

{FEBRUARY 4 2006}

“SHALL WE NOT REVENGE?”

If one wants to understand what the Palestinians did on election day, one has to see the film “Paradise Now”, which has been nominated for an Oscar for the best foreign film, after collecting several prestigious international prizes. It explains better than a million words.

Its makers – the screen-writer-cum-director, Hani Abu-As’ad from Nazareth, and the actors, are Palestinians. (Amir Harel, one of the producers, is a Jewish Israeli.)

The two main characters, Sa’id and Khaled, are suicide bombers. The film addresses a question that is troubling everyone in Israel, and perhaps throughout the world: Why do they do it? What makes a person get up in the morning and decide to blow himself up in the middle of a crowd of people in Jerusalem or Tel-Aviv? And some of the people also ask: Who are they? What is their background? How did they come to be like that?

Today, a long time after it was made, the film also answers another question: Why did the great majority of the Palestinians elect the very group that sent these people to blow themselves up?

The film answers these questions. Not with slogans, not with propaganda speeches, nor with an academic report. It does not preach, praise or get mad. It tells a story. The story says everything. And since not many Israelis are going to see it, I permit myself to do what is generally not being done: to tell the story of the film until almost the end.

The opening scene creates the atmosphere: Suha, a beautiful young Palestinian woman of good family, brought up in France, approaches a checkpoint, one of the innumerable roadblocks that dot the West Bank landscape. She faces an intimidating soldier, a mustached face under a steel helmet, in a bullet-proof vest. Their eyes meet. He does not talk. He measures her up and down, down and up. He checks her bag, slowly, slowly. His eyes do not leave her eyes.

When he finishes, he returns her documents to her – almost. When she tries to take them, he raises his hand. Let her make an effort. In the end, without a word, he orders her with a movement of his head to move on.

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Just a few minutes – minutes in which total humiliation, mutual fear and hatred flow together. The viewer feels that the woman is on the point of blowing herself up. But nothing happens. She moves on.

Two young men, in their early 20s, in Nablus, the central town of the northern West Bank. Practically unemployed, like almost all the young men in Nablus. They have no future. No hopes. Not even dreams. They can do nothing to help their destitute families. They live at the bottom, in a mixture of boredom, frustration, despair. Even the cup of tea that a servile but stubborn boy sells them for 20 cents is cold.

They are bearded, but not fanatical. Religious like everyone else, no more. They were born under occupation and are living under occupation. Nablus is surrounded on all sides by roadblocks. There is no work. No nothing. Only neglect and depressing poverty. The occupation is the central fact in their lives. Everything begins with the occupation, everything ends with it.

One of them, Sa'id, meets Suha. Something clicks between them. Just then the two youngsters receive the message: you have been chosen. Tomorrow you will carry out a suicide attack in Tel-Aviv.

An abandoned building serves as the headquarters of the underground. Final preparations: The beards are shaved off. Their hair is cut. They put on good suits. They get their pictures taken. A short pep talk, without pathos, from the chief, a “wanted person” who is a living legend (still living). The attack is in retaliation for the “targeted killing” of a comrade.

The two look silently on while they are fitted with explosive belts. They are warned that these cannot be removed without exploding. A spine-chilling moment: the two see their pictures on the posters that will go up after the deed.

On the way. The fence is cut. On the other side, a military jeep suddenly approaches. Khaled slides back through the breach, Sa'id continues on his way into Israel. He reaches a bus stop, waits, sees a woman playing with her little child. The bus arrives. The woman and the child get in. At the last minute Sa'id hesitates, gestures the driver to move on – without him.

Among the comrades, panic ensues. Where is Sa'id? Has he deserted? Betrayed them? Run away? They search for him everywhere. Sa'id, still wearing the explosive belt, secretly returns to Nablus, looks for Khaled. He comes upon Suha. While they embrace, Suha says that it's the wrong way, civilians should not be harmed, it won't achieve liberation from the occupation. But Sa'id begs the chief to try him again, to give him a second chance. An important detail comes out: Sa'id's father had been a collaborator and was executed. Sa'id wants to eradicate the terrible stain, the shame that has pursued him from childhood. “He was a good man, but weak,” he says. “The

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Israelis exploited his weakness. It's they who are to blame."

Finally, the two comrades reach Tel-Aviv. For the youngsters from poor, run-down Nablus, Tel-Aviv looks like something from another world – shining, rich, unattainable. Skyscrapers. Girls in bikinis. People frolicking on the seashore.

At the last moment, Khalid falters and tries to convince Sa'id to give up the mission. But Khalid returns to Nablus alone. Sa'id goes on to avenge his father's death.

Last scene: Sa'id sits in the bus, surrounded by soldiers and civilians. The camera focuses on his eyes. The eyes fill the screen. We are petrified by what is going to happen in a moment

All this recounted in a restrained cinematic language. There are almost no verbal statements. On the face of it, a banal story, even with light moments: Khaled is reciting his farewell message before the video camera, the camera does not work properly, he has to repeat the moving message again and again. Comrades stand around, eating. He looks at them, stops and has to start again. And again. A comic interlude.

I studied the faces of the people leaving the Tel-Aviv cinematheque after the performance. They were silent and thoughtful. For the first time in their life they have seen the terrorists who are killing us, who blow themselves up among children, men and women. They see ordinary youngsters, who behave and react as ordinary people. They see the occupation from the other side, the underside.

I sat in the dark cinema, and found myself in a situation of total dissonance: we, the intended victims, who could easily have been sitting on that bus, see everything through the eyes of our murderer. A thought strikes us: that force will not help here. If we kill those two, two others will take their place. The fence will hold up some of them, but not all of them. The Security Service, with the help of collaborators, will prevent some of the attacks, but cannot prevent all of them – and the children of the collaborators will come to avenge. When there are people like that, who grow up in these conditions, some of them will always reach their targets.

The film does not provide solutions. It does not even pretend to be balanced. It exposes us to the face of a reality that we do not know, from an angle that we are not used to – and tortures us with the tension of conflicting emotion.

And perhaps also prompts us to think about a solution that will cause Sa'id and Khaled to turn in a different direction. A solution that will put an end to the humiliation, to the crushing of personal and national dignity, to the destitution and hopelessness.

A few days later, I saw another film that was nominated for Oscars, the much-praised film of Steven Spielberg, "Munich". As it so happens, I saw it in Germany, not so far from Munich itself.

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On leaving the cinema, my German host wanted to know what I thought of it. Spontaneously, without thinking, I said what I had felt throughout: "Disgusting!"

Only later did I have time to sort out the impressions that I had accumulated during this very long film. What had disgusted me so much?

First of all, the Spielberg style, a combination of the highest cinematic technique and the lowest cultural content. It has pretensions to profundity, with new and revealing insights, but basically it is nothing but another American Western, where the good guys slaughter the bad guys and the blood flows like water.

Some Jewish politicians protested against the film for equating the "terrorists" with the "avengers". And indeed, in several places in the film the "terrorists" were allowed to declaim some sentences in their defense, about the injustice done to them by the Jews and their right to a homeland. But that is only lip-service, a pretense, in order to give an impression of balance. But in the portrayal of the Munich attack – fragments of which are dispersed throughout the film – the Arabs appear as miserable, ugly, unkempt, cowardly creatures, the very opposite of Avner, the Israeli avenger, who is handsome and decent, brave and well turned-out – in short, the younger brother of Ari Ben Canaan, the superman of "Exodus".

The Arabs have no qualms of conscience, but the Israelis have scruples in every interval between murders. They hesitate every time when they blow up / shoot / cut down one of their "targets"- which they do, of course, only after ensuring the safety of the wife and children of the victim. They are not just killers, they are Jewish killers. As an Israeli satirical slogan goes: "Shoot and weep."

The presentation of the affair itself is highly manipulative. It withholds from the viewer some very relevant facts. For example:

- That the post-mortems showed that nine of the 11 Israeli athletes were killed by the bullets of the pathetically untrained German policemen. (The post-mortem reports are kept secret until this very day, both in Israel and Germany. But a powerful person like Spielberg should know about them.)

- That it was Golda Meir and her German colleagues – great heroes, every one of them – who sealed the fate of the hostages, when they rejected the kidnappers' demand to take them to an Arab country, where they would have surely been traded for Palestinian prisoners held in Israel.

- That the Palestinians, who were killed in revenge for Munich, had nothing to do with the affair. The Mossad was looking for easy targets and chose PLO diplomats posted to European capitals, who were quite unprotected.

But most of all I was repulsed by the Spielbergian vulgarity that runs through the whole film, including explicit sex scenes that are both gratuitous and particularly

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unaesthetic.

The film contributes nothing to an understanding of the conflict. It is basically a routine gangster film, which Spielberg centered on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to garner the longed-for Oscars that have eluded him until now.