



CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 1986
OFFICIAL ENTRY - SEMAINE DE LA CRITIQUE

ESTHER

אסתר

An Amos Gitai film





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running time : 97 mn

with :

MOHAMMED BAKRI - SIMONA BENYAMINI - JULIANO MERR
ZARE VARTANIAN - SCHMUEL WOLF - DAVID COHEN
SARAH COHEN - RIM BANI

World Sales :

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*If I do not defend my cause, who will?
If I only defend my own cause, who am I?
If not now, when?*

Hillel (First Century)



TECHNICAL CREDITS

Directed by
 Screenplay based on the biblical text "Esther"
 Director of photography
 Camera
 Editor
 Sound
 Script-girl
 Production designer
 Costumes
 Makeup and hairdresser
 Costume adviser
 Chief electrician
 Head grip
 Special effects
 Music

Casting
 Coordinator
 Location manager
 Production manager
 Executive producer

AMOS GITAI
 AMOS GITAI et STEPHANE LEVINE
 HENRI ALEKAN
 NURITH AVIV
 SHEHERAZADE SAADI
 CLAUDE BERTRAND
 RAKEFET LAPID
 RICHARD INGERSOLL
 THIERRY FORTIN
 HERTZ NATIV
 ANTOU THOMAS
 LOUIS COCHET
 PHILIPPE GRUNBAUM
 BACHIR ABOU RABIA
 Popular Jewish-Yemenite, Indian and Palestinian
 songs
 "MOTHER COMPLAINT"
 "KASINATH MISRA"
 "MUKAIJI REIBO"
 LEVIAH HON et ZIAD FAHOUM
 YOLANDE ZAUBERMAN
 EFY ATAD
 EDGARD TENEMBAUM
 RUBEN KORENFELD

Produced by Amos Gitai for AGAV FILMS
 in association with Channel Four Television (London)
 O.R.F. (Vienne), IKON (Amsterdam) and UNITED STUDIOS (Herzlia)
 35 mins. Color by Fuji
 L.T.C. Laboratories (Paris)
 S.I.M.O. Auditorium (Paris)
 Running time: 97 mins.



CAST

MOHAMMED BAKRI
SIMONA BENYAMINI
JULIANO MERR
ZARE VARTANIAN
SCHMUEL WOLF
DAVID COHEN
SARAH COHEN
RIM BANI

Mordecai
Esther
Haman
King Ahasverus
The Narrator
Hatak
Singer (in Hebrew)
Singer (in Arabic)

and, in alphabetical order:

YASMIN ALUSH
FUAD AWAD
SIGAL AZRAD
NAHOOM BERKOVITCH
YAACOV BIRYOTI
HAIM BIRYOTI
RAFI COHEN
TUMA ELIAS
VICTOR FRENTCHIK
SHARONA GABAI
URI GAVISH
YOAV HACARMELI
RAHELI HAIMIN
INDRAWIS HAJ
RAMI HAI-ZION
HAYA HAZAZ
GEORGES KHLEIFI

TAREK KOPTI
ADNAN KITANI
ELI LANDSMAN
YONI LIBMAN
IRIT LUTSKI
MOHAMMED MANADREH
ILAN MINESS
ZOHAR NAHOOM
GALIT NEMZOFF
NAJEEB ORSAN
RUTI SALOMON
ORIELA SASON
DUNIA SHANBUR
ANESTAR SHEHADEH
KARINE SIGAL
VONG TCHE HANG
MODI YEHUDAI

ESTHER FOREVER

In the narration of the plot until its final unravelling, we lay stress on the theme of revenge and its excesses. The biblical evocation of the cycle of violence constitutes a starting point allowing us to question the mentality of victors and vanquished of our own times. The ancient book of Esther offers an excellent opportunity to examine these issues without getting us involved with partisan loyalties or matters of pragmatism.

ESTHER

Synopsis

King Ahasverus reigns over an immense empire of 127 provinces extending from India to Ethiopia. To demonstrate his power and riches he invites the people of Susa the capital of Susa to a sumptuous banquet. On the seventh day of the festivities, when the heart of the king is filled with pride and he merry with wine, he commands that Vashti, the queen, be brought before the guests, to show the people her great beauty.

Queen Vashti refuses to come, making the king extremely angry. His ministers advise him to repudiate Vashti and to choose another queen in her place.

Esther lives in Susa under the protection of her uncle Mordecai who has brought her up as his own daughter ever since her parents died. Her only aspiration is to remain by her benefactor and to lead a simple and serene life. The king, however, has ordered all the fair young virgins to be gathered under the custody of the eunuchs so that he may choose the one to replace Queen Vashti. So Esther is taken to the harem. Mordecai has charged her not to reveal her Jewish descent and to try her luck at becoming queen. She undergoes a beauty treatment lasting one year at the end of which time she is brought before the king. Ahasverus is seduced by Esther the moment he sees her and takes her for his queen. The wedding is celebrated with a banquet.

Some courtiers report to Haman, the king's prime minister, that Mordecai the Jew refuses to prostrate himself when Haman passes. Haman goes to the King and describes the Jews as the most dangerous enemies of law and order. Ahasverus delegates full authority to Haman who issues decree letters ordering that all the Jews be exterminated on a single day throughout the 127 provinces of the kingdom. Mordecai requests

Esther to go to the king and persuade him to stop the annihilation of the Jewish people. The law forbids anyone to come to the king without being called by him, but Esther, risking her life, decides to do so. The king touched by her frailty promises to grant her whatever she wishes. Esther merely invites him and Haman to be her guests at a banquet she is giving the same day. By the end of the evening Esther has not yet formulated her request and asks the king to return the next day with Haman.

Haman has the gallows built for hanging Mordecai, who continues to refuse to prostrate himself in front of Haman. But the king, having read the royal chronicles, remembers that Mordecai has saved his life by thwarting an assassination plot. He orders Haman to do honour to Mordecai for having saved his life. Haman is obliged to lead his enemy Mordecai in triumphal fashion through the streets of Susa.

During the second banquet given by Esther for Ahasverus and Haman she reveals that she is Jewish and that because of Haman her people will be massacred throughout the kingdom. The king leaves for a while to calm his wrath, and when he returns he finds Haman prostrated at the feet of the queen. He orders that his prime minister be hung on the gallows prepared for Mordecai. That same day he grants Esther her wish and gives orders to revoke the decrees sent out by Haman. The Jews are given the right to take up arms and defend themselves against their assailants, to take revenge on their enemies, and plunder their goods. The Jewish population throughout the 127 provinces is called upon to stand up for themselves and do likewise. It is a great triumph for Mordecai, and fear of the Jews spreads throughout the kingdom. On the day which was to be that of their annihilation, the Jews, armed and united, massacre their enemies and plunder their goods. Esther asks the king to grant her people an extra day of revenge. The king consents and the Jews continue the massacre for another whole day. The story of the victory of the Jewish people is written down by Mordecai who also proclaims the annual celebration of the feast of Purim, that is, the feast of the casting of the lots, a day of joy and jubilation.

He is promoted by the king and becomes the second most influential person of the kingdom.

INTERVIEW WITH AMOS GITAI

By Simon Mizrahi

● *What did you have in mind when you first decided to make this film ?*

Initially, I was preoccupied by two different kinds of Jewish mythology. On the one hand, there is the myth of suicide, it's the story of Massada, where 760 people held out against the Romans. When it became obvious that the only possible outcome was defeat and enslavement, they all committed suicide, in order to remain free, in order not to be slaves to the Romans.

The other myth represents the exact opposite concept. To me, the story of Esther is a story about survival, about a group of people who are persecuted and choose not to commit suicide, but to struggle and fight back. They use all the means at their disposal, and above all, their intelligence, in order to survive.

Another aspect I found interesting was that "Esther" is the only diaspora story included in the Bible. And it's the only Bible story where God does not play an active part. Then, I was attracted by the sheer beauty of the story, the minimalism of the biblical text. And so I decided to use the biblical text and dialogue literally. It seemed interesting to try and connect "Esther" to painting and to other art forms, which are for me a source of inspiration, even though they are not directly cinematic.

It took me quite a long time to work out why I was so attracted to the story of Esther and what its meaning was in terms of today. But when I looked at it more closely, I realized what it's really about - it's about a cycle of repression... it's about oppressed people who gradually turn out to be new oppressors.

The story portrays a tragic situation that is entirely closed. There are winners and losers, but the Bible insists on the contradictions of victory. The present-day situation in the Middle East is somewhat similar. People who were persecuted not so long ago learn to persecute. That in turn confronts us with a hermetic and circular on going tragedy, which is relentlessly rooted in the Bible. Both sides keep referring to the ancient texts in order to justify their part in the conflict. The story gradually becomes more and more bloody and intractable. In the story of Esther, there is no way out. The situation is utterly claustrophobic.

The stories of the Bible have always appealed to me, especially those of the Old Testament, because the characters are never portrayed as perfect human beings. There are no angels and no flawless individuals. They all suffer, they all sin, they all do things

they know are wrong, and the Bible registers the contradictions of its heroes. Take the story of David, for instance. He is a very powerful king, in many ways a model, and yet he is a sinner : in order to indulge his love of the beautiful Bathsheba, he sends her husband off to the front to be killed. The story of Job even goes so far as to question the very existence of God. He says : "I am just and yet I suffer, while there are cruel and corrupt people who are wealthy and lead an easy life. Where is Heavenly Justice ?".

Esther is one such myth, which is very strong and very present in Jewish memory. Pourim, the feast commemorating the story of Esther, has been celebrated through the centuries by Jews in many countries. It held a magnetic attraction for people suffering endless persecution, who could not help hoping that eventually a time would come for revenge... But obviously revenge brings with it contradictions, in that the recently victorious become obsessed with power. Strangely enough, the actual ending of the story tended to be played down, even omitted altogether.

When I asked some of my friends, it turned out that all of those who knew the story of Esther, could not remember the real ending. It has simply been wiped from the collective memory.

● *Would you have made the film anyhow, had you not come across the ending with all its implications ?*

I think so, because when I decided to move from documentaries to fiction, I was not particularly interested in making yet another melodramatic movie about a Palestinian woman falling in love with an Israeli man.

I thought I should look somewhere into ancient mythological material and find a fairytale story rich in metaphor. Formally and artistically, I needed other ingredients and subject matter to work with. That is why I decided to build my first feature film upon an old text. This in turn obliged me to tackle all the problems of reconstruction. It's a complex task even to conceptualize it, to avoid nostalgia, to avoid anachronisms, to avoid ending up with a modern caricature of the old text. The problems of keeping the balance and proportions right seemed to me very interesting and a real challenge.

● *Obviously, the budget for Esther was not enormous, but it is not a low-budget film either. One can see that you took great care in the choice of locations and had very specific views on costumes, scenery and the overall look of the film. What criteria guided you in these areas? For instance, those ruins, why did you choose them, do they have some symbolic meaning ?*

The film was shot in the ruins of the old Arab neighbourhood of Haifa, Wadi Salib. Palestinians lived there until the 1948 war. Then Moroccan Jews moved in. In the late fifties, the Moroccan Jews rebelled.

As a result, the Haifa municipality decided to disperse the population of Wadi Salib

and destroyed the neighbourhood. And this area in the centre of the city has been left in ruins to this day, as a kind of testimony. So it has a very strong urban presence. Actually, if you want to cross Haifa from one side to the other, you have to drive through these ruins. In more general terms, the film tries to convey a sense of the troubled existence of Israel in the present day context. The geographical context is the Orient, and if that is where Israel plans to stay, ways must be found of communicating with the Orient.

Since many of the founders of modern Israel were Europeans, that influence remains very strong. Yet there has to be cultural dialogue that is meaningful in terms of the whole region. And what is intrinsic to this region? There is a certain sensibility, a certain light, the colour of the olive trees, the colour of the air and the stones, a kind of harshness... All these are elements of the Orient, and they have to be rediscovered in Israel.

The film of *Esther* takes a certain concept of time and deals with it through a structure of detailed and articulated sequence shots. Each of these is so devised, that the actors are constantly on the move in relation to the camera. The design of every shot is constructed so that there are no edits within any one scene - each scene consists of a single shot. This approach generates a pace and a pattern different from the generally highly edited fast moving melodramatic films.

So in the way the story of the Meguila (the biblical story of Esther), which is divided into chapters in the Old Testament, is similarly divided into chapters on the screen. Each chapter or scene consists of a single shot, which contains the point of departure, the actors in motion, their dialogues recorded live, sounds related to the action, and the intrusion of irrelevant city noises like traffic and the howl of ambulances, the hum of aircraft overflying the location, the rough and random shapes and colours of the ruins contrasting with the deliberate shapes and colours of sets and costumes... All of this - the irregularities alongside the regularities - is contained within each single shot. And it's the kind of film, therefore, which expects the audience to make an effort.

● *Surely you must realize that most people don't like being expected to "work" at watching a film. Not that they can't make some effort, but the effort has to be pleasurable. Why is it that some of your scenes are allowed to run on beyond the point where they're bound to strain the patience of a Western audience?*

I think that generally one makes a film for oneself and for a loose group of more or less likeminded people - unless the film is a purely commercial venture. When I make a film, I don't have a narrow commercial purpose in mind because I feel that there is no point and that I would merely be pandering to what is anyhow a system of illusions. I have met all too many filmmakers who have insisted on telling me that the compromises they made in the last film would enable them to make the *real* film next time. I think that's hokum. I'm interested in what my sensibility, my vision, my feelings have to say at any given moment and that's it.

- *But why do you let some scenes run on for so long before you cut ?*

I don't cut until I'm satisfied that nothing remains in the shot that ought to be seen. It's very subjective. I think that film making is a very subjective process. When I look at a moving image there comes a point when it no longer interests me. That's where I cut.

- *Most of your film is shot from a distance. Yet there are a few close-ups here and there. What do they mean to you ?*

What is a close-up ? A close-up is an exclamation mark in cinematic language. But you don't want exclamation marks all over the place. Sometimes you want to say : just look at the ruins and the artificiality of the situation. The characters in this story are walking amidst ruins - and yet you believe me when I tell you that this is a palace. You accept the axiomatic truth that this is a palace. But it's actually a ruin - and if you're an Israeli audience you will recognize Wadi Salib and be aware of the historical connotations. But in the midst of this mood of distanced contemplation you do occasionally want to highlight a point with an exclamation mark, though you will only want to do this sparingly. The narrator's entrances and exits are obvious instances - so you use the exclamation mark and he looks straight into the lens, in defiance of the golden rule of traditional cinema that "Actors must never look at the camera". In oriental art generally there are few instances of close-up. Close-ups are somehow an invasion of privacy. They are an aspect of individualism. The Orient is not a great believer in individualism, which is a Western notion, and a rather modern one at that.

- *The Narrator is a lucid, ironic, unpredictable and extremely funny character. Is he in some way your spokesman ?*

Intellectually (though that is not explicit in the film), the narrator conveys that Esther is a much told story-part and parcel of our collective heritage. The story is handed down from generation to generation, and the Narrator hands it down to the audience. Dramatically (because I chose to stick very closely to the biblical text) there were certain points where I felt that the dramatic dialogue of the characters would not adequately explain the transition of the plot.

It's the Narrator's role to do that, and in each scene he is a different character.

- *Why was practically the entire film shot in the midst of ruins ?*

In a way that is a modern comment on the story. You take a fable and you put it into another context. So in effect, the audience watches the different layers of this cinematic archeology. Surprisingly, the ruins, which are in fact contemporary, have an aura of classical ruins.

So some parts lend themselves to saying "OK, this is a palace, this is a minaret and even

though it doesn't really look all that oriental, there are those stones, they look ancient enough, and so on..." But in other parts the ruins are so broken down that you get a kind of a parallel impression which is all the time querying the narrative of the film. So there is a plot, and alongside the plot there is a decor intruding into the original story and dragging into the twentieth century. And into the present Middle East situation. All the signals of this content come together at the end of the film, in the final tracking shot, which merges memories and biographies, dialogues and background.

● *Let us talk for a moment about the criteria which governed the choice of costumes, which you tell us were largely inspired by Persian miniatures.*

All the time, the film is saying: "Let's play a game, let's pretend that we are in Susa two or three thousand years ago. To make this stick, we need a few classical elements. Since we know of the existence of a certain Indian or Persian code of colours, let us see what the relationship might be, for instance, between colour code and class, green being the colour of the nobility, etcetera. Or let's gradually change the shade of Mordecai's attire, until eventually it becomes as darkly brown as the garments worn by Hanam. Traditionally, colours have corresponded to a kind of social code, and not only in ancient Persia. A similar phenomenon exists today: if you work for IBM you wear a special tone of grey and a distinct type of suit, and that is a kind of code. But I don't think that the IBM generation are necessarily the world's best judges of Persian colour codes.

When we were researching colour codes in Persian miniatures, I was greatly impressed by the way in which a single miniature can tell a whole story and explain both the context and the relationship between a number of characters in action. In a way this implies a cinematic attitude - and I mean this quite seriously. But of course, there is no reason to limit oneself rigidly to this or any other technique. At some point, we built a tower on the set, from which the camera had a high angle view of the location, and one could almost have painted a miniature by observing the elements within the frame.

We took great pains to find the best possible location for this film. In the early spring, I went into the desert with Henri Alekan, the cinematographer. We wandered about the area between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, and there were all those beautiful medieval castles built of sandstone - almost ideally suited to a relatively realistic representation of the Kingdom of Persia. And we started to make sketches and to calculate where we might shoot and where we might find accommodation for the actors and crew and so forth.

Eventually, we ended up in Haifa and realized that filming in the ruins of Wadi Salib would be much more intriguing, the span of the cinematic contradiction was yet greater. There we could create some kind of a Brechtian texture and distance the plot from any

attempt at accurate reconstruction. We spent several weeks making more precise drawings of sets. The set designer Richard Ingersoll was quite surprised that so little construction work was required. We decided that the thing to do was to add bits here and there, very gently. We also decided to keep the colours of Wadi Salib, the crumbling paint on the shattered walls, the blues and yellows and greys. There was no need even to clear away the weeds, because I would rather have them in shot. On the main set, the camera was positioned on a kind of plinth, and a lot of the “decor” was actually structured by lighting...

● *Why did you ask Henri Alekan to shoot your first feature ?*

Because to me Henri Alekan is an exponent of that great classic period of the cinema which was so ferociously attacked by the “Nouvelle Vague” with their predilection for what they liked to call “realistic lighting”. The incredible skill of constructing space with light was neglected for years and few people nowadays have it. Henri Alakan is one of those great traditional cinematographers who learnt their craft with very insensitive stock and had to work out ways of creating different layers of light. I was very happy when he agreed to work on the film. I think it was also important that someone from a more modern school did the operating : Nurith Aviv is herself a Director of Photography, but in this case she did the camera work. As you know, the sequence shot is a very complicated thing to get right.

● *Your choice of actors is a little surprising, because most of them are obviously non-professionals. Were you above all on the look-out for physical characteristics ?*

I selected actors who could bring their own biographies into the film, actors who were specific enough. Consider the relationship between Mordecai and Haman - you might say that Mordecai is the salt of the earth, while Haman is a brilliant operator. It seems to me that Mohammed Bakri has the dignity and grace and strength of a man who has tilled the land. Juliano Merr is quite unlike the traditional Pourim character, he is not the ugly fellow with the big nose, but a very attractive guy, like Evil is attractive. Type casting would demand that Haman be ugly, bald and fat. But I actually wanted Haman to be beautiful and fascinating. I thought it more interesting to portray Ahasverus as an obese and slow-moving character under the spell of so appealing a Chief Minister. But the overall effect I was after was a triangular relationship between the actors, the “decor” and the biblical text, which I didn’t want to modernize but rather leave in its archaic Hebrew which is really hard to pronounce. In this interaction, the theatrical nature of the acting stands out in contrast to the decor and that is the kind of thing I wanted to achieve. The sound is another element of this deliberate overall effect, with all the sirens and the airplanes punctuating the theatrical interpretation with its impressive lighting and quasi-realistic costumes. So there are all these contradictory forces at work simultaneously.

- *Are all the dialogues taken straight from the Bible ?*

What was interesting to me was to bring out the mythological harshness and the sound of archaic Hebrew, the language of prayer rather than that of the café...

- *The film constantly stresses its inherent duality: "this story took place in Susa, but we are in Israel, don't you forget it". And the audience is never for a moment allowed to forget it. This seems to me something quite new: in time, you are constantly there - in the realm of yesterday, but in terms of space and sound, you are here today. What is the effect you are trying to obtain ?*

In many ways, this is a film about memory, memories which are reflected through image and songs, through tales and music, memories stored in the songs of the Yemenite Jews who crossed the Arabian desert and reached Jerusalem about three generations ago ; memories kept alive in Palestinian exile songs. Then there are the modern memories, the cars, the motorcycles, the sirens, the airplanes. As yet those sounds are new souvenirs, but they keep emphasizing the duality you refer to. Then there are the accents of the actors. I preferred actors with specific identifiable accents, which echo their origins, rather than some synthetic, homogenized accent. So the sound track keeps feeding elements of memory into the narrative.

Historical memories, both ancient and contemporary, suggest that repetition may be inevitable. Of course, one cannot say that the story is exactly the same today as it was in those far-off times. Yet memory keeps nudging us, reminding us that there are lessons to be learnt.

- *For instance ?*

The story of Esther is about the influence of power, about what happens to people when they get power. Let's just briefly return to an earlier part of this conversation, regarding the tragic nature of the present day conflict. It is a conflict without mercy involving people and rights and a total unwillingness to compromise. Both sides seem less determined to live than to fight until the last. It is the relentlessness of their determination which deprives this beautiful landscape of rest - and that is the meaning of the film.

THE CHARACTERS: ENCOUNTER OF ARCHETYPES

Ahasverus: the king reigning as an implacable tyrant. **Haman:** the vile and malevolent advisor. **Mordecai:** the good man who wishes to save his people. **Esther:** the gentle heroine, a model of beauty and kindness.

We have preserved the prototype aspect of each character while striving to unveil the inner contradictions of their personality and role.

Without knowing, or perhaps, not wanting to know, **The King** chooses as queen a woman belonging to a people which inspires in him only feelings of animosity and contempt. Ahasverus used to pomp and pageantry, is overwhelmed, conquered by Esther's simple and authentic charm.

Haman is always caught in traps of his own design: Ahasverus wanting to reward Mordecai for unmasking a plot, orders Haman to prepare a grand ceremony in honour of the kingdom's loyal servant. Convinced that the ceremony is planned for him, Haman eagerly executes the order. But it is Mordecai, his worst enemy, who will enjoy the pomp prepared so carefully by Haman. Similarly, it is Haman himself who hangs on the gallows he had ordered built for the execution of Mordecai. Esther reveals Haman's intention to exterminate her people to the king. The king leaves the palace in a fury. Upon his return, he sees Haman lying prostrate before the queen imploring her benevolence. The king, interpreting this posture of humility as an outrage, instantly condemns his advisor to death.

Mordecai appears to be first and foremost, Esther's benefactor. However, when Esther is singled out to become queen, Mordecai must agree to her departure towards a world from which he himself is excluded. Seeing the Jewish people in great distress, Mordecai turns to his adoptive daughter as a last resource, persuading her to risk her life to influence the king in favour of her people. Mordecai, as well as Esther, knows the law according to which any person coming to the king without being summoned is instantly condemned to death, unless the king touches the visitor with his sceptre as a sign of clemency.

«**Esther** saved her people by her beauty». Behind this oversimplified description of the heroine's trajectory, one observes the shades and subtleties of a complex personality. Esther, who has led a protected life, cradled by her uncle's affection, is brutally plunged in a sumptuous, cold and artificial world. Without ever losing her natural simplicity, she finds herself in the midst of game of power and intrigue, and is driven by a noble motivation to unmask Haman's cruel and vile character. Esther's capacity to

devote herself to the cause of justice, while remaining detached from the earthly, changing conditions is expressed by Racine as follows: «... detachment from the world, in the midst of the world itself». She is both enigmatic and limpid. What is the secret of her charm? She is not simply the «most beautiful» girl chosen from the hundreds of maidens presented before the king. A king who has known nothing but luxury, who has never been refused anything, could only choose a woman who is as simple as she is inaccessible.



FINAL TRACKING SHOT: THE ACTORS INTRODUCE THEMSELVES

Schumel WOLF - The Narrator:

I am an actor. I was born in Hungary, Budapest, in 1934. My mother died when I was seven. I was left with my father. He remarried some eighteen months later, so I had a stepmother.

The Germans took Hungary in 1944. They killed my father six months later during one of the pogroms in Budapest. But it was too late to send us to the concentration camps.

I left for Israel in 1948. I arrived in January 1949. I have always imagined Israel as something beautiful, going by pictures and by what I was told. Just like it said in the Bible: a land of milk and honey... idyllic.

David COHEN - Hatak:

I was born in Alexandria, Egypt, on March 19th, 1947. I grew up by the sea. Everyone was Arab, I was the only Jew. Different religion, different language... And somewhere there was a Jewish country. When I reached school age, they called me "Dirty Jew!" and I cried.

We came to Israel in 1954. And it's the same story... I don't speak Hebrew, so they all say: he isn't a Jew. So once again I was an out cast rejected... I was alone.

Juliano MERR - Haman:

I was born in 1958, in Nazareth. I was born, when my father was in prison, to a Jewish mother and an Arab father. I remember visiting him. I was four at the time. For a time we lived in the headquarters of the Nazareth Communist Party. Then we moved to Haifa. Then the Six Day's War... I was beaten up, they broke my arm, because the Egyptians sank the Israeli missile ship. Then, Czechoslovakia. My father was sent over as the Party representative, from 1968, two months before the invasion, till 1972. Then Moscow, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Italy... And back to Israel. Here, a kick and a slap in the face from the army: "Dirty Arab".

Mohamed BAKRI - Mordecai:

I was born in the village of Baane, in Galilee, in 1953. An ordinary Palestinian family. Lots of brothers and sisters.

The story of Mordecai makes me think of another: there is this very, very poor man... And he lives in a very, very poor place. And he is always asking God to do something about it. (It's an old folk-tale. You're bound to know it). One day, God hears him and tells him to come up and see him in Heaven as a representative of his community. And as he gets up there he sees things he's never seen before. Clouds, colours, stars... Finally he appears before God and God says: "So what do you want?" But he has forgotten what he's come for.

Somehow this reminds me of our story, that after all he'd seen, Mordecai forgot what he had been fighting for. He wanted to protect his people? Well, he did... But he forgot that it was a war of survival which turned into a cruel and bloody war: a war without justification or end. This is where I see a parallel between today and the past. And that's why I'm angry and I hate Mordecai. That's why you and I are making this film, in the hope that we might be able to prevent such slaughter. Neither of us wants to see the concept of revenge upheld. But it is, and we are both furious and express our fury in this film.

Zare VARTANIAN - Ashverus:

There is a season and a time for everything under heaven.

A time to be born and a time to die

A time to plant and a time to uproot the planted

A time to kill and a time to heal

A time to break and a time to build

A time to cry and a time to laugh

A time to throw stones and a time to gather them

A time to embrace and a time to reject

A time to seek and a time to lose

A time to uphold and a time to discard

A time to tear and a time to sew

A time to be quiet and a time to speak

A time to love and a time to hate

A time for war and a time for peace.

I'm just Zare Vartenian.

Vartenian is an Armenian name, you know.

Simona BENYAMINI - Esther:

I was born in 1963, in Hatikva the Moroccan quarter of Tel Aviv. I don't remember much, because we moved out when I was one, but my mother says it was wonderful living there. Then we moved to Kiron, in the suburbs of Tel Aviv. And when I was twelve we moved to the wealthier part of the country, in the north. Yet I know that I feel far more at home down in the south... In the Negev desert... the wilderness. It's such a glorious sun, the desert sun...

PURIM NOW

by Tamar MEROZ

The capital of Susa is located in Wadi Salib, the king an Armenian, Mordecai a Palestinian, Haman an Arab-Jew, and Esther a Moroccan-Iraqi Israeli Jew. This is the *Esther* of Amos Gitai, a political film about persecuted people (who learn how to oppress) and unnecessary revenge.

Esther is a film which accurately re-tells the Biblical story, but does so in a new cinematic language of associated cultural connections beyond the mere visual. The message, according to Gitai, is a story about persecuted people who are determined to survive and who manage to overcome their enemies. But something happens. They are not satisfied with their victory. The Bible tells that, although victorious, they continued to kill an additional seventy thousand people, and how Esther demanded an extra day to continue the revenge.

"I chose", says Gitai, "the Esther story because it's the only Biblical book which doesn't mention God. In this story the characters direct their own destiny. The dynamic comes from the human beings. The film observes how such a development led to bloodthirsty revenge. I wanted to take a situation which represents a metaphor of the general problem. Historical situations are interchangeable but the problematic remains the same. The persecuted learn how to oppress."

Gitai 35, born in Haifa, Israel, is an architect and the son of a Bauhaus architect who immigrated to Israel from Berlin after the rise of nazism. Amos Gitai finished his doctorate in Berkeley and when he started making films he translated into cinematic language what he and his father's school had done before: to materialize a narrative concept in physical form. Although *Esther* is a historical film with seemingly Biblical costumes, the spectator has a sensation that the film has been shot in the present. This duality in the identification of time and place is achieved through a specific film style. Although the film is Biblical, the style is contemporary. The Biblical text is read in accurate modern Hebrew, *"in the sound of the present language"* says Gitai, *which brings about different accents almost the contrary of the visual attempt to smooth the language into homogenous accent."*

Susa, the capital of King Ahasverus' Kingdom is located in Wadi Salib in Haifa. This is part of the dynamic of the film. The place is both historical and contemporary and serves as both exterior and interior. The king's palace is found in an open field facing a minaret. Wadi Salib is loaded with socio-political associations, and here the message is strong. The background ruins are not just seen by our eyes but also strike our memory.

Internal synchronization is at work here.

“Something Brechtian, says Gitai. The large empire of Ahasverus which, in the Biblical story, spread from India to Ethiopia, is here in our film but the ruins of Wadi Salib bring other memories - of destruction and violence. Wadi Salib was a dense Arab quarter until 1948 and a stage for the riots of Moroccan Jews in the late 50’s”.

The actual stone walls cut across the classical narrative of the plot. The old stone decor stores memories which interrupt the story line.

At the end of the film, the actors step out of film time to pass the time line and tell their own stories. Mordecai the Jew is played by Mohamed Bakri a Palestinian, Haman is played by Juliano Merr, a son of a Jewish mother and an Arab father, doomed to live his life in a watershed between these two peoples.

The dialogues are taken directly from the Biblical text, but are pronounced in different accents and interwoven with Yemenite - Jewish and Palestinian songs. At several points the dialogues are not spoken but sung according to liturgies of Jewish prayers. The sound track also includes noises and elements which don't belong to the classical story. This emphasizes the discontinuity of time. The Ahasverus banquet for example does not pretend to be an historical reconstruction filmed in Haifa. The present day sound of the city is left on the sound track, since the film doesn't take place in acoustic isolation. From a distance one can hear sirens of ambulances or police cars, airplanes are passing through overnight skies of Susa, and the panning camera notices parked buses and tourists pouring out to look at the ruins.

This duality remains throughout the film as in counter-point: the stylized biblical plot and its metaphor of here and now. As in counter-point these two elements cross each other and change their relative dominance of the subject, but one is always reminded in the horizon of the other.

The construction of the film is based on Persian miniatures. Henri Alekan's lightning transforms the ruins into an architectonic system of shapes and visual symbols in which the characters play their roles. The scenes are often filmed in one-shot sequences where the relationship of the protagonists to the land changes from long shot to close up. The camera work was done by Nurith Aviv.

The film is not only giving sense to the idea of a deliberate alternative to “Bible Now” but also to the idea “Cinema Now”. It is using realistic settings as the artificiality of studio reconstruction, in this way being the first Israeli film to create a sort of Brechtian texture. So the film is open to interpretation about the modern time. In a contradictory way, this film is patriotic, showing by its existence that Israel is a breathing and kicking civilization, trying to innovate in the cinematic form without imitating other countries.

As an architect, most of Amos Gitai's films concentrate on places, but they are always loaded with strong political implications. His first film, “House”, tells the story of a

house in Jerusalem which changes ownership (from Dagani, the Arab owner who came to it after the 1967 occupation, to professor Barkai who lives in it now). The film shows relations and conflicts between Jews and Arabs in a microcosm. It was presented in Cannes on the Day of freedom of Expression ("Journée de la Liberté d'Expression") in 1982, selected by the Festival of Rotterdam 1982, by the Festival of Berlin 1982 and was shown in "Cinema du Réel" in Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Afterwards, Gitai made "Wadi" and "Field Diary" was exhibited in the Festivals of London, Edinburgh, Sydney, and received a special prize from the jury in Nyon (Switzerland). Other films deal with other places, such as the Philippines and Bangkok. In England the British Film Institute mounted a retrospective of all of Gitai's films.

On Gitai's films Eric Rouleau wrote in *Le Monde*: "Does it not bear witness, together with other artistic creations, that there is a heightened consciousness which in other periods had ended in unnecessary and ruinous wars? His films show there is another Israel".

(Published in "Haaretz", March 27, 1986)



THE BIBLE TODAY

by Rachel NEEMAN



Amos Gitai's film, *Esther*, which has been premiered in the Tel Aviv Museum, is the first attempt, in Israeli cinema, to make a relevant political interpretation of a Biblical story. In his documentaries, Gitai has dealt with Israeli-Arab conflict. Here in *Esther*, he gives us a message which is not strictly one dimensional.

Against the background of the Wadi Salib ruins, Jewish and Arab actors speak to us in Biblical dialogues, and from time to time, this realistic set is disrupted by a sound track loaded with contemporary noises.

Mohamed Bakri, a Palestinian, plays Mordecai the Jew and Juliano Merr, the son of an Arab father and a Jewish mother plays Haman, the Evil. A Eunuch standing at the entrance to a steambath sings an Arab wedding song, and we also hear *Esther's* attendant intoning an Arab song. At a banquet in honour of Ahasverus, Hebrew and Yeminite Jewish songs are played while the queen and her attendants wear Indian saris. Gitai says that he chose the story of *Esther* because he found in it an almost archetypal thriller with typical heroes, with the good, the bad and the beautiful - a minimalistic story. This is also the only Biblical story where God is not mentioned - something that lent itself well to the message he wanted to transmit. He wanted to protest against the excessive use of power.

At one level, the film is a statement against the historical lesson learnt by the Jews, who were once a repressed minority and are today a repressive military presence. "They are persecuting an innocent people" cries Mordecai-Bakri in Wadi Salib. But the casting of an Arab actor in the role of Mordecai the Jew introduces a new dimension and with it, an even more original comment: when the repressed Palestinian refugees become independent, they too will go through a similar process and discover for themselves an object for repression. The transition from repressed to repressor will not spare them and Mordecai, in Gitai's film, is not only the present day Jew but also the future Palestinian.

The landscape of Wadi Salib brings the spectator back to contemporary association; it focuses on a desperate situation and gives the feeling of a dead-end historical process. Outside, in the open stone locations, the film constructs an almost natural setting for the king's throne or the queen's bedroom. Here Gitai is probing a relationship with the orient in a place where the two Semitic languages, Hebrew and Arabic, meet. Simona Benyamini, the actress playing the part of *Esther*, could easily be, by her looks, an Arab princess; the Bakri - Merr - Benyamini triangle is a visually harmonic triangle which further emphasizes the idea that the struggle is about power, not ideas.

The exotic images of the film, as well as the passive role of the camera, the importance of the text and the Brechtian elements such as the inclusion of a clown-like narrator (Schmuel Wolf) bring the spectator back to the medieval trilogy of Pasolini and particularly to "One Thousand and One Nights". Although Gitai stays close to the biblical text, he doesn't present a strictly melodramatic interpretation of the story and thus saves us from the shallowness of an epic such as "King David". The simplicity and minimalism of his sets also add several layers to the story. Beyond the ragged colored flag you can see the Wadi Salib ruins, telling us that we are here and now. This is an interesting experiment where the documentary and the fictitious meet. And at the end of the film, Arab and Jewish actors tell us something of their personal histories and, in doing so, link the old myth with modern history.

(Published in Koteret Rashit - April 2, 1986)



THE FILMS OF AMOS GITAI

by Paul WILLEMEN

IN HIS COMMENTS on Pineapple, replying to Nick Dubrule's review of the same film in Framework 26-27, David Lusted describes Gitai's approach as offering "*a novel and liberating direction for future film essays*", going far beyond the blinkered smugness of "*lazy documentary forms*". Lusted also makes the crucial point, often misunderstood or disregarded in comments on Gitai's work in the UK, that the director neither ridicules nor sanctions the people he films, undermining the security of the audience and encouraging "*scrutiny of what people represent rather than judgement about the kinds of people they are*". This distinction rests largely in the strategy of address deployed in the films, with their building-block approach involving long takes allowing the "*subjects*" to come alive within their "*scene*", enabling viewers to read the complex relationships between the different subjects and "*their*" physical as well as political-cultural environment as these are actualised and activated in the relations between film-makers, camera-looks and speaking subjects (or silent ones, for that matter). The camera discourse charting these relations is never rammed down our throats. Often it is the length of the shot which gradually allows such complexities to emerge as the scenes come alive: the length of the shots not only allows us time to scrutinize the image, to make sense of the relations between sound and image as well as between this image and previous or absent or "*clichéd*" ones. In addition, the activation of time and judicious framing (*mise en scène*) allows the relations between subjects and film-makers to evolve within the shots themselves, thus providing an opportunity actively to read the forces at work in the filmed scene as well as in the filming of the scene, a strategy further enhanced by the careful editing.

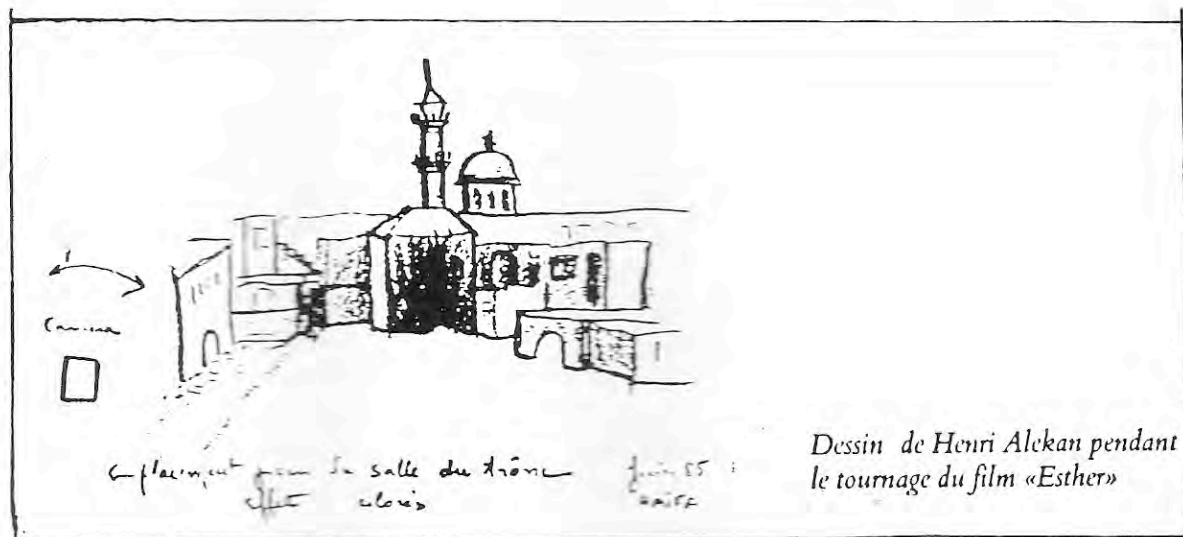
As such, Gitai's films are among the rare examples of cinema that require, in Raymond Williams' terms, complex seeing, using what Benjamin called dialectical images. Such a strategy is always ethically and intellectually superior to the majority of documentary practices because both more honest and more productive of insight into the processes represented in and by the films.

One significant example of this camera discourse occurs in Bangkok Bahrain. After a sequence showing immigrant labourers being paid, shot from the point of view of the paymasters and rendered uneasy by the lack of any verbal interaction between film-makers and workers, Gitai cuts to a scene in which the camera is placed in a dark, cavernous space, pointing upwards to a small square of light showing a few men working on a hatch, looking down into the darkness below and at the camera - as well as into the viewer's space, so to speak. By thus emphatically showing that verbal interaction

with the workers occurs at the price of drastically removing the camera from its previous, "socially embedded" positions, the scene explicitly states, amongst other things, that the camera has to remove itself from the social fabric of Bahrain in order to relate to the workers there. This discourse of camera positions and looks makes any further explanations about how the film-makers were allowed to shoot in Bahrain on condition that they did not talk to any workers, totally superfluous. The point has been made in the triangular relation between the filmers, the filmed and the viewers, but the essential point remains: the film presents sets of relations and discourses as processes to be read and understood, rather than absorbed and accepted. Individual viewers may refuse to acknowledge this strategy or attribute different emphases to its components, insisting on a moralistic stance which asks only: is this person "good" or "bad", is s/he treated as "close to us" or as an "object" (ALL filmed people are signifiers in other people's discourses) removed from us?

However, Gitai's films cannot be held responsible for such reductionist moralism. On the contrary, that is one of the ideologies the films are explicitly against, which makes them also valuable as critiques of the bulk of documentaries shot from leftish/leftist positions. For these reasons - and others discussed in Framework no. 24 (An Avant-Garde for the 80s). Gitai's work can legitimately be described as signalling a "novel and liberating direction for future film essays".

(Taken from "Framework". 1985). Willemen



Dessin de Henri Alekan pendant le tournage du film «Esther»

AMOS GITAI, AN INDEPENDENT LOOKING FOR TRUTH

Amos Gitai was born in Haifa in 1950 soon after the creation of the State of Israel. His father had been an architect with the Bauhaus before fleeing Nazi Germany in 1933 and Gitai also studied architecture first in Israel, then in the United States at the University of California at Berkeley.

His film making practice developed alongside his architectural studies and research projects. Initially his films related directly to his interest in architecture then increasingly to the social and political upheavals of life in Israel. In 1973 he received a grant for a film about architecture but following his involvement in the October 73 war he decided instead to make *After* (1974) "about the memories registered in the mind of someone returning from a war". It was his first film to be concerned with the political situation of his homeland and it gained the Eisner prize at Berkeley.

Several of Gitai's early films were made for Israeli Television who in 1980 commissioned *House*. On completion however the authorities considered the film too dangerous for transmission whereupon Gitai decided to devote himself to its defence and concentrate exclusively upon film making. He fought successfully to have *House* screened in Europe and set about raising finance for future independent projects.

With his next four films *Wadi* (1980), *In Search of Identity* (1980), *American Mythologies* (1981) and *Field Diary* (1982) Gitai was claimed to be "emerging as the leading figure in the dynamic New Israeli cinema" and certain key themes were becoming apparent in his work: "The symbols and styles of modern culture, political mythologies and their influence and blistering critiques of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians". (Open City, Montreal, Feb-March 1984).

His subsequent films *Pineapple* (1983) and *Bangkok Bahrein* (1984) have confirmed him as an important innovator within the documentary form and drawn attention to another key theme - exile and dislocation as a result of political and economic forces.

Gitai is an independent film maker both in the way that his films are financed as individual projects and in the way they assert an independence from conventional forms and established practices. Whilst dependent upon media institutions, principally television companies, for financial resources he tenaciously holds on to his independence in this latter sense. His films attempt without compromise to reveal situations and processes in all their complexity and contradictions and this tends to make Gitai himself an 'exile'.

John STEWART



AMOS GITAI:

Born October 11.1950. Haifa.

EDUCATION:

- 1971-1975 Architecture Diploma, Institute of Technology, Technion Israel
1976 Masters in Architecture. Berkeley, California.
1977-1986 Doctorate in Architecture. Berkeley, California.

FILMS:

- 1973 ARTS AND CRAFTS AND TECHNOLOGY - 9 mins.
 DETAILS OF ARCHITECTURE - 9 mins.
 Two short films produced and directed for the 15 th
 Triennial of Milan.
 TALKING ABOUT ECOLOGY - 11 mins.
 Short film co-produced with architect I.D. Goduvich for the
 15 th Triennial of Milan.
- 1974 AFTER - 13 mins.
 A film of personal impressions on the October 1973 War.
 Special mention by the Jury of the Film News Festival,
 New York, October 1975.
 Eisner Prize, University of California, Berkeley.
- 1976 CHARISMA - 20 mins.
 A film on the relationship between a leader and the every
 day problems of reality.
 Adapted from Brecht's poem: "A Worker Reads History".
 Subsidized by the Institute of Israeli Films.
 Eisner Prize, 1977-78.
 Selected by the Film Festivals of Louisiana and Denmark, 1977.
 Presented at the French Cinematheque of Tel Aviv.

- 1977
DIMITRI - 18 mins.
A film on the mime Dimitri in a village of Versio in the Tessin, Switzerland.
Script, direction and photography.
- 1977
POLITICAL MYTH - 30 mins.
Documentary film for Israeli TV on the political myth, the veneration of leaders, and its historical consequences.
Script and direction.
- 1978
WADI RUSHMIA - 36 mins.
Documentary for Israeli TV on the community of Arab and Jewish squatters in an abandoned district in Haifa.
Script and direction.
- 1979
WADI SALIB RIOTS - 40 mins.
Documentary for Israeli TV.
A retrospective on the riots of the Moroccan Jews in the region of Wadi Salib in '59 in Haifa.
- 1979-1980
CULTURAL CELEBRITIES - 50 mins.
Video with Jade Fonda, Francis Coppola, fashion designers Barry Scot and Betsey Johnson, architect Philip Johnson and the American Highways.
An observation on the images in the 70's and those created them.
Script and direction.
- 1980
HOUSE - 50 mins.
Documentary for Israeli TV.
A house in Jerusalem is in the process of construction for a new Jewish proprietor. Relations and conflicts between Jews and Arabs in a microcosm.
Script and direction.
Selected by the Festival of the Three Continents, Nantes, December 1981; by the Festival of Rotterdam in 82; by the Festival of Berlin, February 82; by the "Cinema du Réel," Centre G. Pompidou, Paris.
Presented in Cannes on the "Journée sur la Liberté d'Expression" in 1982.

WADI - 40 mins.

Documentary.

A valley (wadi) near Haifa shelters Jews and Arabs, a fragile co-existence.

Selected by the Festival of the Three Continents, Nantes, December 198; in Rotterdam, 82; Berlin 82.

Televised in Sweden, Finland, Germany, WDR, Holland and PBS.

1980

IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY - 57 mins.

Conversations with Saul Bellow, Nobel Prize in Literature; A. Farbstein, Trotsky's secretary; the Levi Strauss family (the jeans) and others... on the possibility or impossibility of defining oneself as a Jew.

Selected by the International Festival of Jewish Cinema, Paris, 1982.

1981

AMERICAN MYTHOLOGIES - 52 mins.

Documentary in two parts.

On the American culture under Reagan. Conversations with such personalities as: Jane Fonda, Francis Ford Coppola, punk couterier Betsey Johnson, the director of NBC programming and people who belong to the counter-culture movement. The place of these personalities in the overall assembly of images for mass consumption.

Televised in Sweden, Finland, Holland

1983

FIELD DIARY - 52 mins.

REFLEXIONS - 31 mins.

Two documentaries a field diary on the escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians. Nominated, awarded and shown at:

- Vittel, Festival Mediterranéen, France.
- Nantes, Festival des Trois Continents, France.
- Festival de Kamarina, Italy.
- Festival Salsa Majorca, Italy.
- Festival de Nyon (grand Prix - Prix special du Jury), Switzerland.
- Festival d'Orleans, France.
- Festival de Valladolid, Spain.
- Festival d'Edinburgh, Scotland.

- Semaine des Cahiers du Cinema, France.
- London Film Festival.
- Hong Kong International Film Festival.
- Tyneside Film Festival.
- Sydney Film Festival.
- Antwerp Film Festival.
- Rotterdam Film Festival.

Cinematheques in: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, Munich, Quebec.

Broadcast on television in Sweden, Holland, France, Finland, Austria, Greece, Switzerland, Italy, Britain.

1983

ANANAS - 52 mins.

Documentary.

A pineapple can as it encapsulates relations between Third World and First World countries. Filmed around the world, mainly on production and plantations in Mindanao Island, Philippines; Tagalo, Philippines; Packaging - Honolulu, Hawaii; Distribution - San Francisco; Label printing factory - Japan. Televised in Sweden, Holland, France, Finland, Britain. Nominated, awarded, and shown at Tyneside Film Festival, San Francisco Film Festival, Sydney International Film Festival.

1984

BANGKOK BAHREIN (Labor For Sale) - 78 mins.

Documentary.

An attempt to look at modern relationships between countries where the products to be sold and marketed are people, who are hired and exported. As women work in Bangkok extending the sex industry and Thai men are exported to the Gulf countries as cheap labor.

Presented at the Sydney Film Festival, London Film Festival. Broadcast in France, Holland, Britain and Australia.

1985

ESTHER - 97 mins.

