

FILM REVIEW OF *1948: CREATION AND CATASTROPHE*

Terri Ginsberg

Nakba means “catastrophe” in Arabic. Since 1948, it has come to denote the permanent expulsion and dispossession of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and lands, and the rape, pillage, and massacre of thousands more, by Zionist militias during the years leading up to the establishment of the Jewish state of Israel in historic Palestine. The *Nakba* caused a large proportion of the Palestinian population to become refugees in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt and produced a significant Palestinian diaspora spanning Europe, the Americas, North Africa, and the Middle East. This *ethnic cleansing* of Palestine¹ was denied until recently by the dominant forces within the international community, the neo-imperialist agenda of which was bolstered most notoriously by former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir’s 1969 excoriation of the then-alliance between Egypt and the Soviet Union:² the political front against the advance of communism and radical labor was for her—and in large part remains—the suppression of Palestinian liberation. Forty-two years later in 2011, Israel, politically much further to the right than it was during Meir’s time, passed a law that denies state funding to any public or government entity that memorializes the *Nakba* as an occasion for mourning.³

Interpretation of the events surrounding the *Nakba* has been and remains contentious, both within the scholarly literature and in the public sphere, including the mediascape. Yet as documentary evidence of the event has increasingly been made available and disseminated, Zionists, scholars among them, have been compelled to acknowledge its occurrence, whereupon attempts to justify it in the proverbial name of Jewish safety—and more recently in accordance with Israeli legislation criminalizing the potential subversion of Zionism entailed by acknowledging the *Nakba*⁴—have become prevalent. Perhaps the most illustrious, scholarly example of such casuistry is Benny Morris, who in his 2001 book, *Righteous Victims*, qualified his earlier research documenting the *Nakba*⁵ with the claim that Israel would not have reached its current state of heightened defensiveness had the expulsion of the Palestinians not been more complete.⁶ The great irony of Morris’

Terri Ginsberg is Assistant Professor of Film and Director of the Film Program at the American University in Cairo.

position is its resonance with neo-Nazi discourse on the Holocaust, regarding which a similar (ideo)logic is applied, when in fact, as Palestinian author and political commentator, Ghada Karmi, has written so eloquently, the Palestinians who were targeted by the Zionist militias between 1947 and 1949 were nothing less than “Hitler’s last victims.”⁷

This very irony—the perpetration of an ethnic cleansing for the purposes of a settler-colonial takeover of Mandate Palestine in the name of a social grouping which itself had just experienced the most thoroughly documented genocide in history—forms the central problematic of *1948: Creation and Catastrophe* (“1948”), an independent documentary film directed by Andy Trimlett and Ahlam Muhtaseb and released in 2017. Unlike any previous film concerning the Palestinian-Israeli struggle, *1948* takes aim at the most contentious subject in Palestinian-Israeli historiography: the relationship between the Holocaust and the Nakba. To be clear, this relationship finds no shortage of references within the Zionist literary and cinematic canon, where the Holocaust is cited consistently as that occurrence which indubitably justifies the establishment of a Jewish national entity as a means by which to stave off future Judeocides. This justification has in fact become commonsense discourse throughout much of the First World. By the same token, within a public sphere for which discussion about Palestine is dominated by Zionist interests and overdetermined by them ideologically, any attempt to call out the political underside of the dominant Holocaust narrative is attacked without hesitation by Zionists and fellow travelers, as antisemitic and/or the work of so-called terrorists.⁸

Palestinians, too, have internalized this veritable taboo against publicly challenging the Holocaust narrative, as a perceived bulwark against the delegitimation of their cause. This is true especially at the present moment, when, under pressure from Zionist lobbyists, at least half of all US states have passed legislation which denies state funding to any public or private entity that supports through its actions the international boycott of Israel;⁹ and when Israeli-Palestinian “peace” negotiations are once again being deployed to frame the proposed “reconciliation” between Fatah and Hamas in the direction of further compromise with Zionist interests. By contrast, *1948* takes on this taboo by designating it as one of the primary causes of Nakba denial and the persistence of Zionist mythology. In this respect, *1948* stands to revive the approach of much earlier Palestinian and Palestine solidarity documentaries, such as *We Are the Palestinian People [Revolution until Victory]* (Single Spark Films/Cine News, US, 1973), *Laysa Lahum Wujud [They Do Not Exist]* (Mustafa Abu ‘Ali, Lebanon/Palestinian, 1974), *To Live in Freedom: Israeli-Palestinians in Israel-Palestine [Lehiyot am hafshi (To Be a Free People)]* (Simon Louvish et al., UK, 1974–1975), and *Occupied Palestine* (David Koff, US, 1981). Unlike these earlier, militant-era

films, however, *1948* projects its critique of the political-ideological deployment of the Holocaust through a certain indirection facilitated by textual performativity. The film does not offer an explicit critique of Zionist ideology, that is, nor therefore does it directly target the sacrality to which the Holocaust has been elevated within Jewish and Israeli culture—something which has already been performed with noteworthy acumen by *Balagan* (Andres Veiel, 1994), a post-Wall German documentary suppressed by its own producer, Klaus Volkenborn, for nearly a decade after its release.¹⁰ Instead *1948* contextualizes an extensive testimonial expose of the Nakba within a historiography that deconstructs the commonsensical discourse by acknowledging both the Holocaust and the phenomenology of trauma by which that horror became an accepted rationale for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

1948 is comprised largely of well-rehearsed series of talking-head interviews intercut with archival footage of historic Palestine dating from the period of the first Zionist infiltrations through that of the Nakba, and narrated by a voice-over, the authority of which is mediated by the interview structure and content and by intertitles identifying the interviewees by name, sometimes by professional title, when Israeli by former military affiliation, and when Palestinian by town or village of origin. The film's editing is minimally categorizable as montage in its classical sense; instead, the editorial effect is one of a critical collocation which places the various interviewees, many of whom are differently positioned ideologically and politically, into dialogical agreement around a core set of facts: Palestine was already substantially populated prior to the arrival of the Zionists and supported a substantial mercantile class; Palestinians owned the vast majority of land in the country prior to the UN "Partition Plan," which then, under Zionist and allied pressure, delegated much of the most fertile part of the Levant to Jewish sovereignty without consulting the Palestinians themselves, thus leading them understandably to reject the Plan; the indigenous population was forcibly displaced and expelled from their homes, businesses, and lands under conditions of violent massacres committed by Zionist militias to instill fear in the larger population and compel a large percentage of Palestinians to flee, albeit with the aim of returning once the violence had subsided, in order to establish the Jewish demographic majority necessary to declare the nascent state a Jewish entity, in turn cementing Zionism as a fundamentally racist ideology; Palestinian fighters defending their lands and wanting, like the Zionists, to rid the region of its colonial overlords, also committed atrocities against Zionist settlers, but those acts were far overshadowed in number and intensity by Zionist violence against Palestinians; the Arab League forces which fought alongside the Palestinians were weak not because the latter were disliked or disregarded by Arabs in neighboring lands, as the Zionist narrative would assert, but because of historical divisions within the

Arab world fostered and entrenched under European colonial rule; during the mid-1948 truce with the Palestinians, the Israelis built up their armed forces, in turn provoking more fear among the Palestinian populace leading to additional displacement, with the aim of breaking the truce in the fall of that year—which they did; the Nakba is a fundamental wrong in need of fundamental redress. Taken together, and in several instances separately, these facts run counter to the dominant Zionist narrative regarding the 60 to 70 years leading up to the establishment of Israel as a Jewish state in historic Palestine. Hence, spectators who retain the belief that there was simply a war in 1948 between Jews and Arabs, and the Palestinians lost because they were deceived by their fellow Arabs into abandoning their properties and/or into selling them willingly to Jews, for example, will find their views heavily challenged.

Interestingly in this context, more often than not the ideological disagreements between and among the film's interviewees are not made apparent, identificatory intertitles notwithstanding. This effect is underscored by the fact that the vast majority of the film's spectators will probably not have read the books written by those of the interview subjects who are scholars or even be familiar with their arguments, much less the differences between them. The film's first scholarly interviewee is Benny Morris, whose reactionary position on the Nakba is never revealed, and whose verbal condemnations of Palestinian resistance may only be known to limited circles within the Zionist and Palestinian/Palestine solidarity communities. His nonetheless important research into the Israeli archives is acknowledged in *1948* and in turn serves as a nodal point for ensuing interviews with Palestinian scholars Farid Abdel-Nour and Nur Masalha, the latter of whom is known in particular among scholars for his research and writing about the Nakba in Morris' blind spots,¹¹ and the former of whom has written critically of Morris' "conversion" to the Zionist Right.¹² Likewise does the film refrain from highlighting the differing political positions of Masalha and other Palestinian interviewees, such as the more conservative Rashid Khalidi and Sharif Kanaana as well as Israeli new historiographers Ilan Pappé and Avi Shlaim (who are also differently positioned, albeit much to the left of Morris) and American historian Charles Smith. It might be argued here that the film is attempting on more than one level to suppress difference in the name of pluralism and that, as such, its referential politics are reductive, eclectic, and lacking in rigor. In view of the careful manner in which the interviews are arranged, however, it would appear on the contrary that *1948* is working through diligent indirection to undo the longstanding suppression of Palestinian voices by at once graciously refusing to do the same to Israeli voices while nonetheless drawing from them, and from Palestinians, what is most useful to an accurate explication of the Nakba intended, according to Muhtaseb,¹³ a Palestinian media scholar

whose European-American co-director is employed by the Public Broadcasting Corporation,¹⁴ for mainstream exhibition.

Disagreements are in fact foregrounded at key moments, for prime example between Israeli interviewees who were involved as Zionist militia members in perpetrating the Nakba, and Palestinian scholars whose subsequent counterclaims overtake the militia members' excuses and vain rationales for the violence and injustice they committed. It bears noting that these Israelis are themselves positioned into disagreement over the correct interpretation of their actions, whereupon the film not only reverses the colonialist divide-and-conquer famously enacted by the British under the innocuous-sounding notion of "fair play" but avers strongly that popular Israeli criticism of Zionism is more frequently a matter of moral shame and practical regret than of fundamental political-ideological rejection. The point seems less, that is, recalling Rancière,¹⁵ to project conflict between any of the represented positions than to resituate their dis/agreements as ancillary to the problematics of interpellating and transforming the reigning ideologic.

1948 accomplishes its goal with a minimum of political compromise and historiographical distortion, and this is likely due in part to the fact that, according to one of its intertitles, the film was extensively researched. Its narrative does not delve very far into the question it raises of why the United States under President Harry S. Truman supported the channeling of Holocaust refugees from Europe to Mandate Palestine on the basis of an immigrant quota system implemented previously during the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and why, as such, ulterior political motives on the part of the new imperial power, rather than mere psychologically based "sympathy" for the victims promoted by Zionist lobbyists, were what really led the US to support the UN "Partition Plan" and eventually recognize the Israeli state.¹⁶ While the film makes clear, on the contrary, that the twentieth-century colonization of Palestine was instigated by invaders, and that, by extension, the Ashkenazi Jews who perpetrated the Nakba were not of Levantine origin and managed their settlement of Palestine by unscrupulous means, its narrator does not utter the explicit terms, "colonialism" and "Mandate," until much later in *1948*'s running time, nor does it question the biblical narrative of Hebrew exile and the accompanying notion of a "Jewish people" historically rooted in the Levant, an issue which has become the subject of unprecedented attention and controversy since the 2008 publication of Shlomo Sand's demystification, *The Invention of the Jewish People*.¹⁷ *1948* in this way elides the thorny issue of the purported Jewish right to view historic Palestine nostalgically, that is, as the origin of Judaism and thus as the Jewish mythological home to which, according to Zionists, deference should be lent for Jewish "return." Although this elision may be explained as a means by which to avoid reducing the Palestinian-Israeli struggle to sectarian conflict, the absence of sustained discourse on global (class)

politics, notwithstanding the inclusion of well-known Israeli socialist Uri Avnery as an interviewee, makes the film's inattention to the Zionist appropriation of Judaism read more like a concession to the ostensible inviolability of religion in today's conservative milieu, and an apologia for religion generally, than a principled tack. This is especially disconcerting in view of *Balagan's* provocative claim that "The Holocaust is the new religion, it is the opiate of the masses in Israel," for which it is not the Holocaust per se but its political economic conditions and their ideological survivals and entailments which have enabled Zionism to flourish. Also marginalized is an explanation of the superior funding base of the Zionist militias: the well-known fact of a Czechoslovak weapons sale is mentioned, but the Cold War conditions of that sale, and indeed the contradictions of the Soviet intervention during that period,¹⁸ are never discussed, although the film does point out the fact that each and every Israeli kibbutz (collective farm) was built on consciously, deliberately stolen Palestinian property.

Despite these issues, *1948* makes its undeniable intervention into the contemporary mediascape as an *asymmetrical balancing* of Zionism's *unbalanced symmetry* between Palestinian and Jewish suffering, and on this basis the film represents a landmark in the cinematic treatment of the topic. This strategy of reversal and resituation serves in effect to critique the politically tendentious practice of diplomatic "dialogue" in which the game of comparative suffering becomes an idealized surrogate for a more concerted effort to understand the ways in which antisemitism, colonialism, and anti-Arab racism are related structurally. During the film's second half, the former Zionist militia members, women among them, recount the atrocities they committed during the Nakba, often juxtaposed with Palestinian witnesses to such crimes who confirm their occurrences. This includes Israelis admitting to having perpetrated the massacre of Deir Yassin, widely considered the most heinous pogrom of the Nakba, whereupon a Palestinian man recalls having seen a Zionist militia member ordering another inhabitant of that village to throw his son "in the oven." In turn, another former militia member remembers forcing the decrepit survivors of such massacres to parade through the public streets of major urban centers, where they were mocked and spat upon. Yet another states, "It conjured up our own exile"; while another admits, "We did to them what happened to us." In the context of an editorial organization that iterates the essential facts about the Nakba without either limiting their recognition to any singular political position or denying the existence of fundamental differences between the positions represented, in effect subverting the classic phenomenological reduction which lies at the heart of Western philosophical thinking, *1948* makes the Nakba uncannily *real* for the doubting spectator, performatively rendering it both an extension of, and an analog to, the Holocaust, itself now redefined as a haunting *specter* in the face of which it should be impossible for a rational

viewer any longer to deny either the ethnic cleansing of Palestine or the warped appropriation of Hitlerian trauma which enabled its brutality and swiftness at the dawn of the neo-imperialist era.

Notes

1. N. Masalha, *The Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992); and I. Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld, 2006).
2. "Golda Meir Scorns Soviets," *Washington Post*, June 16, 1969, A15.
3. J. Zahalka, "Knesset Approves Nakba Law," *Israel National News*, March 23, 2011, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/143069>, accessed November 17, 2017.
4. T. Ginsberg, *Visualizing the Palestinian Struggle: Towards a Critical Analytic of Palestine Solidarity Film* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 86–88.
5. B. Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians*, 2nd ed. (1990; Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994); and *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist–Arab Conflict, 1881–2001*, 2nd ed. (1999; New York: Vintage, 2001).
6. A. Abunimah, "Moral Decay and Benny Morris," *Electronic Intifada*, January 24, 2004, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/moral-decay-and-benny-morris/4963>, accessed November 17, 2017.
7. G. Karmi, "Prologue," in *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*, 2nd ed. (2002; London: Verso, 2009).
8. T. Ismael et al., eds., *Arab Studies Quarterly* 33:3–4 (Fall/Winter 2011) [special issue: Academic Freedom, Ideological Boundaries, and the Teaching of the Middle East]; and W. I. Robinson and M. S. Griffin, *We Will Not Be Silenced: The Academic Repression of Israel's Critics* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).
9. Palestine Legal, "Anti-BDS Legislation by State," <https://palestinelegal.org/righttoboycott>, accessed November 17, 2017.
10. See T. Ginsberg, *Holocaust Film: The Political Aesthetics of Ideology* (Newcastle-on-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 176–202.
11. Masalha, *The Expulsion*.
12. F. Abdel-Nour, "From Critic to Cheerleader: The Clarifying Example of Benny Morris' 'Conversion,'" *Holy Land Studies* 12:1 (2013), 25–41.
13. A. Muhtaseb, "E-mail correspondence," October 27, 2017.
14. *1948: Creation & Catastrophe*, <https://www.1948movie.com/>, accessed February 20, 2018.
15. J. Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. J. Rose (1995; Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
16. See L. Davidson, *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001).
17. S. Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, trans. Y. Lotan (2008; London: Verso, 2009). See also K. W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).
18. See Z. Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).