

Filming Israel: A Conversation

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Filming Israel: A Conversation

AMOS GITAI and ANNETTE MICHELSON

Amos Gitai, the preeminent Israeli filmmaker of his generation, is the author of thirty-seven films. Trained as an architect in Israel and at Berkeley, he turned in 1980 to filmmaking for reasons set forth in the following portion of conversations held in New York in 2000. The radically critical dimension of his investigation of Israel's policy on the Palestinian question generated an immediate response of alarm, hostility, and censorship. Although the corpus of Gitai's work is large and extremely varied, including documentary films shot in the Far East, the Philippines, France, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere, it is largely the transition from work in the documentary mode to that of the fiction feature film that has, as might be expected, enlarged the appreciative audience of his work. If in these talks we concentrated on the work of that transitional period, it was because as our talks progressed it became apparent that this allowed us to define issues and raise questions central to an understanding of his enterprise. At the time of our discussions, the negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians were proceeding under the sponsorship of the Clinton regime, and the view of a possible future seemed slightly (very slightly) brighter than it does since the return to power of Sharon in the last elections.

The films referred to in our conversation are the following:

House (1978), the documentary chronicle of the transformation of the home of a middle-class Arab family—of their displacement, and the appropriation of their property. A sequel to this film was shot in 1998.

Wadi (Valley) (1981), a chronicle of developing Israeli-Arab relations within a rural enclave.

Field Diary (1982), a study of the Israeli military during the war in Lebanon.

Esther (1986), a treatment of the biblical narrative of the victory of Esther, the bride of Ahasuerus, King of Persia, achieved with her brother over the evil vizir, Hamman.

Berlin-Jerusalem (1989), a freely structured recounting of the parallel trajectories of two women immigrants, the poet Else Lasker-Schüler and the Socialist Zionist Mania Shohat.

Kadosh (1999), a narrative set in the ultra-orthodox milieu of Jerusalem and centered on the problematic situation of women within it.

*Kippur (2000), a narrative of the drastic action of the war in Lebanon in 1973, seen through the action of a rescue unit. This film was recently cited by *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* as one of the ten best films of the past half century.*

OCTOBER 98, Fall 2001, pp. 47–75. © Annette Michelson and Amos Gitai.

Annette Michelson: I first became acquainted with your work under very particular circumstances. Having come since then to know most of your films, I now think they may have been the most appropriate circumstances possible. During my first visit to Israel in 1982, I was present at the first screening in the Jerusalem Cinémathèque of *Field Diary*, your film on the war in Lebanon. That evening I witnessed an extraordinarily intense reaction to the film—a demonstration of shock and hostility, largely on the part of the many young men who were in from the front, their weapons slung over their shoulders—something one of course sees all the time there, although the visitor may never quite become used to it. That demonstration was, I imagine, somewhat emblematic of your position within not only Israeli film culture, but perhaps within Israeli culture and politics more generally considered.

Amos Gitai: This is a very good point of departure, as you're one of the few outside witnesses to the event that was *Field Diary's* premiere. To be honest, I came somewhat prepared for the reaction. *Field Diary* is the third film of a trilogy. I had already done *House* and *Wadi*. I had already sensed a certain hostility—as well as its opposite—in reactions to the first two parts of this trilogy, through which I wanted to propose the manner in which the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians can be viewed through limited, microcosmic elements. Each of the first two films involves a small piece of territory, and



This page and opposite: Amos Gitai. *Field Diary*. 1982.



this can be as small as a single house or a *wadi* (valley), or it can be, as in *Field Diary*, which is quite different, a field or fields. The idea was to suggest that the conflict really exists on all these levels.

Field Diary takes another form, that of a diary, so that there was also the desire to register an evolution of the situation in time, and to suggest that this diary, written in cinematic language, presents each section as a single element, the whole forming a sequence of locations suggesting a temporal continuity. But as always happens in this area of the Middle East, these are the filmmaker's nice formal reflections until he really gets into the project. However, I think they're essential; otherwise we deal only with bare themes and issues, and I believe one should never wholly surrender cinema's power to thematic representation. But to present a film like *Field Diary* to a public such as you have described, during or immediately after the Lebanon war, with soldiers bringing their toys and instruments into a public space—that's an extremely sensitive kind of context. But it may be the ideal situation for this presentation, for context is, after all, an integral factor in the making of works of art, of cinema, video, literature, theater, and this hostile reaction was completely understandable. I even remember the presentation made by Lea Van Leer, who directs the Jerusalem Cinémathèque, who played a major role in the Center's creation and in the formation of an Israeli film archive. I sensed the ambiguity of her situation. I remember that someone rose and in a state of great excitement asked why this film was being shown and if the military censor had seen it. This person appeared almost threatened by it, and addressed the same question to me. And I responded, saying, as I remember, that I thought that in a place that calls itself a democracy, one must decide if one is a director of a cinémathèque and therefore committed to showing a broad range of films, or whether one merely runs a screening room subject to military censorship. I do think the serious issues raised by my work touched an exposed nerve within Israeli society.

Actually it had begun as a project by a very young filmmaker who was uncertain, at that stage, about work in film. I had invited a number of other filmmakers to do a joint project and suggested we call it *Territories*. And I started to shoot my film *Field Diary* on the West Bank. My colleagues formed a kind of committee, and they started to give me good advice, good brotherly advice, on which shot I should not include, asking why *Field Diary* does not include the good Israeli, suggesting that the film should be more balanced, etc. Having originated the project, I now dropped out, wandered about with the negative and eventually managed to put it together as a film. Nourit Aviv, the camerawoman who shot many of my films, had been living for several years in Paris and introduced me to the producer, Michel Copans, who took me on simply on the strength of his impression of an interesting project. He was extremely generous, got me a small editing room, and eventually showed it to a television channel. They liked it a lot, and then the contract was blocked by the central organization of the French-Jewish community.



Field Diary. 1982.

Michelson: My question was directed not only to the past, but also to the present. That evening in Jerusalem, I witnessed a situation in a language I could not understand, but its essential dynamics seemed clear, and it certainly impelled me to see some of your other films, those which were at the time available here. *Esther*, the next one that I did see, is, I understand, part of another series, a triptych, if I'm not mistaken. I'm therefore led to think that not only are you working as an engaged filmmaker, but you're thinking in large blocks of interrelated projects—this one including, as well, *Berlin-Jerusalem* and *Spirit of Exile*—and that this continues as you pass from documentary through these films, which represent an intermediate mode or genre to the making of feature fiction films, which are now at the center of your preoccupations. The triadic interrelation of theme appears fairly constant, and I find it interesting.

Gitai: I think that's true. As an architect, I know that a triangle is a relatively stable structure, and I am really interested in investigating interrelations within groups of films. I want to remind myself as well that no "reality," whatever that may mean, can be represented in summary fashion. This entails a theory

of angles or viewpoints, and since each has come to exist in its own territory, within its very limited situation, the geometry described within a given point, whether in *Wadi*, *Esther*, or *Kadosh*, is that of a given angle, and the larger structure or tissue of what is called Israel is a composite of these series of points. And perhaps little by little, we can gradually map this larger territory, composing the whole from elements that represent historical points seen in contemporary fashion, with echoes of the past—like *Kadosh*, which deals with the Hasidic community now. In general, I see this experiment called Israel as deserving of work that respects particular points of view.

Michelson: And the recent work in the fiction feature as well?

Gitai: I think that *Kippur* may be my point of departure, even though it is the most recent film. When war broke out in 1973, I was very young, twenty-three years old. A few months earlier I had received a little Super-8 camera from my mother as a birthday gift, and during this war I started to film images. Sometimes they were just textures of earth—what you see from helicopters, sometimes faces. In retrospect, the camera was something I really needed to construct, some sort of barrier, something to help me maintain distance, while at the same time serving as a soldier rescuing people who were losing limbs or burning up in the tanks, and so on.



Kippur. 2000.

Michelson: You had already done your military service?

Gitai: Yes, from age eighteen to twenty.

Michelson: And then?

Gitai: And then I enrolled in Technion, the Institute of Technology at the school of architecture in Haifa.

Michelson: And you were not conscripted in the war?

Gitai: In Israel you're in the reserve for thirty more years. I was not called up in this war, and that shows it to have been a very particular event. It was extremely chaotic. It followed a period that represents the high peak of Israel's arrogance, the period of Greater Israel, and so on. And with a single stroke it shattered this celebration of power and military might. And it was very violent. This war left traces that are still visible. While I was recently in New York, Ehud Barak spoke at length about the Yom Kippur war as the reason why he felt that it's necessary to come to a political arrangement. This war really caused a lot of casualties, many wounded and dead, but at the same time it was the very slow, early beginning of a series of agreements. This war took place twenty-seven years ago. Since then we have had a first agreement with Egypt, then the disengagement of Syria, then Oslo—the start of a very slow process. And for me, it may have been this war that also broke a sense of continuity that had made me think and feel like an architect. The war came three years after the death of my father, Munio Gitai, who was an architect, an engaged architect of the generation that wanted to fuse the aesthetic theory and form of the Bauhaus with a kind of "mission," that of the Bauhaus architect in Israel. This war, I think, brought me other perspectives; it was perhaps at this point that I started to question my decision to become an architect. Architecture seemed too formal an exercise for this era, unsatisfactory for me. I felt I should be doing something else.

I must also give credit to my three years at Berkeley [1976–79]. Upon finishing my studies at Technion in Haifa, I got a grant to do my M.A. and, eventually, my Ph.D. in the school of architecture. Tom Luddy, who was working for Edith Kramer at the Pacific Film Archive, made it possible for us to see a wide range of American and European cinema. Jean-Luc Godard came to Berkeley for three weeks, showing his video work. There was the work and thought of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. I saw a cycle of films by Erich von Stroheim, and, I think, a complete retrospective of Glauber Rocha's films. I can't say that I'm really a cinephile in the French sense. What impressed me more than any single film was the possibility of a consistent sense of form. A range of avant-garde work and great, strong work from Europe was now available to me. And I also saw some of the prints sent from Moscow by Naum Kleiman of silent cinema: beautiful, extremely impressive Soviet films, including some from the Republics. Then I saw Godard's way of using texts, integrating or exposing, estranging word from the film's surface; the video work that he was then doing was a really great

moment of that period. And Godard, for once, decided to be quite didactic; he accepted questions and really engaged for several hours in a dialogue in Berkeley's large auditorium. That was very unusual. And he was in an exceptional mood, because I later saw him again, and he really responded to questions and tried to explain the choices one would have to make. And he said very useful things, about production conditions, about the material dimension of filmmaking—all this in great detail, and very useful to a young filmmaker like myself. When I eventually returned to Israel to do *House, Wadi, Field Diary*, and, later on, *Esther*, what I had seen and heard at Berkeley really stayed in my mind. And I thought that you could do solid work, of the sort called *avant-garde* or, by others, marginal, and that this was the most effective subversive gesture possible. I saw that subversion was not only a matter of thematic argument; it was also a question of formal cinematic strategy.

My second encounter with Godard came much later, in Salsamaggiore, the first time the Italians invited a film of mine, *Field Diary*. Godard was there that year, and he talked about *Passion* [1982] and how he managed to sell the script, make a deal on the rights, how one deals with producers, how you can insist on your own point of view—when's the moment you can be really demanding and inflexible. So I think I saw Godard at his best. And thinking about the really wonderful work in sound-image relation that he does, I felt I had found the possibility of working in a way I could identify with, and saw no reason to yield to the pressures around me. For ten years I found it difficult to get backing. I wanted to do films in Israel but I had to depend on European sources. Although the French resented the Americans, they also imitated the worst kinds of American productions. So it became difficult.

I thought of things my father talked about with me during his last years. And he told me how as a seventeen-year-old boy from Silesia, he went to Berlin and spoke to Walter Gropius, telling him that he wanted to be an architect. Gropius directed him to study carpentry, because the Bauhaus wanted people with concrete knowledge of means of production. After a year in a school of carpentry, he was admitted as a student to the Bauhaus, and one of the very few things he brought to Palestine in the '30s was his set of carpenter's tools. So I have inherited from him the image, the idea of a strong formal tradition as part of its social context, and, from my mother, an attachment to the incorrupt text. A very strong ideological background. Compared with this, the '60s seemed not to leave much of an imprint on me. Now that I've been making films, I see that they were very important.

Michelson: One might see the Yom Kippur war as you have described it as generating a national crisis of self-confidence and territorial expansionism that is, in a way, mirrored in you. That is to say, it involved for you, as well, a break with your sense of your future. That and the acquisition of the Super-8 camera.

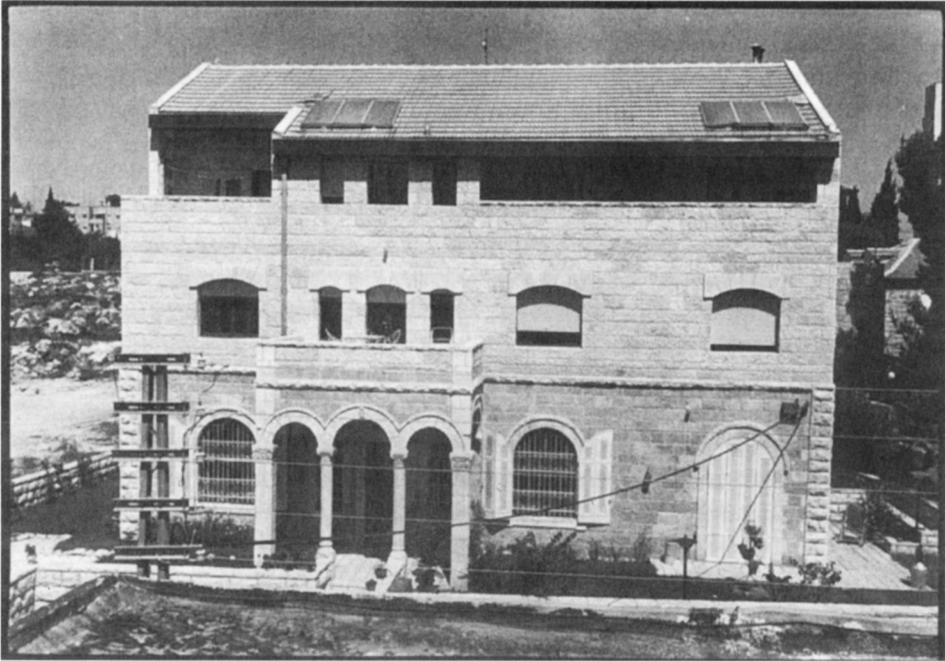
Gitai: Now, again in retrospect, I think that was the last point in contemporary history that an individual such as myself, somewhat alienated and by no means an enthusiastic believer of the official political line, still felt that he had to join the collective effort as a soldier, which means, as you know, risking his life. Thinking of myself then and considering how I now think politically, I see that I had similar thoughts at the time. And I'm really astonished that I took my little car. I had a little Fiat and went to find a friend of mine who lived nearby, and we set out to look for a unit. So it was all on our own initiative; we were not forced or called up by the authorities. It was something we both felt, and I ask myself, "What was this scenario?"

We took the little car and went in search of our unit. We didn't find it because it was already mobilized and sent to the Golan, and our little Fiat got squeezed in the traffic jam of tanks bound for the Golan. We found another unit, but with a very aggressive, macho colonel who said he was going to kill all the Arabs. He told us to join him and gave us some guns. Well, we looked at each other and said that this guy was going to kill everybody, the way he talked. And finally, after twenty-four hours we found ourselves in an air force rescue unit, in helicopters, picking up people who were burning up in the tanks, to get them to a hospital. I had had no desire to join the Israeli army and its military aggression; my views ran counter to their policy and action. My questioning of myself as an individual, as an Israeli and as a filmmaker, was, I think, already happening. *Kippur*, completed recently, was not done until twenty-seven years later, because for some years after the war I just wanted to forget it. And then there were years when I was so disgusted by our politics, that I said, "I will not make a war film." And it's only in the last years, since my return to Israel in 1994, that I thought to myself that now there may be peace; maybe it's time to do a war movie.

Michelson: Something new had developed, however, between the wars of Kippur and Lebanon: a thoroughgoing revision of the history of Israel and of its origins in the Zionist project. Could you say that, in addition to your change of attitude toward the military and the Israeli war project and its position on the territories, that you became involved in that revisionism? Despite your firm opposition to current and recent policy I do not see you as a militant revisionist. You appear to retain a certain sympathy for the Zionist project, which is now the object of a strong, indeed a radical, critique constructed by a new generation of historians. Within the Israeli academy they have mounted a full-scale attack upon the tradition of Israeli historiography and the way in which it mythologized Zionism and its leaders. Their analyses have been facilitated by access to formerly unavailable archives. What were your own reactions to this new and important development?

Gitai: I frequently observe a lack of synchronization between thought in academia—that is, between analytic, critical thinking—and events in the Middle East. We don't have firm territorial boundaries. Israel has a kind of open border





This page and opposite: House. 1978.

on its eastern front since 1967, and it does not have firm cultural or mental borders; it's a fluid situation. This has a very destabilizing effect. Imagine that you have no border between the U.S. and Canada or Mexico, both of the latter countries being hostile. So you don't know where the country ends. This is still being debated, renegotiated, meter by meter. I think that the reaction of some of the New Historians is completely justified, given the context of Golda Meir's extremely hermetic coalition that ran the country during the formative period of this generation of Israeli intellectuals. There was the Israelis' absolute refusal to negotiate with their next-door neighbors, and the real arrogance during the period leading up to the Kippur war. A very disturbing situation.

I remember when I made *House* in 1978 the film was censored by Israeli television. It is a lucid, low-key film, but Israelis find the idea that Palestinians have the same attachment as they do to a piece of territory extremely threatening, something that should not be shown to this gentle-spirited nation. Yitzhak Rabin's administration performed the important task of disposing of a lot of garbage and finishing off many clichés. There had been laws regulating relations between Israelis and Palestinians to the point of forbidding conversation between them. You could risk going to jail. In that context, attack was justified, noble. It is now important that the Zionist movement, however unjust to the Palestinians, not be presented as an evil, theory-driven conspiracy. The overall scheme was not one of conspiracy. There was a sense of urgency, particularly given the situation after World War II, with masses of Jewish refugees in the country—a factor that has to be integrated into any general analysis.

Michelson: One of your interesting films is *Berlin-Jerusalem*, the parallel renderings of the paths of two women immigrants: Else Lasker-Schüler, the German poet who emigrated before World War II, and Mania Shochat, a Russian Socialist activist who came to Jerusalem in 1905 as a member of a small pioneering kibbutz, part of a utopian project. And the film traces, though very economically—with little narrative detail but very clearly nonetheless—the logic of the utopian project's development into an expansionist and somewhat repressive colonialism.

Another variant of that evolution I find in the retelling, in a very distanced and complex way (even in its casting), of how the victory of the heroic Esther and Mordecai is consolidated, as it were, in accordance with their own wishes by a massacre of their enemies and those connected with them. You appear aware, in a way not unrelated to revisionist history, of the critical view of Zionism, not only in the post-World War II period or following '48 and the departure of the Palestinians, but in its very origins. Am I mistaken?

Gitai: No, it's true. And I would have to say that even given my own analysis, I don't think we can rewind history. The Zionist project involved from its beginning the displacement of Palestinian peasants. This involved a strong coalition behind territorial legislation, as described in *Berlin-Jerusalem*. I also think the situation is dynamic and you may create new injustices by just trying to argue that the birth of the secular immigration was such that they must return to their countries of origin. Some have commented, and with reason, that they would have no objection to the return of the six million consumed at Auschwitz and elsewhere; this sort of package deal might be acceptable, and we might indeed make a new stab at things. Given the impossibility of that, my position is dual. On the one hand, I believe we must recognize the nature of our policy and we must acknowledge the memories and attachment of the Palestinians on the basis of their very existence in this part of the world. The political solution that I should like to see is not necessarily one of negotiation of very hard-line positions, followed by the drawing of lines to carve up territories into small pieces. It may be important to set transitional periods for purposes of reassertion and confirmation of identity, and for the formulation of substantive issues. We cannot stop there, however, and the next step—or even one to be taken simultaneously, would be to create another zone in the Middle East, a zone of democratic relationships as a framework for forms of cooperation. I think that's a utopia worth the intermediate stages.

To return to the question about *Berlin-Jerusalem*, I think utopia is always important for work by or with progressive forces. When they deny the need for utopia, they err, because they then enter the domain of managerial, administrative competence, for which they must suffer judgment. The flight of these two women to Jerusalem, each with her own radiant vision of utopia,



Berlin-Jerusalem. 1989.

was really the source of this film project. And the scenario is written so that you don't observe the Middle East's perspective only through consideration of the Middle East. You will always have to consider—and I think this holds generally for the Jews' arrival in Palestine in the twentieth century—the movement between Europe and Palestine, until the 1950s, that is, until the start of massive immigration from North Africa. Looking in both directions helps us to understand the sources of immigration and some of its contradictions. In *Berlin-Jerusalem*, the final shot offers a resurgence . . . well, in a way, it's as if in the film's first part (most of the film), we try to foreground the relations between sound and image. And in the last shot, we divorce the two and say, "OK, now we want to evoke an emergence of buried fragments through the figure of Else, because she makes an imaginary transition from her presence in 1945 to that of a guest or visitor in 1989 when the film was shot. And this echo, these memories within the film's archaeological layers, create a tension, they pose a question to the present, in a way. . . . That last shot was done twice. I was not happy with it. The present was missing, there was something too firmly orchestrated about it.

Michelson: As the film now stands, Else Lasker-Schüler is walking in the city. It's very striking; one is immediately aware of an interesting strategy because this woman who died in 1945 is walking in what is obviously a contemporary city



This page and opposite: Berlin-Jerusalem. 1989.





Esther. 1986.

landscape. We know that from the cars in the streets.

Gitai: And there is one element of graffiti that I left there, from 1962. . . . I was working with Henri Alekan as my lighting camera man, and it was due to him that the film could be shot as it was. Alekan and I talked at length about my wanting to provide two styles—to give each woman her own kind of lighting. There was another source of inspiration. I wanted the lighting of Else’s scenes to be much more linear, to refer in a way to expressionism, and Mania’s was to be much more like that of social realism, more rounded, almost like a poster. What I really like in the films is what we were able to do because of Alekan. I made four films with him, and he was really generous in accepting to work on my first feature, *Esther*. What is fascinating about that generation of directors of photography is that they were formed in a time when film stock was less sensitive, so they had to construct lighting in layers. Obviously this knowledge is lost now. There’s been great progress in the production of raw stock, and we don’t need to construct these kind of layers. But I think that the last shot did not depart at the right point from this way of shooting, and although I had difficulty in convincing the project’s backers, I did go back to Jerusalem and reshoot this sequence.

Michelson: You seem to have approached *Esther* as a specifically defined project, aesthetically. This treatment of the biblical episode that is celebrated on the holiday of Purim is dominated by a pattern and rhythm of ritual. You have specified that it is to some extent visually modeled on Persian miniatures, although Ahasuerus, the king, is not a Persian of the period of the miniatures; he is a figure in a much older civilization. I regret never having seen a good print of this film, because your formal intentions do seem so sharply defined, and much of its interest derives from your choice of visual model. The narrative structure follows that pattern of ritual. In seeing it, I thought of Sergei Parajanov’s work, and then, looking over an essay by my friend Mikhail Iampolski, I saw that he too had referred briefly to the work of the Russian filmmaker. There is through an approach to character, to posture and gesture, duration of shots, use of narrator in direct address to the spectator, the creation of a hieratic ambience; the ritualistic pattern involves a broad spectrum of distancing devices, and the result is an infusion of the hieratic into this drama of triumph over evil. The film was shot in a location that speaks to Israelis of their history, and the reenactment, which concludes with a fusion of this landscape and a soundtrack of modernity, was brilliant. These effects of fusion between past and present do indeed seem to characterize a fair amount of your work.

Gitai: *Esther*, my first “fiction feature,” was shot in 1985. I was really intrigued by this project, because that was a time when many of my colleagues in Israel tended to deal with Israeli-Palestinian issues through realist narrative form. I decided, however, that in my first fiction film I would not try to create the kitsch love story of the Israeli boy and the Palestinian girl, but would go



instead to mythological sources, to the biblical texts, to which I am attached on different levels.

My mother was born in Palestine in 1909, and at that time there were fifty thousand Jews living there. She remembers those days and probably transmitted some sense of them to us. Her honeymoon with my father was spent in Balbec. There was rail transportation between Haifa and Beirut, and she conveyed to us the sense of the Middle East as it was then, before the borders became so threatening and dangerous. She comes from a strong socialist Zionist background. And she was one of the first kids whose parents decided they would speak Hebrew. She was a kind of *wunderkind*, attending meetings of socialist leaders and speaking pure Hebrew. And she often says, jokingly, that she's a victim of Zionism because she was not allowed to speak Russian or Yiddish. [*Laughter.*] She later spent three years in Vienna, training in psychoanalysis, but was told, upon her return, that since everyone was healthy, there was no need for psychoanalysis. [*Laughter.*] And so she decided to teach the Bible and Hebrew in a Bible school. This is where we connect to *Esther*.

Michelson: How interesting that this clearly secular-minded Zionist becomes a teacher of the Bible and Hebrew. What did that mean?

Gitai: It meant that she wanted to interpret the sources of the culture, but in a

nonreligious manner. Often, she repeated to me the questions asked by the children at school, questions that fascinated her. For instance, the kind of good ethical questions, such as: Why was the first man punished by God for a sin committed when he did not know that he had committed a sin? So then of course she started to teach them Kierkegaard. When I started my first “fiction” film, I said, “I will take one of these great biblical texts, because I want to observe the resonance of these beautiful archaic, minimalist texts of the Bible in another context.” And I decided that I would remain very loyal to the text. People with whom I discussed the project said, “Yes, but you should modernize the language.” I wanted to retain the language in its somewhat archaic form. I had always loved its austere minimalism, the biblical writers’ desire to preserve the contradictions of the characters, never to omit but never to clean up, never to make a realist or angelic text, never to beautify, always retaining its harshness and inner contradictions. I decided I would add to the existing historical layers and locate the film in a ruin in the Arab part of Haifa, to install a dialogue with the wars, and another way of reading. The first screening of this film also created quite a stir, not very different from that of *Field Diary*. It took place in the Museum of Television. People accused me of changing the biblical text. Luckily, I came equipped with the Bible in my pocket; this was not my habit, but I was ready for the attack. You know that the last part of the film that deals with revenge taken by the heroic Jews has been erased from collective memory, and I was accused of inventing it. But it’s actually in the text.



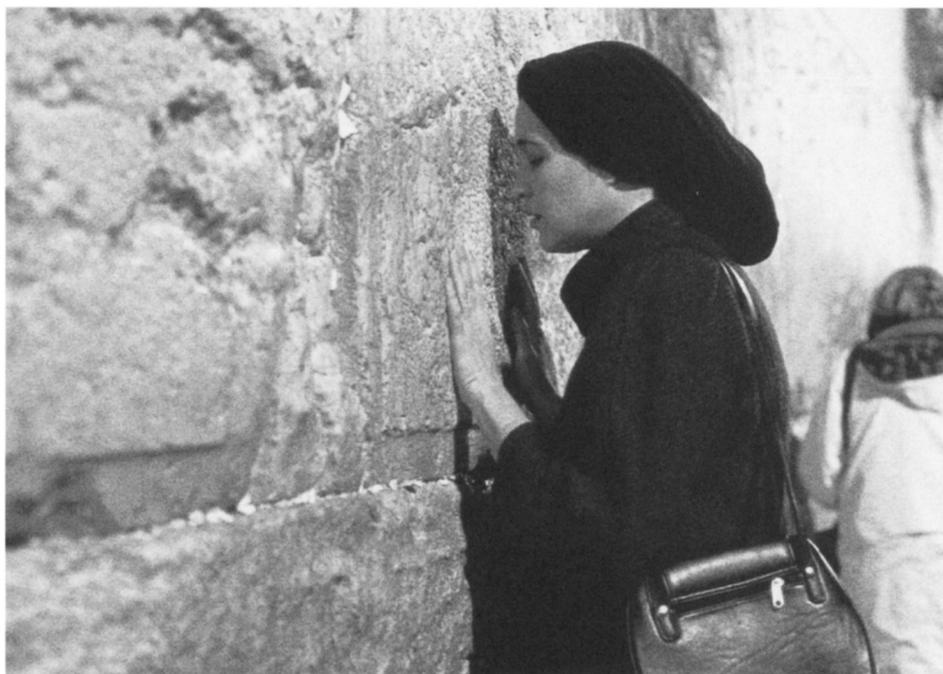
This page and opposite: Esther. 1986.

Michelson: I know. I was Esther in Hebrew school when I was ten or eleven years old and we stopped with the triumph of Esther and Mordecai.

Gitai: Yeah, right. [*Laughter.*] I believe that the form of this film—its *mise-en-scène*, long shots, lack of tracking, relatively wide framing, static nature, composition, geometry, and choreography—also disturbed people. Of course the text of *Esther* is unique in that it's the only complete biblical story set in ancient Persia, and in it there is no mention of God. God is absent; the narrative is structured in a binary fashion between good and evil. I think it's extremely fortunate that we Israelis can read the Bible. We can read it like a newspaper; we have direct access to its resonance. I was interested in the way that the actors—all of different origin (Palestinian, Hungarian Jewish, Egyptian Jewish, etc.) could re-present it. When I returned to Israel in 1994 after some years spent in Paris, I felt that the immediate presence and use of the language and landscape could take my work somewhere new. The spatial or architectural dimensions engaged me: ways of situating a text in a landscape, how you might place archaic text in a ruin that is charged with contemporary meaning—all these sorts of resonance. I started to actually think about working with actors. Not in the manner of mainstream American cinema; I still like to



This page and opposite: *Kadosh*. 1999.



retain the awkwardness or particularity of the actor, to allow it to come to the surface. I was looking for some sort of method for work with actors, and I think this does become evident in the trilogy of the city: *Devarim* (Tel Aviv, 1996), *Yom Yom* (Haifa, 1998), and *Kadosh* (Jerusalem, 1999). In making these films I had access to a wider landscape. The trilogy is also about enclaves, about the fact that Israel is not a homogeneous society. They like to cite the image of the melting pot, but it is not really an effective one.

Michelson: One would surely have to say that this image of the melting pot is dissolving everywhere. In America we have a crisis involving long neglected and now frequently competing identities. And we see that dissolution of the image in most of the metropolitan centers, which have in fact drawn immigrant workers and political refugees over the past several decades.

Gitai: I think that in Israel the threat to the collective project is even stronger, given the threat from outside. That's not the case for America, France, or Germany. And the disintegration of a common ground within Israel is problematic, because the various agendas of sectarian groups, whether secular or religious, right or left, really constitute a block to the common enterprise called Israel. That's why I thought I would situate the trilogy within separate enclaves. *Devarim* is about the Ashkenazi upper middle class (more middle than upper), the sons of pioneers, now disillusioned, as described in Yaakov

Shabtai's magnificent novel, *Past Continuous* [1985]. Haifa, the location of *Yom Yom*, is unique for its mixture of cultures; despite the conflictual nature of the Middle East, Arab-Israeli relations are part of the city's daily life. In the 1940s, Haifa was the site of the brave gestures, ideologically grounded, of women who married Arab men. Most of the leadership of the Communist party, composed of Arabs and Jews, came from there. *Kadosh*, the last of the three films, is set in the Hasidic community and takes place in Jerusalem, the center of religious faith and practice. I could not be silent about religion. This trilogy deals not with the collective project as a whole, but with particular enclaves. *Kadosh* is set in a city that has been a spiritual center for three thousand years, with each neighborhood a microcosm of a separate culture, and together they form a mosaic of cultures: Copt, Armenian, Christians, Orthodox Russians, Muslim, Jewish, and others.

The ultra-orthodox community is dedicated to preservation from the exterior. In Judaism the commandments span the 365 days of the year, and the twenty-four hours of a day. All human situations and relations are taken into account: birth, death, separation, work, leisure, sexuality. The scenario thus composed is extremely intricate, as the commandments rule the entire community's life.



Kadosh. 1999.

Notions of individual achievement and personal satisfaction are not their concern; their concern is the preservation of the community.

Michelson: And preservation demands a high birth rate. This film, of great beauty, centers on the Hasidism's total subordination of the woman to the procreative function. In so doing, it conveys not only the religious dimension of the problem, but projects the contradictions of the political implications involved in this enclave's creation of a strong representation and voice within the politics of the regime whose validity it refuses to acknowledge. The film was shot in Mea She'arim, in the heart of the ultra-orthodox community. I remember that on my first trip to Israel, I was struck, while walking in that section, by the fact that no one ever returned my glance. I was trying, in any case, of course, to be discreet, but I had the impression that no one looked at me; it was as if it had been decided I was not there. And there was the extraordinary physical aspect of the quarter's exterior—the streets, facades, and buildings were uncared for. The signs of austerity were overwhelming. How in fact did you manage to shoot there?

Gitai: I talked with some people who had shot films in Jerusalem and asked for advice. Each one told me, off the record, that I would never be able to shoot there, and that my camera would be smashed, my crew and actors chased away, and so on—which, as you probably understand, only drove me to try it. And there was another factor; since the beginning of my film-making, I've been concerned with the way in which people look at the camera. Take two contrasting examples: when making *Wadi*, I wanted to demystify as much as possible the contemporary fetishization of the camera. I therefore asked the cinematographer not to place it on a tripod, but to put it on the ground, while in *Field Diary*, I did the opposite. I maintained consciousness of the camera's presence, and it's one of the subthemes of the film. Before making *Kadosh*, I went through a fairly long period of study. First of all, because I have an ambiguous attitude to this part of Jerusalem. Like you, I am fascinated by its capacity to maintain itself separate and intact within its strictly formed boundaries; there is something noble about this. It gave one a rare occasion to travel in time, to observe a quarter of the city as it was almost three hundred years ago, to see how human beings functioned then. And the issue of community is for me one of the most interesting themes. And so I met with the Chief Rabbi in charge of relations with the outside world. A very elegant man, of Hungarian origin, very tall, a Giacometti-like figure. I explained the project, telling him I am not religious. I told him I was interested in seeing the ritual baths, frequented monthly by the women of the community. He showed me all the neighborhood sites; he was very kind. And he started to discuss the conditions for filming in the ritual bath.

Michelson: Why were they allowing you to film at all?

Gitai: I think it's really a question of body language and the way you talk to people.

If you don't immediately project a sense that you're judgmental or condescending, a superior, enlightened, modern fellow. If you seem really interested, they don't necessarily reject you, and you can be quite up-front. So we started to discuss conditions of filming. But then I said to myself, "I can't put him through this because our tacit agreement was that he show me the sites. But even if he does give me those sites, I will be breaching our understanding, for if I shoot, I need a cameraman shooting a nude woman. I will have gone back on our sense of accord, and I am not interested in that." So I told the producers that we should build all the interior spaces. I didn't want to disturb them. I would shoot only some of the alleyways. Since I like my cameramen to get a sense of the whole project, I took Renato Berta to all these little synagogues, and translated for him. We walked into a little study, and in it, on one side, were a couple of guys sleeping. Another was drinking a cup of coffee out of a plastic cup. Three men were studying the Talmud. So I listened to them debating a fine point for hours.

With *Kippur* the research took another direction, toward the major events that forge the collective identity. For me, Israel was largely formed by the collective experience of a series of wars, creating images and experiences that compose a common sense of the past, but that also threaten to destabilize it. With *Kippur*, I move closer to questions such as the following: What are the major historical events (such as war) to which entire single films should be dedicated?

Michelson: Do you really want to re-create the successive stages of history through the wars?

Gitai: Not all of them. And I will stick to my idea of treating a microcosm each time, only seven or eight characters in limited situations, and not succumbing to the temptation of creating spectacle.

Michelson: Well, *Kippur* is really spectacular enough.

Gitai: Because of my reluctance to reduce what is called "the enemy" to what I see being presented in film. I will try, for each film, to find another strategy. For *Kippur*, it was easy; these were my own experiences. I was not in a combat situation; in our unit we were only collecting the damage done by war. We never fought, never fired a single bullet. We were in dangerous situations, but as noncombatants. And it's my hope that an Egyptian or a Syrian, on seeing the film, may be aware, without hatred, of the myriad situations existing on both sides.

Another major Middle Eastern war was that of 1948. For me, the others, like the Six Days War of 1967, were too triumphalist, and they lend themselves to kitsch. I don't see myself making that sort of film.

Michelson: How about Lebanon?

Gitai: Lebanon was clearly a military operation about which I have a definite opinion, and I expressed it clearly in *Field Diary*. There was no ambiguity at all. Sharon arbitrarily decided to invade Lebanon. It's obvious that he is what he is, and

I don't feel I have to repeat things in a narrative version. The year 1948 is interesting because of the juxtaposition of the Jewish project and the Palestinian exodus. This is a dramatic project and an extremely complicated one; this one I should like to do. I'm starting to think about it. It will be called *Latron*. This was a single battle on the road to Jerusalem; it was the only static battle. Ben Gurion very much wanted to capture this citadel of British construction. When the British left in '48, they gave it, together with control of the road leading to Jerusalem, to the Arab Legion. The Haganah made five attempts to capture this point and failed each time. The war of 1948 ended without Israeli control over it, and until 1967 the way to Jerusalem, which I remember as a child, was extremely complicated; you had to meander through mountains, etc. . . . In this battle there were immigrants from Europe, sent straight to the barracks. People died without anyone able to identify them. And there was linguistic confusion, because if they did not understand the language, they could not understand the commands. Some spoke Russian, some Polish, some Yiddish. The commanding officer spoke Hebrew.

A couple of years ago, I came across some diaries of women in the Haganah who had been in Bergen-Belsen; they served as nurses in this battle. This is really powerful material. And add to it the fact that later on, during the war, they displaced whole Palestinian villages. This overlapping of . . . well, I shouldn't talk about future projects.

To return to *Kippur*, one of many decisions made was to stay with the characters, never to leave them . . . even during the explosion of the helicopter, for which I drew on my own experience. When in doubt, always dig back into your memories. I had talked about this project with Sam Fuller. I had asked him to play in a theatrical presentation on a text of Josephus Flavius. I asked him to be the narrator, and he accepted. We had some very good, serious conversations then. And one evening I told him this story, my story. He really encouraged me. And some years ago, when he was back in Los Angeles, I stayed with him for a week and we talked about it again. As I've already said, this experience set me on the path of filmmaking, but it took me years to find ways to deal with it, and I knew I had to be patient. Staying with the soldiers was an important idea. We were to be in a helicopter, with only about a meter between us. And then the camera would open slightly, and they jump out into the wide field battlefield, then come back, and the camera stays with them. Then the helicopter takes off, and we see them looking into the distance of the battlefield. All of that in a single unit, essentially. And I did a lot of studying about helicopters, how you can place a camera, where to sit.

Michelson: One is impressed by what you managed to capture and how difficult it must have been in that space with so little margin for movement. And of course, the sequence of the long, long, ever-recommencing struggle to rescue a fallen



Kippur. 2000.

soldier from the battlefield's swamp of mud will remain unforgettable.

Gitai: This film involved immense technical problems, because I told the producers that I would not be satisfied with some minor explosion of material, that I wanted the camera to observe the characters while the explosion was happening. This was technically a very complicated thing to do, but it kept the project coherent. I didn't give in; I didn't leave the characters and say, "OK, now let's imagine it." No, the camera stayed with these young soldiers through this moment, too.

As to the explosion, the producers finally introduced me to a French special-effects guy, and in the beginning, they wanted me to do everything by computer, as is frequently done now. They showed me a successful example, but I was not convinced. I could always tell immediately when the image was manipulated, even in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* [1998]. I said that I didn't want digital effects but physical ones. And finally I came across the British group Digby and Milner, who had worked with Stanley Kubrick. Digby was an extremely nice guy; he didn't need this job, he had earned a lot of money for his work with Kubrick, and on James Bond films. But I managed to convince him to work on this project. He helped me to find a way to keep shooting during the explosion. And he invented the hydraulic systems that were needed. It was really fascinating.

To make this film I had, of course, to have the cooperation of the army, and this despite my reputation as a "dangerous" individual. I told them I would submit the real scenario and met with the deputy chief of staff; he's quite an intelligent guy. And I told him that I knew that they had helped on the production of *Rambo* [1987], on two or three *Rambos*, in fact, that had been shot in Israel, and I thought that the story about this land deserved their support. I think it was also helpful that this is my story, that I had actually been there. And he knew the statistics—that, in most cases, if a helicopter is shot everyone is killed. And so by being quite straightforward, I convinced him. It took time, and I gave it time. I knew that the army is a bureaucratic institution, and I needed to give myself nine or ten months. Fuller had told me of his similar experience in shooting *The Big Red One* [1979]; the film was shot in Israel, so that Haifa became Sicily. I think, too, that this time the circumstances were favorable. Barak was hoping to strike a deal with Syria. Well, they came through.

Michelson: Has the technical work on this film been documented and published? As you know, there are journals dedicated to the technology of the moving image. And obviously, Kubrick's work has generated a certain amount of description and documentation.

Gitai: We did shoot some video, because I wanted to shoot the entire war scene in the Golan itself. It has this particular kind of dark, volcanic soil; it's really a very dramatic area, visually. And as we began, the army was none too happy, because the locations we chose were near the border and a



Kippur. 2000.

bunker there. The film was shot at 800 meters from the actual existing border with Syria. Actually, in those shots, in the shots of the rescue effort, there's no need for dialogue because what you see is so shocking, and it's physically exhausting; you have to carry and run, and struggle to go on. So you become more and more silent because you want to keep what little energy you have; you know that the fatigue is very dangerous. If you're not concentrating, you can be very easily killed. So all these thoughts had really stayed with me, and I did want to put them on film. And finally, I'm glad I did.

Michelson: This film was first shown in France and has now been seen in the New York Film Festival. Has it been seen in Israel?

Gitai: Not yet. I want to release it there on the anniversary date of the war, on Yom Kippur.

Michelson: On what date does Yom Kippur fall this year?

Gitai: The eve of Yom Kippur falls on the eighth of October, and Yom Kippur is on the ninth. Rosh Hashanah will be on the thirty-first. And because this

was such a strange war, and because of its association with the high holy day, there is a kind of sadness which descends over the country then. I think this is the best time to show the film—not before then, when everyone goes to the beach.