news format to a full feature-length film was Canadian Robert Flaherty. Flaherty made films about the Eskimos, the Polynesians, and other ethnic subjects, and thus started the ethnographic film tradition: a white man gazing (through the camera), studying, and objectifying, another culture.¹⁸ When British publicist John Grierson saw Flaherty's *Moana* in 1926, his own fascination with the medium was ignited, and he soon became known as the father of the British social documentary tradition. Grierson was particularly impressed with Flaherty's aesthetics, which went well beyond "the documentary value."¹⁹ It was that fascination that led to his famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality."²⁰

As a filmmaker, Grierson started his career as an employee of the EMB (Empire Marketing Board), and was thus recruited to represent British imperialistic ideology. From there he moved on to make government-sponsored films on the British working class. The films were accompanied by an explanatory narration, and while they were empathetic to the poor conditions of the workers, they could not explicitly criticize government policies.²¹

Even when his group subversively criticized governmental policies, (as in Anstey and Elton's *Housing Problems*, 1935) Grierson accepted his role as a propagandist and told the group of filmmakers he mentored that "art is a hammer, not a mirror."²² As such, Grierson's films were accompanied by a

(male) voiceover, a didactic narration that educated and instructed the audience, but also guided them towards the desired interpretation. In *Housing Problems*, the subjects of the film address the camera directly, and while the effect is strong, the interviews are still framed through the responsible camera/voiceover narration. Moreover, the commentary narration is sometimes accompanied by reconstruction, a creative freedom Grierson took in order to emphasize a point. Truth, to Grierson, was less important than a message, and his documentary tradition struggled between the need to provide truth claims, and the desire to make social propaganda.

Later genres, like Direct Cinema, would abolish as many cinematic markers as possible (narration, unique or pretty camera angles, etc.) in order to achieve a greater "truth."²³ This greater truth is supposedly located in the image, as pictures can only show what there is in the picture, and what is assumed to have been at one time in front of the camera. Direct cinema directors tried therefore to minimize their presence and intervention as much as possible, attempting to be like "a fly on the wall" - observing without being noticed. But Bill Nichols points out that, "Photographic images [. . .] re-present the visual field before a lens but they have no ability whatsoever to distinguish, or to allow us to distinguish, the historical status of that field."²⁴

In other words, once we assume the photographic image to be authentic (the idea that the picture cannot negate, or lie, as it can only assert what is in the picture), we need to accept that it can also not verify or authenticate its own status. What authenticates (or not) the image as an indexical sign for a referenced reality is extrinsic to the image, and lies in the labelling, the packaging, and the commentary of the film. Dirk Eitzen writes, ". . . when

viewers perceive movies to lie [. . .] that perception is with few exceptions a product of the metatextual label or interpretive framework that they apply to the text, not a product of the form of the text per se."²⁵ Even without narration then, direct cinema directors are still dependent upon the marketing of their images as documentaries in order for their truth value to be assumed.

The issue of truth and representation became much more complicated when women and ethnic minorities started producing documentaries of their own in the 1970s. The subject matter, perspective and aesthetics of the films were different than most of what had been seen before. The issue of interpretation was now foregrounded, as the same events were viewed from "other" sides. "Not only is the historical authenticity of the image subject to uncertainty," says Nichols, "the meaning it bears as evidence, even if it is authentic, is subject to interpretation. Facts make sense only within systems of meaning."²⁶

Song of Ceylon (Basil Wright, 1935), for instance, is a Griersonian film. But because it was funded by the Empire Tea Marketing Company, it avoided altogether the question of exploitation in the colonial market economy. Postcolonial documentaries on the other hand may emphasize exactly those power relations that are often transparent to Western eyes. The question of interpretation is magnified when the issue of agency is introduced. Up to the 1970s, most documentaries were made by white men, and narrated by white men. Particularly in the case of the ethnographic film tradition, the camera has been seen as a scientific tool to better learn and understand the object of study. The agency behind the camera was assumed to be neutral, objective and scientific. The relationship between mediator and medium, or the mediating activity, was assumed to be transparent, and value free.²⁷

When women and national/ethnic others started producing self-representations, however, they did not just want to change the perspective on the interpretation of facts. Their agenda often included foregrounding the agency behind the camera, declaring a subjective positioning, exposing the power relations inherent to the cinematic gaze and its apparatus. This direction politicised the structural aspects of documentary film, and created a counterpart to the political content of the films. "A subject who points to him/her/itself as subject in process, a work that displays its own formal properties or its own constitution as work," writes Trinh T. Min-ha, "is bound to upset one's sense of identity - the familiar distinction between Self and Other, because the latter is no longer kept in a recognizable relation of dependence, derivation, or appropriation."²⁸

For Trinh, challenging the Cartesian division between subject/object, outside/inside, mind/matter is at the core of an investigation of the "objective" or "social" aesthetics of documentary tradition. But this political aesthetic (both feminist and postcolonial) can often be seen as relativist and postmodernist. It is important to mention that for Trinh Minh-ha, however, the aesthetic is only truly political if it is not merely reflexive (a formal exercise), but actually accompanies textual social attitudes.

Keeping in mind Trinh's last assertion, I will now show that *Tekumah* bears some aesthetic markers of radical political documentaries, but that these are actually subordinated to a hegemonic textual and ideological Zionist agenda.

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One of the highlights of the Israeli 50th anniversary celebrations was the production of *Tekumah*. The word "Tekumah" means resurrection, rising up, building and



development. The name, a pompous reminder of the early pioneering jargon, indicates that the series was designed to commemorate the 50 years of the Zionist project, as it has been manifested since self-rule. But some of the critics of *Tekumah* did not see the documentary that way. Limor Livnat, then minister of communications, said that, "the official TV station should not present the propagandist position of the Palestinians, while ridding us of all of our myths."²⁹ Ariel Sharon, minister of infrastructure at the time, commented that, "The series distorts the history of (Israel's) resurrection and relinquishes the moral basis for the establishment of Israel and the continuation of its existence."³⁰

Sharon even asked David Levi, then minister of education, to prevent the screenings of the show as to "not expose the Israeli children to criticism of Zionism."³¹ More dramatic still, writer Aharon Papo writes, that the "gift that (the producers) are bringing to the Jewish people on the 50th anniversary of its country, is death to Zionism and Judaism, and definitely not resurrection. Maybe they meant the resurrection of Arafat's Palestine."³²

These comments were heard after the airing of "The Opsimist," an episode describing the conditions of the so-called "Israeli Arabs." It is interesting to note that the episode, while clearly criticizing the harsh living conditions of military rule that persisted until 1966, is not pro-Palestinian independence and anti-Israeli self-determination. The Palestinians interviewed say again and again that they want to remain Israeli citizens. But the focus of the episode is the Arab experience within Israel, and to a degree the events portrayed are portrayed from a Palestinian perspective.

The critical comments were also made in anticipation of the yet unseen, but already controversial, episode "Biladi Biladi," which primarily deals with Palestinian terrorism throughout the 1970s. In response to the

allegations that the series was pro-Palestinian, Gideon Drori, the initiator and chief editor of the series, explained his position:

We are Zionists, but proponents of dynamic Zionism. [. . .] In order to understand ourselves we need to understand the Palestinians. [. . .] We are making a pluralist, multi-vocal series, one that will present (as much as possible) all the forces active in this field.

Vered Kelner (interviewer): Maybe there was so much effort to document the "Other's" voice that the center disappeared?

Drori: Such a danger existed. We are a divided society, there is no mainstream anymore. [. . .] Everyone is in the series; there is not one spectator in this country that wouldn't find himself inside Tekumah.

Drori claimed that rather than being pro- or anti-Zionist, the series was simply multi-cultural, presenting a polyphony of voices and perspectives, as is appropriate (and fashionable) in the 1990s. But is the series truly polyphonic? I will now look at the aesthetic elements that assert such a view, and then at those negating polyphony.³³

Postcolonial and Post-modern Fashions (or All Warriors are Good at Heart)

A 22-hour documentary series can definitely afford to present many different perspectives. The interviews in the series are diverse and comprise a good percentage of the shows (the time devoted to interviews vs. narration varies in the different episodes). The interviews are based on personal memories, and even when the interviewee was in an official position of power, the questions and answers pertain mostly to their personal

experience of the events. Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, for instance, talks about his own impression of Ben Gurion's strength in the face of the heavy burden of the decision to establish the state of Israel. Sharon similarly talks about his own recollections of rescuing the Bar Lev line from Egyptian control (in 1973), without addressing larger issues of responsibility. This tactic makes the series seem as if it is based on a collage of intimate and individual stories, where soldiers and commanders are both placed on the same plane of responsibility and authenticity. In line with identity politics' move towards greater subjectivity for all, this style emphasizes the human beings behind the historical processes. And indeed, it is very interesting to know what early Israeli leaders Golda Meir or David Ben Gurion wrote in their private journals.

At the same time, this aesthetic choice refrains from addressing power issues and issues of responsibility. At best, it exposes the multiplicity of perspectives and at worst it masks political issues at stake. The constant collage of faces and voices also disguises who is being interviewed, or what positions receive more screen time. For instance, the first episode, that which describes the events leading up to the UN decision of November 1947 includes only one Arab interviewee, a member of the important Jerusalem-area Nashashibi family. While there is no quota for meeting the requirements of ethnic and national "otherness", a singular interview may essentialise and reduce the complexity of Palestinian perspectives.

It is also important that no historians are interviewed. The series systematically avoids incorporating expert views, or at least not overtly. The series had six historical advisors (one of which is a new historian), but their activity remains behind the scenes. The choice not to include expert evaluation of the

events enables the different testimonies to be "un-evaluated", or lent equal epistemic status. It is interesting to note that in episodes covering the political events from the time of the Lebanon War (1982) to the present, there is much less agreement between interviewees, and the interviewers seem to press the interviewees with these disagreements. It is true, however, that these episodes cover a period in Israeli society when political disagreement was overt and even violently exercised (as in the murder of protester Emil Grunzweig, or the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, both carried out by right-wing extremists), so the series here merely echoes what is already conscious in the Israeli psyche.

While much historical documentation exists, the series chose to rely mostly on memories and stories. As such, *Tekumah* reiterates the charges of Morris concerning the old historians: it chronicles the events, but does not provide a coherent, serious historical account.

The interviews, too, bear the mark of the 1990s. While Israel of 1948 saw itself as a boiling melting pot, forging a new socialist and brave Jew, the interviews emphasize the heterogeneity of the Israeli society. Tensions with regards to the Holocaust of European Jewry, or between the underground militarised Hagana and IZL (the Irgun), are foregrounded so as to emphasize the multiplicity of perspectives already in existence at that time. Soldiers, in particular, are presented reflecting on tough moments; actor Yosi Yadin recalls broadcasting the underground radio news, and realizing that the names of the victims of a bombing that he was reading off had been under his guidance as scouts a few years earlier. "I was crushed," he says. Others, choking on the words, describe the horrors of war. Soldiers of both sides (Arab and Israeli) appear to be humane



and sensitive, at least in retrospect.

But is the presentation of these diverse and personal interviews sufficient in providing a different perspective, one to seriously challenge the Israeli narrative of the war? The answer, I believe, is no.

Polyphony Subordinated

Before looking into the content of the series, I would like to address the choices of directors made by Drori and his team. All the episodes were directed by Jewish filmmakers. The one about Palestinian citizens of Israel, for instance, was directed by Menahem Hadar, even though Channel 1 employs numerous Palestinian documentarists, some of which have previously dealt with similar subject matter.³⁴ This became a significant issue in the case of "Second Israel", which deals with the experience of Oriental Jews. The director is a Russian immigrant of many years, and the Oriental lobby (Hakeshet Hamizrachit) protested the fact that an Oriental director - more than one of which were on the crew of *Tekumah* - was not chosen. Self-representation is a serious issue for identity politics movements, one that could have been easily addressed, but was not in *Tekumah*.³⁵

The series originally had prologues written and narrated by actor/singer Yehoram Gaon, who previewed each episode and then wrote a short introduction that involved a personal story from that period. Gaon is a Sephardi from Jerusalem, part of a community that has inhabited the city for generations, and has a status somewhat as mediator between the European and the Oriental Jewish communities, which are still quite divided in Israel. Gideon Drori, the chief editor, explains the choice of Gaon:

[We thought that] Gaon, as a symbol of the [Israeli] consensus, will unite everyone, and will help market the series. Gaon is a man of the center,

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*someone that represents the Israeli sabra [native born], someone who grew up himself during this time period.*³⁶

Interestingly then, Drori, who claims that there is no mainstream in Israeli society and that the show is multi-vocal, still attempted to frame the series through a "middle of the road" icon. The prologues were not well received, audiences resented them, and eventually the producers decided to terminate the contract. Gaon claims that, independently of the producers' decision but at exactly the same time, he decided to resign, mostly because he could not agree with the tone of "Biladi Biladi." The prologues have been subsequently removed, but their intent to inspire consensus remains.

The series also uses the voiceover narration of Yigal Naor. Naor, who was a Palmach commander, and is even interviewed briefly in the first episode, is nonetheless a disembodied voice throughout the rest of the series. The tone of the narration, as well as Naor's "pure" Israeli accent, bespeak a Griersonian propagandist documentary aesthetics. In such social documentaries, the voiceover was always male, always elderly, always with the right accent (in Britain, upper class; in the US, northeastern). The race, gender and class of the narrator were never addressed, but were coded as neutral, and the narration itself was presented as objective text, not an ideological product. Voiceover narration was one of the first conventions to be challenged by women and ethnic minorities, as early as the beginning 1970s. A 1998 series that tries to be polyphonic has reason not to impose one narrator, since this asserts and connotes the strong presence of a controlling and filtering agency behind the films. The multiplicity of directors of different political backgrounds and different aesthetics is overwhelmed by the decision to have one narrator. Even if the choice of one narrator was made in order to create a sense

of formal unity to the series, it could have been a woman, an oriental Jew, or anyone but the sabra male, so that we might be reminded of the subjectivity of the agency behind the filmmaking process.³⁷

In most episodes, the narration clearly subordinates the disjointed voices. The section describing events in Haifa, in April 1948, from Tor Ben Mayor's episode, "A Country on Its Way," is a good example. The section starts with an interview with Yaakuba Cohen, an Oriental Jew who masqueraded as an Arab on behalf of the Palmach intelligence unit. Cohen stands in a deserted, decaying Haifa street, describing the hustle and bustle of the market during the 1940s. A black and white photo illustrates his description. He then comments on how he later ran into his Palestinian friends from Haifa in the refugee camps of Lebanon, and how sad it was to see them starve, and to recognize the tragedy of their people. Black and white photos of the Arab residents of Haifa leaving are accompanied by the generic voiceover narration of the show which says: "While the Arab residents of Haifa were fleeing, Abba Hushi and Shabtay Levi [mayor of Haifa] urged them to stay. But the policy of the Hagana was different." The narration never explains in what way the policy was different or why.

While the refugees are waiting at the Haifa port to be taken to Lebanon, Golda Meir, a member of the people's council, comes to visit. An excerpt from her diary is read, in which she describes her tour of Arab downtown Haifa: "It is terrible to see the dead city. I found by the port; kids, women and men waiting for an exit route. I walked into the houses. There were houses with fresh coffee and pita bread still left on the table. And I couldn't without realizing that this was probably the sight in many [Jewish] towns in Europe a few years ago. Many questions arose." The scene changes and a crackly

voice of unidentified English announcer (UN?) proclaims that the British forces would leave Palestine on 14 May, 1948, and the withdrawal is set against increasing violence. Naor's narration starts describing the Hagana's drafting and arming programs.

This section is significant for a few reasons. As far as the content goes, there are at least two issues at hand: Meir's attitude to the Palestinian inhabitants, and the events that took place in Haifa. Haifa is an easy choice for compassionate portrayal; Morris claims that Haifa is the one exception to the pattern of expulsions, as the Jewish local authorities sincerely tried to convince the Arabs to remain, but the Arab leadership decided to go.³⁸ More important though is Meir's known hostility to the Palestinian problem. It was she who met secretly with Jordan's King Abdullah to try to divide Palestine between Israel and Transjordan. In another episode, Meir is shown giving a speech saying, "Who are these Palestinians? I am a Palestinian too. It's a fact, here, I still have my [British] Palestinian passport." The segment from the diary shows a different Golda: sensitive, contemplative, and more importantly, aware of Palestinian losses.

Tracing the connection between the Palestinian *Nakba* ("disaster" in Arabic), and the Jewish Holocaust is a trendy issue of the 1990s. Only recently has Israeli discourse started to publicly discuss the connection between the two events. But Golda's remark was written in 1948, therefore affirming both Karsh and Morris' assertions that the perspective was there all along and is not so "new".³⁹ Aesthetically this segment is important because it exposes the way the series refrains from addressing challenges to the dominant Israeli narrative. If the series was intending to engage seriously the new historians' allegations, a statement like Meir's should have been followed by some commentary about the refugee problem. But



instead, the show moves on to talk about the rising Israeli death toll, a common Israeli excuse to avoid any serious discussion of uncomfortable subject matter. Similarly, issues surrounding Meir's complex character and the contradiction this account presents to her traditional image are avoided.

The reason for this avoidance is all too clear. The series never attempts a serious examination of Israeli history (old or new), but is much more interested in providing the 1990s version of the Zionist narrative. That version does not foreground consensus figures like Gaon, and instead pretends to be politically correct and multi-cultural. But at the end of the day, even though many voices are foregrounded, they are not seriously asserted. Naor's voiceover narration dominates all other voices with what seems to be a neutral, but is actually an old and familiar Zionist narrative. That is, the conventional use of the objective tone from a *Palmachnik* as the narrator, plus the content of his narration and the way the episodes are edited, all subordinate the "new" perspectives to an old - and culturally grounded as authentic and reliable - voice. While the series opens the stage to Palestinians (citizens, refugees and even *fedayeen*), foreign workers, Oriental Jews, etc., their voices are always bracketed or controlled by a higher narrative level, that of the ideology of the series. This (politically) outdated aesthetic choice anchors the series in positivist agendas, while providing a veneer of post-modernism, which is then mistaken as post-Zionism.

Ronit Weiss Berkovitz, the director of the controversial episode on the PLO, "Biladi Biladi," said, "I am convinced that openness to the 'other's' truth will not refute our truth. I am not afraid to examine our moral justification. Our national strength will not be weakened, the great Zionist project we have built will not collapse."⁴⁰

Indeed, if the one who designs the historical journey begins it believing the moral justification was there, one is bound at the end of the journey to find what she believed in all along. Berkovitz and *Tekumah* never tried to question the "great" Zionist project, they just chose to describe it in 1990s fashionable lingo.

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Endnotes

¹ Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

² Pappé, Ilan, *Britain and the Arab Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951* (London: St. Anthony's/MacMillan, 1988).

³ Morris, Benny. *1948 And After: Israel and the Palestinians* (NY, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990) 7.

⁴ Megged, Aharon. "The Israeli Suicide Drive," *Ha'aretz* weekly magazine (10 June, 1994) 27, 92.

⁵ Post-Zionism existed before the new historian debate arose, alongside anti-Zionism. Thinkers like Noam Chomsky and Albert Memmi have challenged Zionism on different grounds. A good example of these positions can be found in Weizfeld, Eibi (ed.) *The End of Zionism and the Liberation of the Jewish People* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, Inc., 1989).

⁶ Both Ariel Sharon (infrastructure minister at the time) and Limor Livnat (minister of communications, and in charge of the national television) demanded the removal of the series, and eventually settled for studio discussion of "problematic" episodes after the screening of those same episodes. *Ha'aretz*, 16 March, 1998.

⁷ *Maariv*. 15 March, 1998. All translation from the Hebrew press is mine.

⁸ For instance, Hadash, the joint Jewish-Arab communist party has won five seats in the parliament in the 1996 and 1999 elections, increasing its three seats from the previous term. These new votes came primarily from Israeli-Jewish voters.

⁹ See Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, op. cit.

¹⁰ Morris, Benny. *1948 And After: Israel and the Palestinians*, op. cit. 22-27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² Shlaim, Avi. "The Debate About 1948," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 27, 3 (August 1995) 289.

¹³ Karsh, Efraim. *Fabricating Israeli History: The 'New Historians'* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd.)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶ Morris, Benny. op. cit., 27.

¹⁷ Until the wide use of television in the post WW II era, 20-minute newsreels accompanied feature film projections all over the world, and supplied the viewer with visual, moving images of the weekly news.

¹⁸ Flaherty was very close to his subjects, spending years with them prior to, and during, the making of his films. His films exemplify the affection he developed for his subjects, and the trust they felt towards him. Yet Flaherty's films romanticize and essentialise "primitive" cultures in ways that are most problematic in ethnography today.

¹⁹ Winston, Brian. *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: BFI, 1995) 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ Barnow, Eric. *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford University Press, 1993) 91.

²² *Ibid.*, 90.

²³ Winston. op. cit., 205.

²⁴ Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991) 150.

²⁵ Eitzen, Dirk. "When is a Documentary?" *Cinema Journal* 35:1 (1995) 91.

²⁶ Nichols. op. cit., 152.

²⁷ Trinh T. Minh-ha. "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," in Michael Renov (ed.) *Theorizing Documentary* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 90-107.

²⁸ Minh-ha, op. cit.

²⁹ *Maariv*. 15 March, 1998.

³⁰ *Ha'aretz*. 16 March 1998.

³¹ *Ha'aretz*. 16 March 1998.

³² *Maariv*. 19 March, 1998.

³³ *Kol Ha'ir*, 20 March, 1998.

³⁴ The most obvious example is Nizar Hassan, who directed *Istiklal*, a documentary about the attitudes of

Israel's Palestinian citizens concerning Israel's Independence Day.

³⁵ I do not want to promote here the idea that one can only write/make films about one's self. On the contrary, I think that the meeting of different groups on the different sides of artistic projects is welcome. However, issues of hegemony and power should be addressed, and given the situation in Israel (not just with regards to Palestinian sovereignty), the issue of self-representation is doubly important.

³⁶ *Kol Ha'ir*, 20 March, 1998.

³⁷ The American documentarist Ken Burns, for instance, has chosen recognizable African-Americans to narrate his latest series about jazz. Previously, in his famous *Civil War* and *The West* documentary series, the narration was done by upper-class, northeastern male accented voices, with no consideration for the content of the shows.

³⁸ Morris. *1948 and After*, op. cit. 18-21.

³⁹ This testimony about the slightly more complex attitude of Meir to the Palestinian *Nakba* is probably missing from the official historical narrative, precisely because (to paraphrase Karsh) of the ocean waters that old historians choose to swim in.

⁴⁰ *Maariv Women*, 29 March, 1998, 5.