

## Country Focus: Israel

### A Changing Landscape

by Dan Fainaru

Ten years ago, Israeli cinema hit rock bottom. Less than 1% of the country's audiences paid to see a domestic film, with most leaving the cinema disappointed. The same could be said for international sales or screenings at festivals.

However, in 2008, Israeli films have captured some 14% of local admissions. Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* was the first film selected for Cannes and the jury's peculiar decision to ignore it was one of the most discussed issues once the festival was over. Released a month later in Paris, it attracted over half a million people.

Something radical must have happened to Israeli cinema over the course of the last decade. But then, a great deal happened to the country itself during that period. Seen as a window on the country it represents, there is a distinct connection between its political, economic and sociological state, and the cinema that it creates. Israel may not have been particularly concerned by the films being made in its own backyard – and it may not be particularly concerned now – but for the last few years, it has rightfully taken pride in their achievements.

Some reasons for this shift are obvious. Film schools were launched in the 1970s and so a new generation of filmmakers have spent time developing their skills and passing them on to the next generation. New cinematheques in Haifa, Tel Aviv and finally Jerusalem changed the perception of what cinema is for so



Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*

many aspiring filmmakers. And from the first TV channel setting up operation in 1968, more channels, from commercial to satellite stations, are in existence and piped into almost every Israeli home. Though variable in terms of quality, the larger number of stations has resulted in an increased demand for material to screen.

The struggle to establish some kind of legal basis for the state support of cinema resulted in the Cinema Law, passed in 2000. After twenty years, the Fund for the Promotion of Quality Films has transformed into the more palatable Israeli Film Fund. New funds have sprung up alongside it, each supposedly specialising in just one field but more often than not stepping on each other's administrative toes, competing for the most suitable projects to invest in.

Local film festivals such as those in Jerusalem and Haifa were instrumental in encouraging the promotion of Israeli film internationally. Katriel Schori, head of the Israeli Film Fund and the person most responsible for reshaping Israeli cinema's identity, highlighted the lack of international awareness: 'When I took over the Film Fund, I realised that practically



*Michael Winterbottom at the 26th Jerusalem International Film Festival*

none of our films had even a flier in a foreign language, let alone well-prepared press books.' Nowadays, at least 50% of new Israeli films have some sort of international partner (often more than one) or at least a pre-sales contract. Schori's statistics indicate that in the last couple of years foreign investment in Israeli films almost double domestic contributions. The same applies to international sales. No longer is the industry happy to merely cater for Jewish communities abroad.

But as important as all these factors are, the change that took place in Israeli cinema has its roots elsewhere. It was the mood of the country that changed. In the first years after the War of Independence (1948) there were more urgent matters to attend to. Cinema was the kind of luxury not to be indulged in by a serious, determined society united together in an effort to establish the identity of a new country. The films ushered in with the change were inclined to pure entertainment, with few exceptions, for the next twenty years.

But with time, things were changing. The Six Day War in 1967 put an end to little Israel. Television, long suspected by Prime Minister Ben Gurion of poisoning the minds of his 'Golden Youth', finally came into being. It led audiences to question the need to go to the cinema when they could be entertained at home. The novelty of hearing characters on screen speaking the same language you heard on the street was also wearing off. And, on a larger scale, the country was changing.

The tightly-knit community defending its borders had become seen as colonising power, controlling alien territories which were originally supposed to be used to bargain for peace. But as the possibility of peace talks stalled, it looked like the territories would have to be kept a little longer, to scare rivals into negotiations and temporary settlements were erected between the Palestinian towns and villages, which eventually became permanent homes. The children that were born there grew up convinced this was their land and that they had a legitimate right to it. Likewise, an army created to defend its lands became a peacekeeping force within its own borders.

With the economy having improved, the self-imposed claustrophobia of the country whose regime discouraged travelling as wasteful all through the first years of its existence had eased off. A lobby of upcoming and veteran filmmakers managed to persuade several politicians that Israel should start working on having its own Bergman. The Fund for the Promotion of Quality Films was started in 1981, and the Ministry of Education and Culture was put in charge of it, with the cultural consistency not the commercial potential of the projects determining their selection.

The result was a decade of politically motivated films, attacking the official policies of the new Israeli right-wing regime with unprecedented and righteous fury. It is no wonder that towards the end of the decade, when Ariel Sharon was in charge of Industry and Trade, overseeing the Film Centre, he turned down an invitation to join the first European Media programme. Asked for the reason, he apparently said he saw no reason to help the enemies from within spread their pernicious messages abroad.

By the end of the 1990s, after the first Gulf War and the end of the first Intifada, any illusions that well-intentioned Israelis might still establish a dialogue with their neighbours were shattered. The Palestinians demands

seemed to exceed anything even progressive Israelis were willing to concede. Brave liberal statements sounded lame and pointless, and since there was no discernible commercial cinema, domestic cinema looked defeated. It was in this moment that a new generation of filmmakers emerged, defining the cinematic landscape and shaping Israeli film for the future.

No one expected that on 1 January 2001, when the Cinema Law was officially implemented, events would move so fast. However, things had been moving in the period leading up to it. Arik Kaplun's *Yana's Friends* had been in the works for seven years before it won Best Film and Best Actress at Karlovy Vary in 2000. Dover Kozashvili's *Late Marriage* and Nir Bergman's *Broken Wings*, though released in late 2001 and 2002 respectively, had been in production for some time. Kozashvili and Bergman (finally Israel had its own Bergman!), and most of those who followed them, did not pretend to proffer solutions to the state of the nation. Instead they focused on small, intensely personal issues, as if inspired by the French New Wave, who had claimed forty years earlier that real cinema is not found in 'big subjects'. It was also no longer just a matter of what is said but how it is conveyed. Israeli film, to put it quite simply, had become more interesting to look at. Quite possibly because this generation had seen far more films than their elders and felt more comfortable expressing themselves in this new language.

*Late Marriage* confronted a young Russian emigrant with a variety of Israeli characters, all of them caught in the middle of Tel Aviv during the Gulf War. Although the sirens wail in the background, they never distracted the filmmaker or the audience from the narrative. Kozashvili's picture could almost qualify as an ethnic comedy. A Georgian family separates a favourite son from his Moroccan mistress so that he can enter into a 'decent' marriage with a nice Georgian virgin. As for Bergman's *Broken Wings*, it was a dark coming-of-age



drama in which a woman, with four children, attempts to come to terms with the death of her husband. Partly autobiographical, Bergman avoided politics in favour of an emotionally engaging drama. As the film unfolds it becomes clear that the man died as the result of a bee sting, not a terrorist attack or some military operation. Far from an allegory of a state of siege, the film is a family tragedy, period.

The accent on the personal over the national, the attention paid to the individual for their own sake and not as a cipher for something else, did not deny these films their place in a larger context, but firstly made sure they existed on their own terms. Filmmakers were no longer content with issuing the 'right' statement. Their interest lay in making their point in an affecting, moving manner. So much so that, despite the growing political isolation of Israel as a state, its cinema has suddenly become more popular than ever.

Having avoided an overtly didactic approach to their work, filmmakers began to look behind

the official façades characters wear. Eytan Fox's 2004 feature, *Walk on Water* (2004), upturned the cliché of the tough Mossad exterminator, with its protagonist in a state of acute crisis, questioning his identity as a secret agent and a man, even in terms of his sexuality. In the same year, Eran Riklis's *The Syrian Bride* (2004) focused on a young Druze woman who has to leave her family in the Golan Heights, as the only suitable Druze husband for her is a Syrian living in Damascus. Its deeply humanistic approach to the woman's plight, highlighting her emotional state, gave the film a universality beyond the Hollywood blueprint used three decades earlier.



Eran Riklis's *The Syrian Bride*

The new Israeli films were not turning their backs on big issues in favour of personal dramas. Rather, the big issues were reduced to human size, possessing an emotional impact that earlier Israeli films could not hope to offer. Following Amos Gitai's bitterly cynical look at religion from a purely secular point of view – a thorny subject at best – in *Kadosh* (1999), Gidi Dar's *Ushpizin* (2004) approached the same subject, but with gentle, sympathetic humour. It was followed by David Volach's painfully searing film *My Father, My Lord* (2007), and, with more than a touch of exoticism, Avi Neshet's *Secrets* (2007).

With Keren Yedaya collecting Cannes' prestigious Camera d'Or for *Or* in 2004, as well as Shira Geffen and Etgar Keret repeating the same achievement three years later with *Jellyfish*, the position of Israeli cinema as a valid new voice, both in tone



Keren Yedaya's *Or*

and content, seems to be firmly established. The tremendous success of Joseph Cedar's *Beaufort* (2007), Eran Kolirin's *The Band's Visit* (2007) and Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* highlighted Israeli cinema's capacity to attract large audiences. *Beaufort*, like Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima*, avoided discussion of the nature of and reasons for war, but had plenty to say about the way it is waged, showing soldiers in the line of fire, victimised by generals and politicians who manipulate from a safe distance. Kolirin's film, a bittersweet, wistful comedy in which Egyptians and Israelis are divested of their national identities and allowed to act as simple human beings, was a deserved crowd-pleaser. Blessed with a touch of surrealism and a healthy dose of humour, combined with simple and yet richly imaginative visuals, it defused the eternal conflict that rears its head whenever Israelis and Arabs appear in the same frame. *Waltz with Bashir*, a resounding worldwide success, based on a premise – animated documentary – that might have



Joseph Cedar's *Beaufort*

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seemed dubious on paper, shows an Israeli soldier assuming responsibility for never lifting a finger to prevent mass murder, twenty years after the fact. Shot as a normal documentary and then transferred to animation, in its present shape it is no longer another breast-beating Israeli litany on the Middle East conflict, but one of the most potent, painful and shocking cinematic statements made this year, from any cinema.



Eran Kolirin's *The Band's Visit*

And then there is Amos Gitai, a particular case in Israeli cinema. Based in Paris for many years, where he gained an international reputation for developing a sophisticated and complex cinematic language, he is now back in Israel. Better known and respected abroad than any other filmmaker in the country, he is a prolific director whose ambitious, insistently political body of work has been acclaimed at festivals around the world, but for whom audiences at home still feel his work to be closer to lectures than drama and have yet to fully accept him.

No review of Israeli cinema would be complete without mention of the documentaries produced. Considered for many years to be just another tool to record the various achievements of a young state flexing its muscles and establishing its identity, documentaries have developed in shape, form, perspective and ambition, largely thanks to the inspiration and teachings of David Perlov. The Brazilian-born filmmaker's highly subjective six-hour long *Diary*, covering 10 years of his life (1973-83), is still considered the country's

major documentary achievement. No longer merely informative, a wave of documentaries surfaced, presenting reflections on a large variety of themes: from Orna Ben Dor's study of the second generation of Holocaust survivors, *Because of that War* (1988), and Ron Havilio's *Fragments of Jerusalem* (1997), a six-hour series that poetically ruminated on Jerusalem's past and present, to David Ben Shitrit's *Kadim Winds – A Moroccan Chronicle* (2002), dealing with the frustrations and discriminations of the Moroccan community in Israel. Interestingly, as fiction became more intensely personal and less politically militant, documentaries filled this vacuum with a series of highly relevant portraits of life in Israel.

Some documentaries were deceptively innocent of political intent, such as David Ofek's *No. 17* (2003), which initially followed a police investigation searching for the last victim of a terrorist attack, but became a revealing portrait of a country under constant terrorist threat. Others were far more explicit, like Ra'anan Alexandrowicz's *Inner Tour* (2001), which looked at Israel through the eyes of Palestinians who have never seen the other side of the border before, while Yoav Shamir's *Checkpoint* showed the confrontation between young Israeli soldiers and the Palestinian population. In *Nine Star Hotel*, Ido Haar presented an uncompromising portrait of illegal Palestinian workers regularly sneaking in and out of Israel – their only way to make a living, despite the inhuman conditions they



Ido Haar's *Nine Star Hotel*

have to submit to. No filmmaker, however, is more virulently committed to his cause than Avi Mograbi, whose self-made films (from his 1997 satire *How I Learned to Overcome My Fear and Love Arik Sharon* to the recent *Z-32*) are part documentaries, part self-styled essays, all of them withering in their attack on the policies of the Israeli government.

Since Israeli cinema, both fictional and documentary, has so many references to the political situation in the region, what about the Palestinian point of view? It is doubtful whether Elia Souleiman (*Chronicle of a Disappearance*, 1996), Hany Abu Assad (*Paradise Now*, 2005) or even Tawfik Abu Wael (*Atash*, 2005) would appreciate being included in a survey of Israeli cinema. Their films deal more with internal Palestinian affairs, though they do not ignore the threatening neighbour, nor do they paint a pretty picture of it. But it is necessary to mention these films, as Israeli producers and funds were actively involved in bringing them to the screen. That all these



Tawfik Abu Wael's *Atash*

filmmakers have deservedly established a solid reputation for themselves and, in all likelihood, will not resort to the same production procedures again, does not detract from the fact that there was a collaboration of sorts, sometimes pleasant, sometimes less so, which might hint at the possibility of a dialogue between the two sides. And when or if that is ever established, perhaps a new cinema will emerge in the Middle East.

## Key Players

Dan Fainru profiles some leading figures in Israeli cinema

### GIORA EINI

The most unlikely key player in the Israeli film industry, Giora Eini is a lawyer with no cinematic background, who used to serve as legal adviser to the General Workers Union. Politically savvy, he became head of the Rabinowitz Foundation in the 1980s. A Tel Aviv fund, named after one of the city's ex-mayors and the main source of support for art initiatives, film was a minor focus for it until the introduction of the 2001 Cinema Law. The Cinema Project, the creation of the foundation, is now the second-largest fund in the country, disbursing an annual budget of close to US\$5 million amongst six or seven productions. Titles it has funded include *Or*, *Atash*, *My Father*, *My Lord*, *Beaufort*, *To Take a Wife* and *Secrets*.



Giora Eini

Eini, who prides himself on having no friends in the industry, leaves artistic responsibility to cinema professionals. His area is administration, obtaining budgets from the Cinema Council, checking that none of the Fund's regulations hinders its smooth running.

Eini's organisation rarely actively seeks international partners, but is understandably happy when foreign co-producers show interest. This has made it possible for the Cinema Project to be credited on films such as the Canadian/Hungarian production of *Faceless*, Paul Schrader's *Adam Resurrected* and another Polish/Israeli co-production, *Spring of '41*, starring Joseph Fiennes.

## RONIT ELKABETZ

Ronit Elkabetz is the most distinctive female movie star in Israel, with a promising directing career ahead of her. Born in Israel to a family of Moroccan emigrants, she is equally at home in Hebrew and French. Her dark, intense looks originally gained her entry into the fashion world, before her first role, in Daniel Wachsmann's mystical 1990 drama, *The Appointed*. Though she never trained as an actress, she was soon entrusted with major roles, both in Israel and in France. She excels at portraying strong-willed women, struggling for their own space in a male-oriented society. She appeared as an independent divorcee engaged in a torrid affair with an unmarried man in *Late Marriage*, as an ageing prostitute who won't quit in *Or* and the improvised host of the Egyptian band in *The Band's Visit*.

In 2005, Elkabetz teamed up with her brother, Shlomi, to direct *To Take a Wife*. She plays Viviane, who attempts to escape her claustrophobic home life. Her follow-up, *Seven Days*, played in the Cannes Critics' Week in 2008.



Ronit Elkabetz in *To Take a Wife*



Ari Folman

## ARI FOLMAN

Ari Folman is, without a doubt, the man of the year. Born in Haifa in 1962, Folman served with an elite unit during the Lebanon War, then went on to study filmmaking at Tel Aviv University. His graduation film, made with Ori Sivan, was the documentary *Shaanan Si*, offering an eerily surrealistic portrait of Tel Aviv during the first Gulf War. *Saint Clara*, their first feature, in which a 13-year-old girl can predict the future provided she does not fall in love, displayed the same touch of surrealism, both narratively and in terms of its strange visuals, accompanied by an aggressive soundtrack. Working again with Sivan (the psychoanalyst in *Waltz with Bashir*), Folman directed *Made in Israel*, a satirical fantasy in which the last surviving Nazi is brought before a court of justice in Israel. He has also contributed as a writer for numerous TV series.

*Waltz with Bashir* was not an easy film to fund. After experimenting with animation on the TV serial *The Stuff Love is Made Of*, Folman put together a short demo for HotDocs in Toronto. For a number of years, he travelled to different markets to seek funding, constantly developing his ideas along the way. Finally, he shot the entire film as a live-action

documentary, sinking his own money into the project, even opening an animation studio in order to painstakingly paint each frame of the film. Vindicated by the results, he is now looking to develop similar projects.

## AMOS GITAI

Amos Gitai originally intended to follow in his father's footsteps and studied architecture, but then switched to film. *The House* (1980), about a Palestinian home in Jerusalem that was abandoned during the War of Independence and occupied by Israelis, was commissioned by Israeli Television. When producers disagreed with some of the film's content, Gitai left the country with the film. His visual style and language, and particularly his political agenda, which repudiated the stance of the Israeli government, established his reputation abroad, both as an avant-garde director and as a fierce critic of Israel's policies. His first feature, *Esther* (1986), an adaptation of the Biblical tale with a contemporary coda, screened at Cannes Critics' Week, and his films, alternating



Amos Gitai

between documentaries and fiction, have played at festivals ever since. They are mostly dedicated to the particular problems of his homeland and the Jewish nation as a whole, presented in a didactic style reminiscent of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Marie Straub.

Gitai returned to Israel in 1993, but his films, often featuring international stars such as Jeanne Moreau, Juliette Binoche or Hanna Schygulla, require budgets beyond the means of the local industry. Therefore, although his films are usually shot in Israel, most of the funds come from abroad and, as such, his works are often regarded as foreign productions rather than domestic ones.

## LIA VAN LEER

Usually referred to internationally as 'the first lady of Israeli cinema', she was the first person to head the Israeli Film Archive, which became the country's first Cinematheque, followed by a second one in Tel Aviv and a third in Jerusalem, both of which she was instrumental in creating. After 1967, she and her husband Wim moved to Jerusalem and the Film Archive moved with them.

In 1984 she set up the Jerusalem Film Festival. Never one to delegate authority whenever she believed she should personally take care of the matter, Lia has proven to be an indefatigable globetrotter, acquiring friends and acquaintances around the world and among the high and mighty, who were always present whenever she needed their help. She was responsible to a great extent for establishing the Jerusalem Cinematheque as a leading cultural centre in the city, one of the few points of encounter between Israelis and Palestinians. She guided the festival's rapid growth and the ever-increasing number of competitive sections in it, insisting on a large sidebar dedicated to Jewish-themed films from all over the world. Having accumulated prestigious awards for her activities, both at home and abroad, she relinquished her activities only last year, when, well into her eighties, she stepped down as the active



Lia Van Leer

director of the Cinematheque, the Festival and the Archive, but she still retains her position as chairperson on all three boards.

### AVI MOGRABI

Avi Mograbi is a one-man show, to the extent that such a thing is possible in the film industry. A filmmaker whose output is generally considered to be documentary, but is much better defined as film essay, he writes his own projects, shoots the material himself with his own digital camera, rushing out whenever the immediate events require his presence, and acts both as on- and off-camera narrator, and as himself. He is responsible for every stage of the filmmaking process and therefore needs minimum participation from funds or outside producers in order to finalise his projects.

Born in 1956, the scion of a highly respected film family (one of Tel Aviv's central squares still bears the name of the Mograbi cinema which adorned it), he studied philosophy and art. In film, he has become one of the most

irreverent spirits working in the industry. His films attack the policies of right-wing governments and their dubious achievements, not only in what he sees as the unbearable conditions meted out to Palestinians, but also in the particularities and paradoxes of life in Israel. Recognised first by international film festivals, he has already been invited to Cannes and Venice. Strangely enough, several of his films have been aided by local film funds, which might explain many of the recent successes of Israeli cinema.

### EILON RATZKOVSKY

Since Eran Kolirin's *The Band's Visit* took Cannes by surprise in 2007, revealing itself as the first authentic Israeli worldwide crowd-pleaser, everyone wants to work with the film's producer, Eilon Ratzkovsky. Or, to be more precise, with July August Productions, the company he owns with TV producer Yossi Uzrad and his partner, Guy Jacoel. Ratzkovsky's golden touch was certainly a part of the film's success, but he also has a talent for creating fruitful partnerships with directors.



Eilon Ratzkovsky

After studying philosophy in Rome, Ratzkovsky returned to Israel, taking a series of jobs as an assistant director before moving gradually into production and finally setting up July August in 2003. Initially, the company filled the quota of children's features for one of the commercial channels.

With American-based Israeli producer Ehud Bleiberg they produced *Love and Dance* in 2006 and following *The Band's Visit* they worked with Bleiberg and Paul Schrader on *Adam Resurrected*. They have since produced Ronit and Shlomi Elkabetz' *Seven Days* and Eitan Green's whimsical *It all Begins at Sea*.

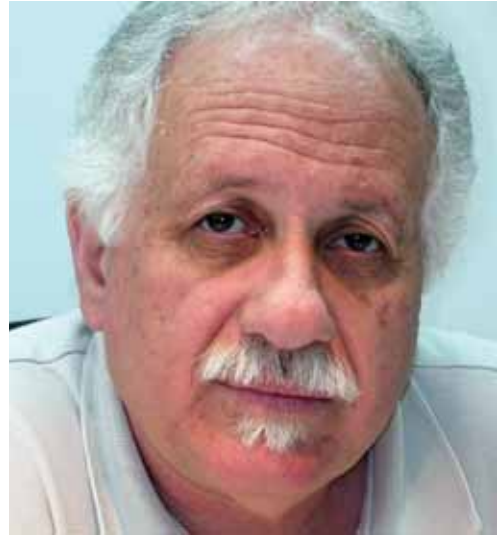
### MAREK ROZENBAUM

Born in Poland in 1952, Marek Rozenbaum is a highly respected producer who has been closely associated with the Israeli film industry for the last 25 years. Transfax, the company he founded twenty years ago, has produced over thirty features and forty documentaries. He is currently working with Keren Yedaya on *Jaffa* and Dover Kozashvili on his third feature, *Infiltration*.

He was one of the first to realise the importance of finding audiences outside Israel, attending international festivals and markets. An active lobbyist, whose efforts brought into existence the present Cinema Law, Rozenbaum is also a realist who was quick to point out many of the shortcomings to be expected in its implementation. He is now President of the Israeli Film and TV Academy and a member of the Producers Association, which he has chaired in the past for six consecutive years. Having recently produced three films by first-time directors, he believes the only way for Israeli cinema to continue being relevant in years to come is to seek and develop new talent.

### KATRIEL SCHORI

Katriel Schori's appointment as the Executive Director of the Israeli Film Fund in 1999 began the transformation of contemporary



Katriel Schori

Israeli cinema. A graduate of the NYU Film School, he returned to Israel in 1973 as head of productions for Kastel Films, the country's leading producer at the time. Involved in a large number of projects, both documentaries and fiction, he worked closely with a number of international broadcasters such as the BBC, ARD and PBS.

After three years in the US, he returned home and set up Belfilms, which, by the time he was asked to take over the Fund, had already produced over 200 documentaries and features.

Joining the Fund at its lowest ebb, he initiated a series of promotion schemes to rebuild its stature. His international links brought in potential investors, and Israel's presence at festivals and film markets increased as a result. He achieved this by creating a budget for international promotion and by assuming international responsibility not only for the films backed by the Film Fund, but also films made outside his direct remit.

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