

INTERVIEW

„I Wanted to Show the Unspoken, the Repressed, that Which Is Intangible“

Gesprächspartner: Offer Avnon, Regisseur

Herausgeber: Goethe-Institut Tel Aviv / Culture of Remembrance

Anlass: Screening von „The Rhine Flows to the Mediterranean Sea“ im Tel Aviv Cinematheque, 14.–15. April, anlässlich Yom HaShoah

Offer Avnon is the director of the film The Rhine Flows to the Mediterranean Sea, which was screened by the Tel Aviv Cinematheque on April 14 and 15 to mark Yom HaShoah. In conversation with Hilla Lavie, Avnon speaks of the shadows of the Shoah and the grief that have been present in his life since birth. He talks about his life between two worlds – Israeli and German – and how he has used his camera to capture images that tell of this trauma.

By Hilla Lavie

After ten years in Germany, you returned to your hometown of Haifa. What brought you to Germany?

Germany has been present in my life since childhood, as part of the shadows that accompanied my family, as part of what was left unspoken, what was repressed. My mother emigrated from Poland to Israel before the war, at the age of six, with her Zionist parents, but many of her family members who stayed behind perished in the Shoah. Her two uncles survived Auschwitz and immigrated to Israel after the war as Zionists. As a child, I spent every summer with one of them. He lived on a kibbutz; he was a kind, modest man who never complained. How did he manage not to let on about the horrors he had endured? Nor did he ever speak of the past.

My father's family history, too, was overshadowed by the Shoah. Separated from his mother, he came to Israel as an orphan with the „Tehran Children“ group. Mother and son only survived the Shoah because the Russians deported the family to Siberia after invading Poland. My paternal grandfather was murdered by villagers while trying to earn a living away from home. My father's brother died as a soldier in the Anders' Army; we don't know exactly how he lost his life. In general, very little is known about most of my family stories from that time; the information is fragmentary. It was against this backdrop that I first came to Germany on a high school exchange program. For me, it was a deeply moving experience. That is why I later returned as part of a university exchange program and decided to stay. There, I began to

learn German and to live in the language that, in my childhood, had come to symbolize the trauma – the Shoah.

The exploration of trauma runs through all your work to date.

Trauma is part of my own experiences and those of the people around me. This has fascinated me all these years and motivated me to work with it through film and art. My inner life has been shaped by people who experienced these difficult, traumatic events firsthand. These people are my flesh and blood, a part of me, my family. I was interested in the survivors' inability to ever fully convey what they had been through – events so traumatic that one can scarcely comprehend them if one wishes to remain sane. Yet it is precisely for this reason that what they „conceal“ due to protective and defense mechanisms has no less of an impact on those around them than explicitly told stories.

How does one approach such a complex, elusive subject as trauma using audiovisual means?

While studying Visual Communication at the Holon Institute of Technology, I discovered Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* in the institute's library. I watched the film over and over again, completely fascinated. Even back then, I decided to explore the themes of identification with the aggressor and the fascination with Nazi Germany. I created a film collage (*Balsenstein*, 9 min., 2000) using photos from my family's albums, combining images of my parents, my brother, and myself with sequences from Riefenstahl's film. The shadows that accompanied my life became visible in this combination of anecdotes from family life. I wanted to show the unspoken, the repressed – things that are supposedly normal, but appear abnormal from a different perspective.

In my next film, *Burden/Last*, I also explored identity and trauma in various forms. It is a sort of early, yet different, version of what I ultimately addressed in my film *The Rhine Flows into the Mediterranean*. One section in *Burden/Last*, for example, deals with the enduring grief over my uncle Offer. Offer was my mother's younger brother, who was killed in the Israeli War of Attrition. My mother's response to his death was my birth. I am named after him. Through my mother's character, Offer's story runs through the film; she is shown time and again in the days surrounding Memorial Day for fallen soldiers. For me, the presence of the Shoah is closely linked to the presence of Israeli grief. The story of my birth is undoubtedly a major source of the shadows I grew up with. After working for many years on the footage in an almost Sisyphean editing process, I realized that I had to detach myself from this story and remove it entirely from the film. In a sense, this liberated the film and enabled me to focus on the memory of the Shoah.

The images in the film were all shot by you. They possess a fascinating beauty. What guided you while filming?

The concept for the film was clear to me from the outset. I envisioned a combination of interview excerpts interspersed with visual footage. Through the images, I try to capture something internal that exists within my soul. They arose from my personal observation,

shaped by the weight of trauma. That is what I wanted to concentrate on; that is what I tried to hold on to.

I photographed objects, some of which seem to have nothing to do with the film's subject matter. For example, there is no image in the film of a barbed wire fence in a concentration camp. And yet, for me, these images touch upon and emotionally permeate the film's theme in a far more compelling way. They are the sum total of all historical events and my engagement with the Shoah. They express the non-verbal, the atmosphere of death, time that is both past and present.

How did you come up with the title of the film, „The Rhine Flows to the Mediterranean Sea“?

I lived in Cologne for ten years along the Rhine – a river I love deeply. The Rhine was a constant presence in my daily life and, for me, a kind of substitute for the Mediterranean. As „Father Rhine“, the river also connects to the concept of the „fatherland“ and occupies a central place in German culture and German nationalism. While searching for a title for the film, the Rhine kept coming to mind: as a flowing element between events of the past and present, symbolic of a consciousness in flux; as a stream of people on their way from one place to another. All of this is linked to my endeavor to capture cinematically what is intangible – the subconscious. Geographically, the trauma occurred in the places where the events took place. But the trauma also travels with the people who experienced it – to Germany, to Poland, and to Israel.

Poland and Polish Holocaust remembrance occupy a central place in the film, alongside Germany.

Over the years, I have met quite a few Poles and it was important to include Poland in the film. I first visited Poland as part of a German-Polish-Czech theater project. At the time, I was the only Jew and Israeli in a group of Germans traveling through the woods in a minibus along the concrete road that the Germans had built during the war. When I saw the first houses in Poland, I was so overwhelmed that I started to cry. My grandparents had emigrated from Poland to Israel; they had lost their family members in Poland. They never wanted to visit Poland again. Back then, I sensed that I wasn't traveling in Poland like other Israelis. I arrived as an Israeli who was already „half-German,“ and felt as though I were a sort of Diaspora Jew with Israeli experience. I felt safe and didn't want to hide my origins.

This theater project enabled me to have an intense encounter with young Poles. For many of them, I was the first Jew they had ever met – and, what's more, a descendant of the „Jews of that time“. I thought I sensed something like an awkward discomfort in them. Compared to encounters with Germans, where I often noticed feelings of guilt over the actions of their ancestors, I sensed no such guilt in Poland. This was also evident in the reactions to my film. The audience at the Warsaw Film Festival was very young. They had engaged deeply with the commemoration of the Shoah. But somehow, it hadn't really reached their hearts. The positive and emotional reaction of the German audience was quite different. As the Poles themselves

were victims of the Nazis, their narrative naturally differs from that of the Germans. And yet, I think it's important to question these different narratives.

The film is narrated in your own voice in German – even in sections dealing with the shadows of Israeli history and the relationship to Palestinian history.

My grandparents, who lost their family members in Poland, would certainly have felt a shiver run down their spines had they heard me speaking German. But Israeli politics would have pained them even more. They were idealists and social democrats. Israel is my home; Hebrew is my mother tongue. There is an internal rift I grew up with. Over the years, this inner rift developed into a rift in my world – living in Germany, living in the German language.

This is a film that deals with the trauma of the Shoah, but also points to the trauma that „we“, the Jews, have inflicted on the Palestinians. And here I want to make one thing clear immediately: I do not make nor do I accept a historical comparison of the events themselves. Nevertheless, this immediately causes discomfort for some viewers, but I've never been interested in the so-called comfort zone. Yes, the film is in German, yet its perspective and emotional identification remain „ours“ – that of Israeli Jews. As is well known, Jews have always been good at laughing at themselves, just as self-criticism is an essential and vital part of Jewish culture and heritage. My critical perspective is a personal one; with it, I invite Israeli viewers, as well as German and Polish ones, to engage in their own critical self-reflection.

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AUTHOR

Dr Hilla Lavie is a postdoctoral fellow at the Richard Koebner Minerva Centre at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Her doctoral thesis, which examines the representation of Israel in West German films of the 1950s and 1960s, was awarded the Simon Wiesenthal Prize for Holocaust Studies. She is currently conducting research in the fields of German-Jewish history and queer history. Hilla Lavie is a lecturer in film and history at the Hebrew University.