

20 December 1998

Dear Judy,

I should have written this letter immediately after the Jewish Film Festival when it was all fresher in my mind, but as you know I was at that time suffering from a bad back (still not quite right) and couldn't sit at my computer. I'm going to write about my impressions of the Festival as they come to me without too much attempt at revision, and since a number of the films came under the heading of 'Israel at Fifty', I will not feel inhibited from speaking about my views in this direction. What I say is, of course, all up for discussion and I would welcome an exchange of ideas.

As you have probably gathered, I came to the Festival with a critical eye. Firstly I am opposed to Zionism on the grounds that it is an ideology which walks roughshod over the human rights of the non-Jewish population of Israel-Palestine; I see this as an inevitable consequence of its aim to establish an exclusively Jewish state, not as the unfortunate falling short of an ideal. I was therefore particularly interested to see whether the Israeli films reflected the moral dilemmas posed by Zionism and written about by such eloquent Jewish-Israeli writers as Israel Shahak and Akiva Orr, or by others with a Jewish background like Noam Chomski and Marc Ellis.

Secondly my opposition to Zionism, which sprang originally from my interest in Arabic and the Arab world and a realisation that the West in general makes little or no attempt to see the Middle East through Arab eyes, has led me on to question the whole concept of discrete cultures, particularly where the cultures in question are based on ancestral religious practice. In these terms the idea of a Jewish film festival, rather than, say, a Yiddish Film Festival, is problematical. For it suggests, as indeed does Zionism, that the Jewish identity of a Jew in Marocco is more significant than his/her Maroccan identity, and that he/she therefore identifies with Jews in other parts of the world more than he/she does with his/her fellow non-Jewish compatriots. I doubt this as much as I doubt that a Christian in South India is more Christian than Indian or a Muslim in Kashgar is more Muslim than Chinese. Even the Palestinians, who spring from a relatively restricted geographical area and have struggled to find a new identity since the catastrophe of Zionism befell them, are a mixture of different and overlapping cultures.

I am not denying that people of Jewish background usually have a Jewish identity; I *am* questioning the emphasis which is put upon it. This is partly because I believe that overstressing the importance of Jewish identity is a

limitation on Jews themselves (in a curious way it is accepting the very distinctions which Nazism imposed) and partly because I see it as aiding the on-going Zionist propaganda myth that the Jews are a distinct nation and that they must therefore have an exclusivist state.

I couldn't go to all the events you arranged, so I picked out those which seemed most likely to relate to my interests and which ran at times I could manage. I intended to come to the 'Images and Memory' discussion, but my back was particularly bad at that time and so I did not. However, I had already seen 'Good morning Mr Hitler' and attended the subsequent discussion led by Luke Holland at Sussex. I did not particularly like Wistrich's commentary, as far as I remember, but then I don't like his suave Zionist apologism. The footage, on the other hand, was revealing. The further away in time we get from Hitler, the more easy it is to regard him as a monster rather than a human being. It then becomes easy to say 'We could never be like that.' The sad truth, it seems to me, is that we are all liable to be seduced by power, and we are all capable of committing atrocities against those onto whom we have projected our own shadow. In principle I see no difference between Hitler's treatment of the Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, Slavs, communists and the mentally ill and Zionist/Israeli treatment of the Palestinians. This was, of course, the point which I made in the discussion following 'The Wave' which I was very glad you chose to show. (In my view the one-sided American/British treatment of the Iraqi people in the last few days and the dishonest use of a propaganda-ised view of Saddam Hussain by Blair, Robertson and Cook to justify it, is another example. It is in no way an endorsement of Saddam Hussain to point out that he is hardly the only villain in the world.)

I found both 'Out for Love' and 'Babcha' sentimental attempts at defining Israeli identity in entirely Jewish terms. In the first one is struck by the absence of any real engagement with the underlying issue of why there is fear and hatred and by the fact that there is absolutely no portrayal of the one fifth of the Israeli population who are severely underprivileged Palestinians. The filmmaker and his girlfriend visit the occupied Golan Heights as if it were perfectly natural to go on holiday there, indeed as if it were a part of Israel and as if the Syrian population had not been evicted or killed as recently as 1967.

I don't dispute that this is the way Dan Katzir sees things, or rather doesn't, for the Palestinians were always in a sense invisible to Zionists and therefore to ordinary Israelis as well. But I think we, as outsiders, are entitled to say that it not good enough to portray the blowing up of a bus as if it were inexplicable and to present the Jewish-Israelis as helpless victims. One might just as well say that the killing of Germans in the Warsaw ghetto uprising was

inexplicable and that they were innocent victims. Equally, the murder of Rabin did not happen out of the blue; it was entirely consistent with an important and unscrupulous strand of Zionism which is generally directed outwards against Palestinians and other Arabs (in which case it attracts little western attention), but which turns against Israelis as well when they are perceived as a threat to the idea of a 'rassenrein' greater Israel. (One needs only read Ben Gurion's diaries or look at the way Baruch Goldstein is revered for his massacre of the Muslims at prayer in Hebron to understand this point). Despite his bellicose history, Rabin had become such a threat, or at least this was how he was perceived by his killer.

'Babcha' is full of the old Jewish grandma chestnut, and to my mind brings in the holocaust quite illegitimately. I couldn't laugh at the in-jokes, partly because I didn't understand them, but partly because I had the feeling of being manipulated. I was being told; look how sophisticated and western we are, and yet how underneath it all pure unadulterated Jewish values survive. This is sentimentality, not life. (I actually question how 'Jewish' Israel is. I am inclined to agree with Akiva Orr that Israel has created a new identity, Israeliness, which has little to do with the spirit of Judaism.)

Hannah was an excellent choice, and particularly poignant for me because I know Vienna well, being married to (though separated from) a Viennese woman and having spent much time there recently doing my research. I am only too aware of the anti-Jewish atmosphere which still lingers, and which the film captured so well. I thought Schwabenitzky cleverly showed how weak characters get sucked into extremist movements because they find in them a ready-made identity in which all evil is projected outwards. Once again, however, I have to say that Zionism comes to mind as another example of this phenomenon. Following the confrontation which followed the discussion after 'The Wave' I was a bit apprehensive about attending the reception, but felt that I should not back out on this account. In the event it passed off without incident and was an excellent opportunity to meet several people, including Ferid Boughedir.

'Summer at la Goulette' was a breath of fresh air. As well as being immensely funny in its portrayal of the very human prejudices of the three communities, it also showed how they in reality formed one whole. It seems to me that almost as great a tragedy as that which occurred to the Palestinians in 1948 was the 'ingathering' of the Arab and other oriental Jews which followed. Hanna Braun, an Israeli, recently spoke at a conference on the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of Israel of her experience teaching an extremely angry class of women and children in Elat who had been segregated from the Askenazim in separate camps and whose menfolk were immediately conscripted and taken away from them. La Goulette shows us how it could have remained,

and indeed how it could be in Palestine-Israel if attitudes could be changed. How much more exciting to have a mixture of different traditions, all treated equally, than to define everything in terms of a dominant Jewishness. I believe that the majority of Palestinians have for long been ready for such a sharing; the PLO called for the establishment of a secular democratic state many years ago. The opposition to such an idea has come from Israelis.

I don't think I have much to say about the interview of Lewis Gilbert. I love his films, and was only sorry that he did not show a clip from my favourite, 'Educating Rita'. I'm not sure, however, what it means to interview him as a Jew in a Jewish film festival. Is there anything particularly Jewish about his films? You might find an odd thing here or there, but isn't it stretching a point a bit to call him a Jewish film-maker (if indeed you or Sydney Samelson did; I can't remember)?

I disliked 'Bedouin Sand'. Firstly there was the way in which when we finally got to see an Arab during the festival he was a bedu. I have nothing against bedouin, but the Arabs with whom the Israelis need to come to terms, the vast majority of Palestinians, are not nomads. When I lived on a kibbutz in Israel we were introduced by the kibbutzniks to bedouin, but never to other Arabs. It was as if we were being told: 'Look at these lovable primitive people with whom we get on so well; these are the Palestinians who so self-evidently need to be ruled by us.' And then there was the clearly propagandistic use of the minefield. Yes, there are minefields with unexploded mines in them - I myself wandered inadvertently into one by mistake and survived to tell the tale. But to me there was another agenda which read: look what a hideously dangerous place we live in; this is what justifies the brutal way we behave towards Arabs. The father even behaves cruelly to his own child and to his wife. The message of the film seems to be that he really has a heart of gold but again this seems sentimental to me. Much more probable is that years of service in the Israeli army treating Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza inhumanely has traumatised him and made him incapable of ordinary human emotions.

I was sorry not to have been able to come to 'Yiddle with his Fiddle' because if there is one really authentic Jewish culture which I have no difficulty with, in which Jewishness *is* of over-riding importance, then it is Yiddish. I know far too little about it, but I am aware that ironically it was precisely Yiddish culture which Theodor Herzl and other assimilated Zionist Jews (including Freud) despised. Herzl used the pejorative term 'Mauschel' to describe the Yiddish character and expressed the belief that Zionism would deal with him in the same way as William Tell when he said: 'If the first shot misses,

the second will earn its revenge.' (I confess I'm not quite sure what he meant here, but one gets the drift.)

I hope we will have an opportunity to discuss all this sometime.

Yours sincerely,

Francis Clark-Lowes