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# Narrating trauma in the Middle East – a new psychological landscape?

# Abstract

This is a study of contemporary feature films and short films presenting personal and collective traumas originating in Levantine Middle Eastern conflicts – in Israel, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. Just after the millennium there were significant shifts in these societies and consequently in their cinemas. A number of films received both international attention and awards. This essay seeks to investigate how this wave of films may function as ideological comments through their narratives and 'psychologization' of characters, and through emotional responses evoked in the audience.

The text initially frames a vocabulary of trauma, then continues with a contextualized presentation of trauma cinema, a discussion 'national myths' and national traumas, and a brief chapter on to how 'cinematic ethics' are formed through audiences' emotional responses and how these can be influenced. The analysis concentrates on how the films relate to the national myths, (i.e. the dominant discourses) of each respective nation in order to evaluate their political stance in relation to the status quo, and where these societies are at in their collective trauma processes. The discussion also delineates national tendencies in these cinemas, and examines whether there is anything like a common language shared between them that transcends the national.

Contents

## Introduction

A few years back I watched two films which made a lasting impression with their intense representation of traumatic events: *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, Israel, 2009) and *Incendies* (Denis Villeneuve, Canada, 2010).[1] Already nurturing an interest in Middle Eastern cultures, and a fascination for how people and societies deal with difficult experiences, personally through psychological mechanisms and collectively through narratives, this film niche seized my attention. This essay has allowed a further exploration of the subject.

## Subject, aim and research questions

This study is concerned with contemporary feature films and short films (some of which are more artistically oriented), about personal and collective traumas originating in Levantine Middle Eastern conflicts.[2] I seek to investigate how they through their narrative, their 'psychologization' of the charachters and through emotional responses from the audience may function as ideological comments in a political and ethical discussion. Are there tendencies in these films that differ from earlier views on conflict and trauma, and most importantly, with the dominant discourses of these societies? The discussion outlines what specific national stances that prevail, and examines if there are those transcending national/ethnic identity. If so, what conclusions can be drawn from that?

## Limitations and justification

Just after the millennium there were significant shifts in the cinemas and societies discussed. In order to conclude something that is relevant to the present, I have strived to keep the material as recent as possible. The primary film sources are no older than from 2005. The reason for including short films is that they are often made by younger or less established directors, and I believe their voice is important to include.

All films describe traumas born out of conflicts in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, but no other Middle Eastern countries. This selection is justified partly by the need for diverse material for a comparative analysis, and partly due to the fact that the conflicts in this geographical area are to an extent overlapping, and that the films consequently often deal with more than one of the national contexts simultaneously. *Waltz with Bashir* is for example centered around the first Israel/Lebanon war of 1982,[3] while also touching upon the situation of Palestinian refugees during that conflict. In *Transit Game* (Anna Fahr, Canada/USA/Lebanon, 2013) we meet a Syrian man

1 In the filmography, the films' nation of concern are marked in bold.
2 The criterion for a film to belong to any of these nations will be based on the narrative itself and does not necessarily equate the nation of origin, even if this correlates in most of the cases.
3 In order not to take on any political standpoint, I will strive to name the wars and conflicts discussed in the most objective way possible, thus avoiding names used by only one side.

hoping to reunite with his family in the north of Lebanon, and during the course of the action he encounters two Palestinian refugee children who frame his own experience in a new light. The film also draws attention to the pressing refugee situation in Lebanon. Furthermore, the nations share a lot more when it comes to the field of cinema than one might imagine. Of course, counternarratives in response to the others' narratives can be seen, but other things are more convergent, like various exchanges within film production that have occured throughout film history. For example, Palestinians have often used facilities in Lebanon, especially during the intifada period, while in recent years they sometimes even receive Israeli funding.[4] Syrian films have often used the Palestinian narrative as a metaphor for their own political situation.[5] The cinemas share recurring themes such as the relation to the land, confined space, issues of migration, and of course the themes of war and conflict. Not least, all cinemas employ different strategies (overtly or not) in order to gain Western support for their causes.

## Research overview

There is a solid corpus of literature discussing film and trauma, also those which are rooted in the national contexts I investigate, especially when it comes to Israel and Palestine. If not exclusively though, they often have a national vantage point, while my intention is to discuss the films all together. This is where I believe this study can contribute with something new. When it comes to individual films, substantially more academic studies are done on Israeli films than on any of the other nationalities' films, while Palestine takes the second place. I have not come across any literature specifically concerned with how films about war related traumas contribute to discussions in society or in the formation of discourses, even if many of the selected sources touch on the subject. Studying this might also be a widening of the field.

## Primary and secondary sources

The film selection has been dependent on what has been available from Sweden the past few months. This has mainly influenced the selection of full length feature films, as there is a wealth of short film material on the internet. Malmö Arab Film Festival (MAFF) by the end of September gave a valuable opportunity to watch a number of films, as well as getting in contact with directors and producers in order to inform the study.[6]

4 Nurith Gertz & George Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2008, p. 25; p. 34.
5 Rasha Salti, "Critical Nationals: The Paradoxes of Syrian Cinema", in Salti, Rasha (ed.), *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Contemporary Filmmakers*, New York: Rattapallax Press 2006, p. 30.
6 4th Malmö Arab Film Festival, 26–30 September 2014.

It is interesting to reflect upon why certain titles have been available here and others not. With recent worldwide attention and a range of film festival awards, many titles have been granted international distribution. However, it seems like the interest is limited to these titles and not the cinemas at large. Titles that present a more complex reality and engage with both Israeli and Palestinian realities (and that may actually be more important films because of this) such as *Arna's Children* (Danniel Danniel and Juliano Mer-Khamis, Netherlands/Palestine, 2004) and *Forgiveness* (Udi Aloni, Israel/USA, 2006) have escaped the interest and cannot be found. The elusive drama *Ladder to Damascus* (Mohammad Malas, Syria/ Lebanon/Qatar, 2013) was the centerpiece of MAFF, but gained no distribution outside the event, while the more action-based Palestinian film *Omar* (Hany Abu-Assad, Palestine/United Arab Emirates, 2013) was screened nationwide in Sweden. With the exception of Lebanese films, films by female directors are absent from the available feature film selection.

When it comes to secondary material, four books – one on each national cinema – serve the need for cultural background and contextualization. These are Ella Shohat's *Israeli Cinema – East/West and the Politics of Representation*,[7] Lina Khatib's *Lebanese Cinema – Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*,[8] Nurith Gertz's and George Khleifi's *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory* and finally *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Contemporary Filmmakers*, edited by Rasha Salti. A few different works on trauma cinema – both general and specific ones – are employed, as well as literature on psychology and ethics in film. In addition, a few film journals are used.

## Theory and method

No previoius research with the exact same approach that could be used as a foundation has been found. Therefore, I combine different sources to construct a workable theoretical framework for the analysis. This is amalgamated from trauma theory, a contextualized theory of trauma cinema, the semiotic concept of myth related to the specific nations and finally a psychologically guided philosophy of ethics related to film theory.

Raz Yosef's *The Politics of Loss and Trauma in Contemporary Israeli Cinema* analyzes films from a theory of psychology and trauma cinema.[9] Since similar sources on the other nations are lacking, his work has been a vantage point to build the framework. However, his classical Freudian reading is focused on the "dimension of unconscious desire in forming traumatic

7 Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema – East/West and the Politics of Representation*, London/New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd 2010.

8 Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema – Imagining the Civil War and Beyond*, London/New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd 2008.

9 Raz Yosef, *The Politics of Loss and Trauma in Contemporary Israeli Cinema*, New York and Oxon, UK: Routledge 2011.

memories".[10] This, I believe, takes the analysis more into the personal realm and distances it from an interpretation relating to collective traumas and the national discourses, so I do not conduct the analysis from the same perspective.

I base the analysis on two to three feature films and one to two short films for each national cinema. A few full length documentaries about the Syrian Civil War have already been produced in spite of the prevailing chaos, but I have only encountered one feature film, the abovementioned *Ladder to Damascus*. This is compensated by using three Syrian short films. The vantage point for the analysis then is to interpret the films from this psychological and ethical perspective of film theory, which I frame as 'internal politics'. Here I discuss the films through different prisms, for instance how the characters are portrayed in terms of psychology, how ethical and moral responses are constructed with cinematic tools, and how balancing acts between facts and fiction impact the narrative. I also juxtapose the narratives with prevailing 'national myths' to see where they subscribe to these and where they diverge, in order to evaluate their contribution to a collective discussion and creation of discourse around these specific Middle Eastern conflicts and traumas (which due to their distribution is not necessarily limited to their respective area of narration). The intent is to take a wider angle than the national, and instead relate the outcome to a universal human perspective.

## Trauma concepts

I will make use of psychology concepts I find productive for the discussion, whether they are Freudian or Jungian or derivative of any of them. The literature includes both orientations, and the intention is not to make this piece of work a cause for either school of psychology. However, it can be said that trauma terminology generally originate in the Freudian tradition while the practice of reading film in relation to the collective psyche is more connected to the Jungian tradition.

The Greek origin of the word *trauma* refers to an injury inflicted on the body. However, in medical and psychological discourse, it has come to imply an injury inflicted on the psyche,[11] and I will use the term accordingly. Trauma originates in an 'impossible experience'; unspeakable and unthinkable to the person experiencing it.[12] This experience is something that violates one's innate sense of ethics. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as follows:

> a [psychological] response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the

10 Yosef, 2011, p. 13.
11 Yosef, 2011, p. 86.
12 Yosef, 2011, p. 11.

> experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. […] The pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself – which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally – nor can it be defined in terms of a *distortion* of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it".[13]

Even if the exact definition is debated, the psychological responses described above are commonly named 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)'.[14] 'Shell shock' is also a relevant term in this context, referring to a psychological disturbance caused by prolonged exposure to active warfare. Caruth writes that trauma "seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available".[15]

E. Ann Kaplan criticizes the way trauma theory has been simplified in order to provide an attractive tool for contemporary analysis within humanities research since the 1990s.[16] She especially denounces Caruth's emphasis on 'dissociation'– the psychological defense mechanism manifesting as varying degrees of detachment from reality – as the core concept of trauma theory. She instead suggests there are at least three ways that trauma may find its course into conscious memory, and other reasons as to why the theory need to widen its scope.[17] It is indeed worth noting that trauma in a clinical sense is a much more complex phenomenon than described here or in film literature, or for that matter in cinematic representation. Acknowledging this complexity, I continue to present a few common trauma attributes from the consulted literature. They are important for this discussion but consequently not exclusive in the pathology.

It is essential for the psyche to use different strategies to cope with the impossible event it has experienced. Initially, there is usually a state of denial, with partial or total 'amnesia'– a loss of memory of the event – but noteably not from the feelings it evoked.[18] The period of time of the delayed response that follows from the inability to deal with the traumatic event as it happens, is called 'latency'.[19] During this time the effects are not yet perceptible and everything appears as if

13 Cathy Caruth, "Introduction", in Caruth, Cathy (ed.), *Trauma – Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore, Maryland and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1995, p. 4.
14 Caruth, 1995, p. 3.
15 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, Maryland and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1996, p. 3.
16 E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture – The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press 2005, pp. 32–41.
17 Kaplan, 2005, pp. 34–35.
18 Yosef, 2011, p. 13.
19 Yosef, 2011, p.9, Caruth, 1995, p. 7.

nothing has happened. Eventually, the belated response will surface, and a reconstruction of the memory is possible.

In the formation process of traumatic memories there is commonly a 'displacement' in temporality and a varying degree of dissociation to the event.[20] Freud himself emphasized the presence of fantasy and the role of the unconscious in this memory formation.[21] Janet Walker, one of the first film scholars to use trauma theory, has introduced the term 'disremembering':

> The process described by psychological literature as that of conjuring mental images and sounds related to past events but altered in certain respects shall be termed 'disremembering'. Disremembering is not the same as not remembering. It is remembering with a difference […] Disremembering can become urgent when events are personally unfathomable or socially unacceptable.[22]

This partial uprootedness from 'reality' incessantly causes the validity of the traumatic memory to be questioned. But Yosef notes that "[t]he truth of the event appears not in referential signs of it, but rather in its 'literal' presence".[23] The title of Janet Walker's article in *Screen* phrases it elegantly; *False memories and true experience*.[24] Lina Khatib describes further how the trauma is not only tied to a past event, but that it remains present as the fact of having been wounded.[25] One will inevitably be 'acting out' the trauma, which means repeating the emotional pain connected to it (in one way or another), until there is enough awareness, acceptance and willingness to 'work through', i.e. solving or transforming it.[26] The victim is held captive in the past until the trauma is released.

Witnessing atrocities inflicted on someone else can be deeply traumatizing and cause the same kind of response in the psyche as a direct experience, and this is called 'vicarious trauma'.[27] 'Perpetrator trauma' adds to this the dimension of guilt. 'Postmemory', on the other hand, is not witnessed in person. The term denotes how a traumatic event of a previous generation is still capable of influencing the decendants at an individual level, and moreover, the society at large.[28] Marianne Hirsch, who coined the term, explains:

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20 Yosef, 2011, p. 13.
21 Kaplan, 2005, p. 36.
22 Janet Walker, *Trauma Cinema: Documenting Incest and the Holocaust*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 2005 p. 17; p. 19.
23 Yosef, 2011, p. 11.
24 Janet Walker, "Trauma Cinema: False Memories and True Experience" in *Screen*, Summer 2001, vol.42, pp. 211–216.
25 Khatib, 2008, p. 178.
26 Yosef, 2011, p. 8.
27 Yosef, 2011, p. 13; Kaplan, 2005, p. 40.
28 Yosef, 2011, p.14.

> ‘Postmemory’ describes the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.[29]

The mechanisms of trauma can appear also at the level of collective or national consciousness, where it plays out in a similar way. “The impact of past crimes in a nation-state may evidence itself in the form of cultural ‘symptoms’ analogous to those in individuals”.[30] However, in this case, there are degrees of forgetting, not always equivalent to an individual’s experience of repression or amnesia. Some painful parts of history are avoided rather than completely forgotten, for instance the facts may be known but the trauma not recognized.[31] Kaplan elaborates: “[T]he phenomena of ‘forgetting’ are not always innocent, for political interests generally enter into process of national memory or non-memory, as the case may be”.[32]

## Trauma cinema

Dramatic events within a nation are naturally to be reflected in its cinema. The authors of *Palestinian Cinema – Landscape, Trauma, and Memory* put forward four periods of cinema which directly relate to the Nakba (‘the disaster’) of 1948, the Arab defeat in the 1967 war against Israel and the two intifadas.[33] Ella Shohat does not strictly divide such periods in Israeli cinema even if she acknowledges changes with the declaration of independence in 1948, and the above-mentioned 1967 war, both of course mirroring the developments in Palestine.[34] At the time of the first Israel/Lebanon war in 1982 there was an ‘individual turn’ in Israeli cinema, where the situation was questioned through personal narratives.[35] After the second intifada 2006 yet another wave emerged, one that concerns itself with perpetrator trauma – representing the Israeli as a perpetrator of atrocities.[36] A couple of years earlier a new tendency in Palestinian films was to focus more on internal issues and tensions, consigning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the background.[37] Lina Khatib does not suggest any periods in her *Lebanese Cinema – Imagining the Civil War and Beyond,* but it is clear from her centeredness on the Civil War that the only categorization that

29 http://www.postmemory.net/ (retrieved on 11 December 2014).
30 Kaplan, 2005, p. 68.
31 Yosef, 2011, p. 7.
32 Kaplan, 2005, p. 68.
33 Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, pp. 11–12.
34 Shohat, 2010.
35 Shohat, 2010, pp. 215–217.
36 Raya Morag, “Perpetrator Trauma and Current Israeli Documentary Cinema”, in *Camera Obscura*, 2012, 27(2), p. 94.
37 Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 197.

matters in the Lebanese context is pre- or post the outbreak of the Civil War in 1982. In Syrian cinema changes in the themes and expressions can be noted at the independence from the French Mandate in 1946, with the repression by the dictatorship starting in the 1960s, with the loss of the Golan to Israel in 1967 and finally with the escalation of events that commenced the Civil War in 2011. These are not the only events inducing changes in the respective cinemas, but the impact is evident. All four national cinemas can indeed be viewed as traditions of trauma cinema.

When national traumas are not expressed and taken care of, cinema often functions as a site of negotiation of memories: "Cinema can provide the holding necessary for intense experiences in a similar fashion to therapy, making such experiences more accessible and more bearable".[38] Khatib gives one example: "[T]he importance of Lebanese cinema in the context of the Civil War is that the cinema can be looked at as a memory project giving voice to a silenced past"[39] Thus cinema is both a means of filmmakers to tell the untold stories and experiences, and a means of an audience to engage with them.

Janet Walker defines 'trauma cinema' as "a group of films, drawn from various genres, modes and national cinemas, each of which deals with world-shattering events […] in a non-realist style that figures the traumatic past as meaningful, fragmentary, virtually unspeakable, and striated with fantasy constructions".[40] Khatib elaborates on this: "Lebanese cinema complicates this definition by not exclusively drawing on non-realist styles of representation. However, even through realism, Lebanese cinema is not concerned with representing truth".[41] This, I find is a major point and mirrors the way traumatic memory is constructed. It is also true for all of the films discussed in this essay. While only some use elements of fantasy, none of them claim to be representations of truth. Instead they communicate the experience of trauma, how it was *felt,* and provide a space of negotiation. Yosef observes that in Israeli cinema, collective traumas tend to be presented as personal memories.[42] It is a valid point also for Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian trauma films. Even if only expressing one facet of the whole, the personal story serves as a representation of the collective experience.

Returning to the concept of latency, it often takes quite a long time for a traumatic event to resurface in cinematic form. Films tend to come in waves several years after the initial events. For example, the three Israeli feature films I will discuss all deal with the Israel/Lebanon war of 1982. Suddenly, after a little less than three decades, several works which allude to the same traumatic

38 Christopher Hauke & Ian Alister, "Introduction" in Hauke, Christopher & Alister, Ian (eds.), *Jung & Film – Post-Jungian Takes on the Moving Image*, Hove, East Sussex, and Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge 2001, p. 2.
39 Khatib, 2008, p. 179.
40 Janet Walker, "The Traumatic Paradox: Autobiographical Documentary and the Psychology of Memory" in Hodgkin, Katherine & Radstone, Susannah (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, London: Routledge 2003, p. 109.
41 Khatib, 2008, p. 178.
42 Yosef, 2011, p. 5.

event emerge. Likely, this wave was in part triggered by the new war with Lebanon in the summer of 2006, and may be an invitation to watch these stories as comments to the new events unfolding. Following Morag, it is even more accurate to view the emergence of these films as displaced narratives of the occupation of the Palestinian Territories, which are repressed narratives in the Israeli society of today.[43] In other words, it is a repressed perpetrator trauma that seeks expression.

Khatib states that "The [Lebanese] films' focus on the war can […] be seen as an illustration of its presence as a persistent trauma".[44] This holds valid for all the national contexts discussed. Trauma cinema as a genre will likely perpetuate itself, too, until the traumas are fully worked through in the society.

## National myths – national traumas

In everyday language the word 'myth' most often implies something that is not true at all. In the context of semiotics, however, it expresses what people believe to be most true. Roland Barthes describes two levels of signs: 'denotation', which is the descriptive level, and 'connotation', the symbolic level. The connotative level which includes cultural themes, concepts and meanings, is the level of 'myth'.[45] It defines the boundaries of what is acceptable and relevant when it comes to social practices and knowledge production within a culture or society, and makes up an intangible meta-language that possesses the ability to create the entire value system of a society.[46] Thus it equals a society's dominant discourse, and in the following text I will refer to it as 'national myth'. It presents itself as an overarching truth, and gradually becomes culturally transparent and 'normal'.[47] We need to remember, however, that it is not necessarily truth per se. We need also to remember that national, or public myths as referred to in this case, are "mechanisms of maintaining unity and cohesion in a nation at a time of crisis" and thus serve a purpose.[48] Challenges to the national myth are likely to be questioned and criticized by those who hold the myth to be true. The national myth may seem definite, but like all cultural expressions it is subjected to an ongoing negotiation within the society, as Barthes writes, "myth is historical".[49]

If the national myth is the way the nation would like to see or present itself, its 'persona',[50] the unsolved national or collective traumas dwell in the negative space of the national myth, and is typically that which is *not* talked about. As we have seen above, there can be awareness or not of

43 Morag, 2012, p. 94.
44 Khatib, 2008, p. 178.
45 Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, London: Cape Editions 1967, pp. 91–92.
46 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1972, p. 114.
47 Barthes, 1972, pp. 128–129.
48 Khatib, 2008. p. 155.
49 Barthes, 1972, p. 119.
50 In the psychology of C.G. Jung: "the mask or façade presented to satisfy the demands of the situation or the environment and not representing the inner personality of the individual; the public personality". http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/PERSONA (retrieved on 10 December, 2014).

the collective trauma, but as long as it is silenced and/or not worked through, its haunting power remains. Usually though, after a latency period, the experience resurfaces and the society is more ready to negotiate both its origins and its implications.

A number of national myths and traumas as well as reasons for stigmatization (the price for not following the social norm, or the mythical status quo) are outlined next.[51] Some are assembled from the primary and secondary sources, some are my own observations from travels or other cultural encounters. The account is by no means comprehensive, but still gives a departure for the further discussion.[52]

While the 'victim rhetoric' establishing the Jewish people as constant victims of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, is prevalent in Israel,[53] the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust survivors were largely silenced with the building of the new state:

> Zionist society, dominated by the myth of a new brave warrior Jew, was not prepared to incorporate the personal stories of Holocaust survivors. […] The survivors were required to fall in line with the unified and redemptive national narrative, which demanded that they erase their Diasporic identity and become part of the combat Zionist collective, and that their lives demonstrate the transition from annihilation to redemption in the State of Israel.[54]

This muted past is of course very contradictory considering the mantra surrounding the Holocaust; 'We must never forget'. This is but one example of how national memory can be very selective and may harbour inherently contradictory elements. The uncompromising warrior identity stems from a deep-rooted fear of the powerlessness experienced during the Shoah and an obsession with not repeating the trauma.[55] During that time also a collective fear of siege was formed, as a response to the traumatic experiences from the ghettos in Europe.[56] Functioning as a psychological safety-net, there is a policy in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) that no soldier, living or dead, will ever be left in the battlefield. This of course relates to the fear of siege theme, and soldiers take refuge in that they can count on their fellow comrades. The stigmatization is heavy to someone who lets his brothers (or sisters, for that matter) down.

Even if Zionism is a secular movement, it is deeply imbued with Biblical myths and symbolism. Anat Zanger goes into depth with the theme of annihilation and redemption found in

51 Note that these are not explicitly linked to film.
52 Here and in the following, as much as possible and as long as it serves the discussion, I present the nations in alphabetical order to avoid any interpretation of political bias.
53 Morag, 2012, p. 97.
54 Yosef, 2011, pp. 7–8.
55 Shohat, 2010, pp. 36–37.
56 Shohat, 2010, p. 87.

Yosef's quote above, which is commonly described as the 'binding myth'. It originates in the story about Abraham being summoned by God to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac as an act of faith. This motif has transformed throughout history – and Zanger writes: "The story […] has been identified as one of the central codes through which Israeli society communicates with itself".[57] She explains its implications: "Zionism, like God, promised the land to the people and demands the sacrifice of its sons".[58] Shohat describes how the death of individual soldiers is mythically compensated through the continued life of the nation.[59] Sacrifice is in this way perceived as a prerequisite for the existence of the nation, which for example is reflected in that those who have not served in the army experience a stark stigmatization in society.

Lastly, a common image is that of the humane soldier that 'shoots and weeps', a phrase that was coined during the first Israel/Lebanon war.[60] A Jewish soldier values life above all, and to defend life it is sometimes required to kill, which is another inherently contradictory justification.

The main national myth in Lebanon seems to be the unity of the nation itself – Lina Khatib questions it throughout her book on Lebanese cinema. She insists that there is really no sense of a nation, the only national memory and identity being connected to the war.[61] She also states: "One of the most prominent public myths in Lebanon during and after the Civil War is the idea of the war being that of 'others on our land'" due to the country's strategic geographical and political place.[62] In portraying itself as a victim, Lebanon as a nation and the different groups therein can continue to escape their part of responsibility.[63] Sam Lahoud, one of the producers of the film *Void* (Christelle Ighniades, Jad Beyrouthy, Maria Abdel Karim, Naji Bechara, Salim Haber, Tarek Korkomaz and Zeina Makki, Lebanon, 2013), points out that politicians in the Lebanese parliament – still to a large extent the very same militia people that seized power after the war – are virtually uninterested in reassessing the past, because if they do they will have to face responsibility themselves.[64] Khatib further notes that anything that is considered politically sensitive is silenced because it threatens to challenge the still very volatile society. [65]

Beirut is at the heart of the wound from the Civil War. According to the official story Beirut is a reconstructed city, but in reality it still harbours the scars of a war torn reality.[66] Further, there is

57 Anat Zanger, "Hole in the Moon or Zionism and the Binding (Ha-Ak'eda) Myth in Israeli Cinema", in: *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*. Vol. 22 Issue 1. 2003, p. 96.
58 Zanger, 2003, p. 95.
59 Shohat, 2010, p. 55.
60 Yosef, 2011, p. 148.
61 Khatib, 2008, – first mentioned on p. xvii and continues in depth on pp. 5–17.
62 Khatib, 2008, p. 155.
63 Ibid.
64 Q&A at the Malmö Arab Film Festival tour in Norrköping 24 November, 2014.
65 Khatib, 2008, p. 157.
66 Khatib 2008, p. 60–61; p 7.

generally a compact silence about the South of Lebanon, where much of the conflict took place and possibly the worst atrocities were committed.[67]

The trauma of exile and displacement weighs heavily, as many people were forced to either leave the country or to relocate.[68] Associated with this, there is often a sense of not belonging. About 17,000 people are still missing since the war, and it is indeed an open wound, especially since the authorities refuse to deal with it.[69] If someone does not stay true to commitments to those who disappeared during the conflict, they are very likely to be socially stigmatized.

Palestine continually defines itself against the Israeli narrative, telling a reverse story. The loss of land following the Nakba is seen as the grand national trauma, that also comes with the trauma of exile and displacement.[70] With it comes the shame of not being able to defend the land. According to the national myth, this needs to be amended through an aggressive masculinity, the fight of the 'fedayeen'.[71] The contradiction between the images of the Palestinian victim and the freedom fighter is a reflection of the Diasporic Jew versus the image of the Israeli warrior.

The view that the occupation has created an impossible sitiation where there is no choice but violent resistance, is prevalent. In a similar way as in the Israeli binding myth, the sacrifice of life in the name of resistance is redeemed by the honour to die as a martyr and by keeping the national struggle alive. There is a deep stigmatization of anyone who is collaborating with the enemy, even if that also may be a no-choice situation. Stigma and guilt also accompany those who leave the country and leave the people behind.

Finally, there is a sense of claustrophobia and fear of confined space as the available space shrinks due to Israeli security measures.

In Syria the loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in 1967, and the constant opposition between the countries thereafter, has been used to legitimize terror, also in the own country.[72] There is a profound grief over a seized country, and what the government has done to its own people, for example in Hama.[73]The population often percieve themselves as passive victims of a situation of deep hopelessness.[74] Focusing on grand narratives, especially military ones, the regime has been excluding the stories of the people and their suffering from the national narrative.[75]

All the nations face an overarching pressure of being in war or at constant risk of war. They have endured layer upon layer of traumatization, from personal tragedies to national ones. People

67 Khatib, 2008, p.171–172.
68 Khatib, 2008, p. 69–73.
69 Sam Lahoud, Q&A at the Malmö Arab Film Festival tour in Norrköping 24 November, 2014.
70 Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, pp. 1–3; p. 8.
71 Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 59.
72 Salti, 2006, p. 35.
73 Salti, 2006, p. 36.
74 Lawrence Wright, "Disillusioned", in Salti, Rasha (ed.), *Insights into Syrian Cinema: Essays and Conversations with Contemporary Filmmakers*, New York: Rattapallax Press 2006, p. 63.
75 Salti, 2006, p. 33; pp. 37–38.

living in such cultures may experience guilt for surviving what others had to die for. Also, the perceived enemy tends to be demonized, polarizing into an 'us-versus-them mentality'. Consequently, wishing to engage with the Other in any way easily stirs controversy.

## Emotions and ethics – audiences' response to film

Cinema itself is a medium of images that functions more or less like a psyche in projection. Hauke and Alister write that "[p]owerful images are the natural language of the subconscious, and […] emotion is the chief source of consciousness. The ego immersed in the experience of a film can be moved at a level below that of conscious attitudes".[76] Plantinga adds: "The ability of narrative films to elicit sympathies, antipathies, allegiances, and other responses to fictional characters is a key element in their aesthetic success, and in their moral and ideological impact".[77] Throughout our everyday lives we use intuitive judgement to guide our decisions, and we use it to organize our impressions while watching a film, especially regarding the characters. Intuitive judgement is a swift emotional response that has been proven to precede moral reasoning – revealing that our judgement to a large extent is based on emotions rather than morals. This makes moving image audiences especially susceptible to emotional manipulation.[78]

There is an array of tools for inducing certain emotions in the viewers, in order to manipulate them to respond in certain ways. Carroll describes this as films have a 'prefocus' that directs the attention to what the director wants people to see and feel.[79] Character engagement is the prime tool for this purpose.[80] Carroll states that "[b]y designing protagonists who are morally appealing, the moviemaker purchases the criterial wherewithal necessary to elicit the pro-attitudes required to underwire the audience's moral responses to the story".[81] Plantinga distinguishes this empathy in 'sympathy' and 'allegiance'.[82] When there is the attitude of sympathy, we feel concern for a character because we believe that they are suffering or treated unfairly. An allegiance goes even deeper, usually it involves the sympathy, but is likely to be governed also by moral judgement. Once we have forged an allegiance with a character, we can even tolerate that they to some extent behave contrary to our moral beliefs.[83]

76 Hauke & Alister, 2001, p. 11.
77 Carl Plantinga, "Moral Judgement and Attitudes toward Fictional Characters" in French, Peter A., Wettstein, Howard K. & Saint, Michelle (eds.), *Film and the Emotions (Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XXXIV)*, Boston and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2010, p. 34.
78 Plantinga, 2010, pp. 46–47.
79 Noël Carroll, "Movies, the Moral Emotions and Sympathy" in French, Peter A., Wettstein, Howard, K. & Saint, Michelle (eds.), *Film and the Emotions (Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume XXXIV)*, Boston and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2010, p. 5.
80 Plantinga, 2010, p. 34.
81 Carroll, 2010, p. 17.
82 Plantinga, 2010, p. 43.
83 Ibid.

Other cinematic tools such as camera placement or movement, cutting, focus, bracketing, point-of-view-shots, close-ups of facial expressions, movements and postures all help to direct our attention in certain ways.[84] Music also has a great emotive power and is of course widely used,[85] I will however not explore this relation more in the analysis.

Kaplan conveys that the very experience of watching trauma cinema is a form of vicarious trauma, which is indeed a way to influence audiences through emotions.[86] She notes that the pain we feel is evoked by empathy and an interaction with our own previous traumatic experiences.[87]

In her famous work *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which discusses war photography, Susan Sontag argues that we can never understand the Other's pain.[88] I object to this in principle. While the specific situation of suffering is always an individual experience, I argue that since witnessing alone is able to cause a vicarious trauma, coupled with the human ability to feel empathy (not only sympathy), we can come very near to understanding the pain of the Other. Indeed we cannot understand the context or the specific details, but we can understand the pain. Jung would also say that these very difficult experiences are part of the collective unconscious, an innate disposition in every human being of understanding basic human behaviour and situations.[89] Witnessing the Other's pain and suffering carries an ethical dimension in that it calls for action.

84 Carroll, 2010, p. 6.
85 Plantinga, 2010, p. 48.
86 Kaplan, 2005, p. 87.
87 Kaplan, 2005, p. 90.
88 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin; London, New York, Camberwell, Toronto, New Delhi, Auckland and Rosebank 2004, p. 113.
89 http://carl-jung.net/collective_unconscious.html (retrieved 2 January 2015).

## Analysis – internal politics

Here the films are discussed through the theory laid out in previous chapters, stressing what I perceive to be the most significant aspects for each piece of work. Each film is introduced by a short presentation. The films are organized first alphabetically by nation, then chronologically within the national cinema. In case two films were released the same year, feature films precede short films, else they come in alphabetical order. When all films of one national cinema are presented, I discuss these together. In the chapter 'Further discussion' I eventually discuss them all together.

Israeli films

*Beaufort* (Reshef Levi, Israel, 2007) is set at the time of the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. A small unit led by the young commander Liraz has the mission to hold the mountain outpost of Beaufort until their evacuation, and then to blow it up.[90] The film depicts the anxious soldiers as they struggle to survive the last days of the mission. With casualties and individual breakdowns, the surface of the operation is cracking from utter meaninglessness. Isolated in the foggy maze of the outpost while waiting for an order to leave, they feel abandoned by the army and the nation. It is becoming increasingly difficult to keep the mythical beliefs intact, and one by one the soldiers start to question why they are at all fighting.

For Raz Yosef, the film is primarily about the trauma of abandonment by a father figure and the nation, and the story is of course a variation of the binding myth.[91] The language reportedly adds to the theme of father/son/children – Yosef writes that Liraz for instance is referring to his soldiers as 'his children'.[92] Most of this is lost in the Swedish translation, which diminishes its significance upon viewing and makes it more difficult to interpret for someone who is not familiar with this central theme of Judaism. The essence of questioning of the binding myth – to dispute the necessity of sacrifice and death – should however be apparent to anyone.

Liraz has a rebellious need to prove himself, and he doesn't like to take orders from his superiors. He is unbalanced due to inner tensions and possessed with the heroic narrative of the past, refusing alternative versions of history. He comes across as inept and unable to take wise decisions. Liraz can be interpreted as a metaphor of Israel, not taking responsibility for 'his children'. Towards the end, Liraz confesses his weaknesses and admits to Koris, the paramedic of the unit, that they had indeed deserved a better commander. When they have left Beaufort and reach the homeland, Liraz falls to the ground and finally allows himself to weep.

90 Beaufort was a fort from the age of the Crusades. Situated inside Lebanon, it was controlled by Israel since 1982 following a controversial battle that involved many losses.
91 Yosef, 2011, pp. 28–40.
92 Yosef, 2011, p. 32.

Koris on the other hand is in touch with his overwhelming feelings of loss, yet is courageous and does 'the right things' such as rescuing the wounded Oshri (Liraz's second-in-command) from missile fire when Liraz is paralyzed by the situation The same happens to Liraz when other soldiers die on different 'pointless' occasions. Koris questions the situation and tries to see other ways forward, for example to escape the mined fortress when the final evacuation is delayed, even if this will be seen as a defeat in the eyes of the enemy. He functions as a national conscience, instinctively knowing what is the most sensible and humane thing to do. Following Carroll's reasoning above, we are nudged toward taking Koris's perspective because he is morally good.

*Waltz with Bashir* is an autobiographical story of recovering a traumatic memory. Boaz comes to talk with his friend Ari (the director) about a recurring nightmare. Boaz dreams that 26 dogs are haunting him through the streets of Tel Aviv. These were the dogs that his commander had him shoot during the Israel/Lebanon war in 1982, because he could not make himself shoot at people. His traumatic memory of the event comes to haunt him every night. This story ignites Ari's own inquiry about what happened – he cannot remember anything but a sequence where he is swimming naked in the sea outside Beirut. In order to recover the traumatic memory he starts to interview his friends who were there, doing military service at the same time. He also gets help from a psychiatrist specializing in PTSD. Surrealistic images start to come back in the form of disremembered fragments, one where he travels with a huge fantasy sea woman along the coast.

The film adresses the events of the refugee camps Sabra and Shatila, which have been erased from the Israeli national collective memory.[93] While the narrative enlightens the mechanisms of trauma and traumatic memory, Ari fails to take his ethical responsibility once he has recovered the memory from the day of the massacres. He relates the trauma to the postmemory of his father who was a Holocaust survivor, which is not erroneous in itself, but he identifies too much with the victim role, and is unable to look above his own horizon.

The most striking feature about the film is the visual language. It is said to be an animated documentary and makes a tremendous impact once the memory comes back in real shape. We readily adopt Ari's perspective of the story because he has the willingness to find out the truth, and because it is exciting to come along on the quest to find the missing pieces of the puzzle.

*Lebanon: The Soldier's Journey* (Shmuel Maoz, Israel, 2009) is also told from the director's perspective and experiences.[94] It takes place on the first day of the Israel/Lebanon war in June 1982. We follow Shmulik and three other soldiers inside a tank following a paratrooper unit on enemy ground. They are sent out on a follow-up mission after an air force strike that should be an 'easy assignment', but things go very wrong as they move through civilian space where they eventually

93 Yosef, 2011, p. 1.

94 Since both this film and the country of Lebanon are subjects of this essay, I will use the UK title *Lebanon – the Soldier's Journey* when talking about the film.

get lost. Shmulik is the gunner, but he has only been shooting at barrels before. We perceive his inner torment from his wide opened eyes, his sweat and trembling hands as he is pushed to shoot. He fails to shoot in time at the first critical encounter with the enemy, so the terrorists escape and instead the Israeli unit loses one of their soldiers. Shmulik is torn between his resistance of shooting to kill and the feelings of immense guilt that it was likely because of his delay that they lost their fellow soldier. He finds it too much to take responsibility for and screams to Asi, the tank commander, to share the burden of killing.

The experience is intense, as the whole film is staged inside the tank. Everything we can see of the outside is viewed throuth the gun sight. It gives a claustrophobic setting, and this bracketing is a very effective means of prefocusing the narrative, as we cannot escape the brutal scenes and the beridden soldiers. It can also be associated to the fear of siege theme, with the isolation and hostile forces all around. The fear of being lost and trapped allude to this as well.

The tank itself may stand as a metaphor for Israel. The inside gets more and more filthy from oil, cigarettes, dirt, blood and scattered croutons from the army supplies. Inner national conflict is represented by the soldiers' constant disagreements, and at one point the tank almost ceases to work. There is a 'repressed desire' to engage with the Syrian hostage who is chained inside, as we perceive a sexual attraction between Shmulik and the Syrian in the undignified and vulnerable situation when the prisoner needs to pee. Following Morag's argument of a displaced story, the prisoner can be said to symbolize the repressed Palestinian people, and engaging with him would be a relief to both.

The dream of the feminine is very present. The soldiers recall their mothers at home, the camera pans a pin-up girl image inside the tank, Shmulik even lingers on a young Lebanese mother whom he has just deprived of her five year old daughter and family while she is staggering about in the debris in a torn dress that exposes her body. Yigal, the driver, tells a story of how he was comforted by his teacher at school when his father died, how he felt her breast and the scent of her body and got aroused. This is the only story that can unite the four soldiers.

Through being inside the tank with them, seeing everything that they see and the close-ups of their beridden faces, we can understand them. We can feel sympathy with them because we experience the insanity of the situation ourselves. The film asks us to understand the Israeli situation and the immense pressure on the soldiers to do what they do.

The short art video film *Pillar Cloud* (Maya Geller, Israel/Germany, 2013) was named after the Israeli operation in Gaza of late 2012.[95] It is a conceptual piece of work where four dancers inside an abandoned apartment were asked to improvise movements to the traumatizing sound of sirens. Initially, a voice explains what to do when an alarm goes off. Everyone is doing everyday

95 The name has a biblical reference also: according to the Torah, a pillar of cloud is a manifestation of the presence of God. *Pillar Cloud* http://euromedaudiovisuel.net/p.aspx?mid=103&l=en&did=1345 (retrieved 9 September 2014).

things like eating an apple or sorting some clothes in a relaxed way. As the sound of sirens goes off they get locked inside their experience, where the movements turn manic and rigid as they perform meaningless and repetitive actions to create a sense of order out of their inner chaos. For people in Israel the sound of sirens is indeed a sound representing all previous layers of trauma, and a language connecting past and present that everyone understands.

The films all deal with their traumas and tensions in isolation. Yosef criticizes the three feature films for being distant to the The Other, offering no reconciliation.[96] While it is true, I think it is also to some extent unfair as it is not where the society is in its trauma process at this time. There is still much internal trauma to 'work through', and the Israeli psyche is generally not ready for a reconciliation phase. But both *Waltz with Bashir* and *Lebanon: The Soldier's Journey* actually do acknowledge the trauma and deep loss of the Other, even if they fail to take ethical action. The films do make clear that they do not want to take part in committing any more atrocities or to add new layers of trauma to their already troubled existence. Having said that, I agree with Yosef when he states that portraying soldiers as victims is problematic.[97] The audience's sympathy with their suffering may take away their responsibility.

Lebanese films

In the film *Zozo* (Josef Fares, Sweden/Czech Republic/UK/Netherlands/Denmark, 2005), Zozo is the youngest boy in a middle-class family in Beirut. Even with the ongoing war, his everyday life in the neighborhood is quite normal. The family is waiting to emigrate to Sweden where the grandparents are, but suddenly their house is bombed and Zozo is the only one to survive. He decides to go to the airport alone, and succeeds with the help of a girl and a conscient militia man.

Naturally, he is very traumatized by the events. Dreams and fantasy are interwoven with reality in a process of 'disremembrance' and negotiation of the past. His imagination is just as real as reality, something which Haugbolle calls 'magic realism'.[98] The chicken Zozo takes care of while in Lebanon can talk, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The chicken functions as a repository for Zozo's thoughts, and is someone who can understand what he has been through. Reality in Sweden is very different. The dove in the Swedish schoolyard does not respond. His grandparents on behalf of the grandfather have also taken the 'rational' decision not to talk about what happened, believing they help him concentrate on building a new future. Zozo has no longer anyone with whom he can talk about his trauma. However, with a newfound friend he finds an emotional level of understanding because this boy has an abusive father and has also experienced

96 Yosef, 2011, p. 142.
97 Yosef, 2011, p. 148.
98 Sune Haugbolle, "Emotional Archives and the Lebanese Migrant Experience – An Analysis of the Feature Film Zozo" in Eksell, Kerstin & Guth, Stephan (eds.), *Borders and Beyond – Crossings and Transitions in Modern Arabic Literature*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2011, p. 55.

difficulties. This is the only solace he (and the audience) gets.

The most heartbreaking theme in *Zozo* is his immense longing for his mother and his wish that she will return. She is the past, she is Lebanon and she is a longing for a peaceful reality. I find that one of the main messages of the film is the importance of acknowledging trauma and to actually talk about it.

*Incendies* is fabricated as an unfolding detective story. Following their mother Nawal's will, the twins Jeanne and Simon are asked to find their brother and their father, and give them each a letter. Hitherto they thought the father was dead, and they did not know of a brother. Jeanne travels to the Middle East and Simon reluctantly joins her after some time. The geography is fictitious, the named cities and villages do not exist, but the connection to Lebanon is undebatable. The story is unusual in that it is is representing the south of the country.

Piece by piece, the story of Nawal's life unfolds, presenting a series of severe traumas from war and those originating in social stigmatization of a repressive society. The traumas are reflecting all the wrongdoings the Lebanese people have had to endure. As we witness the disturbing episodes she goes through, we suffer with her. We see the depth of her empty eyes many times, her torn face. We see her tears, her screams and her anguish. Even if we cannot fathom all the traumas she suffers, we feel the pain from a vicarious trauma experience. The beloved son and the detested father, the notorious torturer Abou Tarek, proves to be one and the same person, showing that everyone may be a victim, and everyone may be a perpetrator depending on life circumstances.

The last will of Nawal Marwan is to end the chains of hatred, and the end does offer a reconciliation as the twins find out their mother's fate, and the son/father is given the letters. Also he is struck by the truth, and he goes to visit the mother's grave. Through Jeanne's wish to understand the mystery of the mother, and her openness to the painful truth, it is possible somehow to heal the past.

*Void* tells the stories of six women who are missing someone since the war – a brother, a son, a husband, a father or a lover. It is the day before a manifestation outside the parliament where they will demand the authorities to give them information of what happened to their missed beloveds. Each story shows how they, each in their own way, are unable to live in the present and to have meaningful relationships because they are stuck in the past. The present is represented by their (current) men and lovers, who urge the women to be here and now with them and to leave the past behind. In the end we find that their stories are interwoven – they are all missing the same person. This makes a point – if one missing person can affect so many, one can understand the dimensions of 17,000 people missing. *Void* is addressing the need to reassess the past, urging authorities to take their responsibility in order to release this deep collective trauma.

In *Troubled Waters*, Iskandar returns to Lebanon after 27 years in exile. He has built a new life in Canada, but has returned to find his father and to ask him to come with him and his family. We follow him as he goes through angst before the meeting. He is haunted by memories and voices of the past that impose themselves on the present. The experience is as if we were inside his head hearing his thoughts and the sounds of past memories. It can be understood that the relation to the father was not unproblematic. Iskandar tells the father that he did not come to blame, but the father is unable to face a reconciliation with his son or with the past, so he tragically kills himself. The film negotiates the near impossible encounter between a traumatic past and the present, and yet the necessity of making them meet.

As we have seen above *Transit Game* juxtaposes the painful experiences of refugees of different origin. Despite their tragic situations, a hope for the future is kindled with their connection and them helping each other. It proves that there is warmth and care to be found between people, no matter who they are.

The Lebanese films do not deviate so much from the myths, but they are actually offering reconciliation and therefore real hope for a new future. Some of the narratives are still bound to the chains of the past, but there is a tangible effort of wanting to make peace with what was and what is.

Palestinian films

In *Paradise Now* (Hany Abu-Assad, Netherlands/Palestine/Israel/Germany/France, 2005) we meet the friends Said and Khaled, who work at a car mechanic workshop. Suha, the daughter of a well-known martyr, goes there with her old car and attracts their attention, and she is not unaffected by Said. The friends are then selected for a suicide mission inside Israel by an underground organization, and are allowed one evening with their families without saying goodbye. Late at night Said also visits Suha.

The story problematizes the act of suicide bombings by exploring the choices through the psychology of the characters. The ‘female’ perspective of other methods than violence is put forward through Suha who questions the price of martyrdom, saying she would rather have her father alive. As they prepare for the mission, Said and Khaled go through oscillating stages of conviction and doubt. We perceive their hesitation and inner reasoning part form the dialogue, part from lingering shots of their faces and their movements. Both have trouble to be convincing when they record the jihad videos where they explain their cause and bid farewell to their families. In the scene, the camera is not functioning during Khaled’s speech so he has to do it all over again. By ridiculing this moment, Abu-Assad challenges the martyr myth.

Something goes wrong on their first attempt to enter Israel. They lose each other and are left to their own choices. We see Said at a bus stop, hesitating to enter a bus with civilians, and he

decides not to. Back with the organization, the friends have to be 'tested' to see if they are still trustworthy for a second attempt. Said is haunted by the postmemory of his father being a collaborator with the Israelis. He explains his willingness to carry out the mission so that he can redeem himself from the past stigma by this 'heroic act'. Once his decision is made, he takes on an emotional armor through which it is impossible to reach him. He becomes hard, unreasonable and sarcastic, quite different from the character we have learnt to know so far. When death comes close to reality, Khaled realizes life is more precious to him. He decides he is ready to listen to Suha's perspective and abandons the mission. Said first agrees to come with him, but then leaves in a dramatic turn. In the end we see Khaled screaming and crying in agony, and we see both Suha and Said's mother suffering quietly.

Both Said's and Khaled's characters evoke our sympathy, and even if the film leans towards the choice of life above death and violence, it seeks to make us understand the reasons behind the two options.

*Omar* is a later film by the same director, where the main character is a real sweetheart. He is a young baker who works hard so that he can build a future with his girlfriend Nadia, whom he is madly in love with. To see her, he climbs the separation wall day after day while risking being shot. He is brave, charming and honest, and has good relations with both friends and family. Omar is however also part of a resistance movement together with his friends Amjad and Tarek, Nadia's brother. One evening they shoot at an Israeli military area, killing one soldier. Both Amjad and Omar are caught by the Israeli security and forced to become informers. This leads them down a spiral of betrayals eventually destroying all their relations and everything valuable in their lives.

The audience easily forges an allegiance with Omar, because he makes an effort doing everything right in his private life, and not least because of the love story at the center of the plot. He is also brutally treated in Israeli prison and we can feel empathy because of his suffering. Even if we may not say that he is doing the right thing when he shoots the Mossad agent whom by national default has forever destroyed his life, we understand that it is the impossibility of the situation forcing him, that there is no other choice. I find it quite remarkable that *Omar* seems more rigid in its viewpoint on the no-choice situation than Abu-Assad's previous film *Paradise Now.*

With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict setting the frames, the film is simultaneously exposing social tensions within the Palestinian society, such as the honour-culture and the human corruption (which the occupation is, perhaps righteously, blamed for) and the stigma of collaboration.

*Though I Know the River is Dry* (Omar Robert Hamilton, Egypt/Palestine/Qatar/UK, 2013) tells of a man on his way back home to Palestine. He left his family to work in America because he wanted to give his newborn son a better future. His mother blamed him for his choice already before he left, now she has urged him to return because his brother died in some incident with the

Israelis. We hear his thoughts through the way back, cross-cut with memories of the people he left and with footage of the Palestinian national struggle. While it is an open critique of the occupation – with images of road-blocks, fences, the wall and the checkpoints, and the 'freedom from choice' that it has caused – the film also addresses internal tension in the society, especially the stigma and guilt of leaving and choosing to live in exile.

The Palestinian films seems to be breaking a previous hero-villain dichotomy and portray more complex characters than before, even the Mossad agent gets a chance to be human. We are given a backgound to why the Palestinian characters take the actions that they do and martyrdom is challenged. Even if the occupation is definitely seen as the major cause of everything that is wrong, there is a wilingness to address the issues within the own culture, and maybe also to see new ways of approaching the deadlocked situation.

Syrian films

*Ladder to Damascus* is a poetic drama telling of the female protagonist Ghalia, possessed by the spirit of a girl named Zeina who died on the same day as Ghalia was born. Full of dreams for the future, she moves to Damascus to study acting and to understand her duality. Fouad, who studies filmmaking, is deeply fascinated by her, and finds her a room in the Damascene house where he resides together with other students of Syrian and Palestinian origin. The war in the streets is closing in on Ghalia's and Fouad's potential love story, and their friends in the house are shaken and psychologically torn from personal experiences of the conflict and struggle to keep insanity at bay. Fouad's film experiment is too much to bear for one of the Palestinian students, who shouts at Fouad to stop the film, in a vain attempt to make the unreal reality outside cease.

Ghalia and Zeina seem to symbolize the past and the future of Syria. Fouad is above all obsessed with her past, the ghost of Zeina. However, as the reality of the students' sanctuary home is falling apart they are all forced into the immediacy of the present.

In *Passing* (Amr Kokash and Ghiath Alhaddad, Syria, 2013), a boy sits on a swing moving back and forth over black and white photographs of happy people, now lost to the conflict. The swing is squeaking and there is a distorted nursery melody and sounds of children. The scene is cross-cut with news footage and overlaying sounds and images that create a chaos. Random images occur of dreamy images of northern lights, bombings, animals being killed and Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1940) proclaiming 'Let us fight for a new world!'. We hear screams, babies' cries, news reporters and an increasing rhythm of music that could be something from a computer game. The angles of the boy on the swing become awry. A chicken is cut in the throat and ends up on the floor beneath the boy, struggling for its life. This is cross-cut with the cut of the eyeball in

Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *An Andalusian Dog* (1929). At the end the chaos fades and we see the shadow of a person walking in a forest at night.

*Passing* projects an experience of total chaos and comments on the media overload and the lies people are constantly being told. I interpret the eyeball scene as a comment on the brutal violence that is devoid of any meaning – Buñuel said of his film that it was supposed to be built on ideas and images that could not be explained rationally.[99] The film is screaming from a place of violated innocence.

*God is the Greatest* (Kai Gero Lenke, USA/Germany, 2014) takes place in a war torn city, where a man and his mother are on their way home from buying groceries. On the way she is shot by a sniper. The man runs for shelter and keeps screaming for his mother. A group of fighters come out to shoot back at the sniper. Every time they shoot, they scream 'God is the greatest'. A young man running for shelter tells the man he saw the mother moving and runs forth to take her to a sheltered space. Eventually they find out that she is dead. At the end the young man goes back to the place where the woman was shot, and silently starts to rotate with outstretched arms, demonstrating that life and human dignity are greater than death and violence.

The film is challenging the use of religious vocabulary in the context of fighting and killing. It asks us to reflect on the true meaning of expressions like 'God is the Greatest' and 'Gods will'.

In *Jasmenco* (Wathec Salman, Syria, 2014) three siblings who are professional flamenco dancers visit 'Serawan's house'. They walk about the rubble inside the war torn building and watch the devastation, remembering its grandeur, and the performances they used to give there. The story is juxtaposed with old footage from an actual performance they did there before the conflict. With tearful eyes and determination they decide to dance again despite the (authentic) artillery fire going on outside, as an homage to the arts and as a celebration of life. A tortoise in the rubble symbolizes how life slowly goes on, no matter what happens.

These recent Syrian films generally break with the national myths. While they still portray themselves as victims of horrendous atrocities, they use creativity as a means of resistance, and they no longer see themselves as *passive* victims. They continue to focus on small-scale stories, stories of the people and to refuse all triumphant stories of their oppressors.

The latency for films on the civil war unfolding is very short, which is both interesting and unusual. Here the cinema deals with an ongoing conflict as it happens. Why it is so one can only reflect upon at this stage. Perhaps there is no need to uphold an official version or coherence, since the regime is indeed the opponent, so instead the directors can acknowledge traumatization immediately. The Syrian films are brave acts of witnessing the conflict with open eyes. Both by their narratives and their very existence, they are celebrating life and creativity in the face of death.

99 Luis Buñuel, *My Last* Sigh, translated by Abigail Israel, New York: Knopf 1983.

## Further discussion

In the films there are different means of creating immediacy and distance. Many of the titles blend facts and fiction. *Ladder to Damascus* for instance was recorded in a building in Syria with the actual conflict going on outside.[100] The people in the student home are 'real' people, only a couple of them are actors. Their personal realities and stories are woven into the fictive passages. This knowledge, and the fact that the sounds of shootings are authentic, just as in *Jasmenco*, gives an eerie feeling when watching, and it summons our presence. The dreamy sequenecs of *Ladder to Damascus* distances us on the other hand. A similar thing happens in *Waltz with Bashir*. Based on interviews and a real story, it is presented as an animated documentary, where the animation style is realistic. Morag elaborates on what it implies:

> Its emphasis on the referential quality of the photographic as a type of mirror underneath the animation is an important contributing factor to the indirectness of the complicit perpetrator. Conceptualized through old logic and new appearance, the choice of photo-animation, like the choice of the redemptive narrative structure and the sound of women's cries over the animation, masks the indirect position of the complicit perpetrator with a feeling of closeness to reality — to truthfulness. In fact, however, it fails to commit to an ethical stand toward the truth that has been revealed. [101]

So while it creates a sense of reality and immediacy, it simultaneousy evades responsibility. The same is the case in *Lebanon: The Soldier's Journey.* While we know that the film is based on the director's own experience, there is a disclaimer saying that any similarity with events or people is completely unintentional. The view through the gun sight also gives a prefocused and extremely immediate view, but the tank isolates us from the outside and the Other.

*Incendies*, *Omar* and *Paradise Now* for example, are devoid of specific place and time markers, but we have enough information to understand that *Incendies* is taking place in Lebanon and the time in the Palestinian films is after the building of the separation wall. In creating a distance to reality in the films enable themselves to represent something more universal, something that is a common trait in the Palestinian cinema tradition.[102]

I did not expect to find such a strong common denominator in the films, but it proves that the theme of the feminine is an all pervading theme in all cinemas, either in the most common form of longing for the feminine, or in the form of the suffering of the feminine, where the suffering of the feminine equals the suffering of the nation. *Though I Know the River is Dry* is the only film

100During April to October 2012. Q&A with the director after the screening at MAFF.
101 Morag, 2012, p.104.
102Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 65.

where the mother is a ‘negative’ character, though she is representing a common attitude in the Palestinian society. Like the mother who literally means the world to Zozo, the feminine seems to be holding the world together. I take this theme to be an expression of a longing for a softer reality than the patriarchal paradigms in these cultures can offer for the time being.

## Conclusion

The national cinemas and the films studied reveal where the nations are in their very complex trauma processes. Israeli and Palestinian films at the moment creatively focus on their inner psychologies and issues through questioning their own mythical fabrics, but witout much engagement with the Other. Syrian narratives of today stand out with their vividness that defies the horror of the situation in their country, while also breaking free from official stories. Lebanese films do not deviate so much from national myths, but are distinctive in that they offer the invitation of reconciliation and making peace with the psyche, and bear seeds of hope for the future.

The common language for all the cinemas is the theme of the feminine, whether it is expressed as a longing for uniting with it, or a suffering inside it. This reveals a wish to balance the patriarchal stronghold on these cultures. Together, these trauma cinemas also communicate a sense of urgency, with a need to make aware the painful past, the suffering it inflicts on the present, and the desperate need to talk about it and negotiate it to enable a future. By moving along the axis of immediacy and distance, the films create an urgency that draws our attention and awareness, as well as a universality that encourages a profound understaning of the issues at stake.

# Filmography

## Feature films

*Arna's Children*
Pieter Van Huystee Film and Television, Trabelsi Productions: Netherlands/**Palestine** 2004
Producers: Osnat Trabelsi, Pieter van Huystee
Directors: Danniel Danniel, Juliano Mer-Khamis

*Beaufort* בופור
United King Films, Metro Communications, Movie Plus, The Yehoshua Rabinowits Foundation, Cinema Project, Keshet Broadcasting, Yes-DBD Satellite Services, CDI, Cinema Factory Production Ltd., Cinema Industry Association in Israel: **Israel**, 2007
Producers: David Mandil, Chilik Michaeli, David Silber
Director: Reshef Levi

*Incendies*
micro_scope, TS Productions, Phi Group: Canada, 2010 (about **Lebanon**)
Producers: Luc Déry, Kim McCraw
Director: Denis Villeneuve

*Forgiveness* מחילות
Metro Communications, Elevation Filmworks: **Israel**/USA, 2006
Producers: Micki Rabinovich, David Silber, Lemore Syvan
Director: Udi Aloni

*Ladder to Damascus* سلم إلى دمشق
Abbout Productions, Doha Film Institute: **Syria**/Lebanon/Qatar, 2013
Producer: Georges Schoucair
Director: Mohamed Malas

*Lebanon*/*Lebanon: The Soldier's Journey* לבנון
Ariel Films, Arsam International, Arte France, Israeli Film Fund, Metro Communications, Paralite, Torus: **Israel**, 2009
Producers: Anat Bikel, Leon Edery, Moshe Edery, Ilann Girard, Benjamina Mirnik, Uri Sabag,

David Silber
Director: Shmuel (Samuel) Maoz

*Omar* عمر
ZBROS: **Palestine**/United Arab Emirates, 2013
Producers: Hany Abu-Assad, Waleed Zuaiter, David Gerson
Director: Hany Abu-Assad

*Paradise Now* الجنّة الآن
Augustus Film, Lama Productions, Razor Film Produktion GmbH, Lumen Films, Arte France Cinéma, Hazazah Film, Eurimages, Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Hazazah Pictures, Lama Films, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Nederlands Fonds voor de Film: Netherlands/**Palestine**/ Israel/Germany/France, 2005
Producers: Bero Beyer, Amir Harel, Gerhard Meixner, Hengameh Panahi, Roman Paul
Director: Hany Abu-Assad

*The Great Dictator*
Charles Chaplin Productions: USA, 1940
Producers: Charlie Chaplin, Carter DeHaven
Director: Charlie Chaplin

*Void/Waynon*
Production company n/a: **Lebanon**, 2013
Producers: Nicolas Khabbaz, Sam Lahoud
Directors: Christelle Ighniades, Jad Beyrouthy, Maria Abdel Karim, Naji Bechara, Salim Haber, Tarek Korkomaz, Zeina Makki

*Waltz with Bashir* ואלס עם באשר
Bridgit Folman Film Gang, Les Films d'Ici, Razor Film Produktion GmbH, Arte France, ITVS, Noga Communication – Channel 8, New Israeli Foundation for Cinema and Television, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Israel Film Fund, Hot Telecommunication, YLE Teema, Télévision Suisse-Romande, Radio Télévision Belge Francophone, SBS Australia: **Israel**, 2008
Producers: Ari Folman, Serge Lalou, Gerhard Meixner, Yael Nahlieli, Roman Paul
Director: Ari Folman

*Zozo*

Memfis Film, Film i Väst, Sigma Films, Zentropa Entertainments, Zozo: Sweden/Czech Republic/ UK/Netherlands/Denmark, 2005 (about **Lebanon**)

Producer: Anna Anthony

Director: Josef Fares

## Short films

*God is the Greatest*

Beauty Killed The Beast – Lenke & Weidenhöfer GbR: USA/Germany, 2014 (about **Syria)**

Producers: Cyril Aris, Kai Gero Lenke, Matthias Weidenhöfer

Director: Kai Gero Lenke

http://vimeo.com/111410817 (retrieved 11 December 2014)

*Jasmenco* وكنيمساج

Zianoor Films, **Syria**/USA, 2014

Producer: Wathec Salman

Director: Wathec Salman

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zbq7a4y9ztk (retrieved 13 December 2014)

*Passing* مرور

Production company n/a: **Syria**, 2013

Producer: Amr Kokash, Ghiath Alhaddad

Directors: Amr Kokash, Ghiath Alhaddad

http://euromedaudiovisuel.net/p.aspx?t=videos&mid=103&l=en&did=1898

(retrieved 10 September 2014)

*Pillar Cloud* עמוד ענן

Production company n/a: **Israel**/Germany 2013

Producer: Maya Geller

Director: Maya Geller

http://euromedaudiovisuel.net/p.aspx?mid=103&l=en&did=1345 (retrieved 9 September 2014)

*Though I know the River is Dry* مع أني أعرف أن النهر قد جف
Idioms Film, Mohanad Yaqubi: Egypt/**Palestine**/Qatar/UK, 2013
Producer: Louis Lewarne
Director: Omar Robert Hamilton
http://www.riverdryfilm.com (retrieved 12 December 2014)

*Transit Game*
Sepasi Films: Canada/USA/**Lebanon**, 2013
Producer: Anna Fahr
Director: Anna Fahr

*Troubled Waters* عَكَر
Maisonette Film Productions: **Lebanon**, 2013
Producers: Lara Ayoub, Toufic Khreich
Director: Toufic Khreich

*Un Chien Andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*)
Production company n/a: Spain/France, 1929
Producers: Luis Buñuel, Pierre Braunberger
Directors: Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí

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