Jaffa (כלת הים, *Kalat Hayam*, 2009)

Yael Munk

dir. Keren Yedaya; prod. Emmanuel Agneray, Jérôme Bleitrach, Benny Drechsel, Marek Rozenbaum, Karsten Stöter; screenplay Illa Ben Porat, Keren Yedaya; photography Pierre Aïm. 35mm, color, 106 mins. Bizibi, Transfax Film Productions, Rohfilm, distrib. Rézo Films.

One of the narrative configurations of Israeli cinema's impossible love affairs between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs is melodrama with all its complexity (Loshitzky). The genre of melodrama, once underestimated as appealing only to housewives, is today considered a way to enable renewed symbolic discourse around complex political issues. One such issue in Israeli cinema is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In his seminal article »Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,« Thomas Elsaesser contends that the family melodrama was the preferred site of petit bourgeois conflict, and that »the persistence of the melodrama might indicate the ways in which popular culture has not only taken note of social crises and the fact that the losers are not always those who deserve it most, but has also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms« (72). In other words: while melodrama seems to deal only with personal issues, it in fact reflects and works through social—and, I would add, political—crises. In this sense, Keren Yedaya's second feature film, *Jaffa*—the Hebrew title meaning »The Bride of the Sea,« referring to the Arabic name for the city of Jaffa—perfectly illustrates the symbolic role of melodrama.

After the enormous success of her debut film, *Or, My Treasure* (2004), the filmmaker returned to her two favorite Israeli actresses, Ronit Elkabetz and Dana Ivgy, but this time with a melodramatic narrative set in the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: The city of Jaffa, which after Israel's independence in 1948 was supposed to become a symbol for the coexistence of Jews and Arabs but failed to do so.

Just like the city of Jaffa, which has since been torn between two conflictual and contradictory identities, the film *Jaffa* takes place in an unspecified present and reveals an almost textbook family melodrama, giving special importance, for instance, to home decoration over the intellectual content, and emphasizing characters' emotional and psychological predicaments (Elsaesser 76). The narrative opens in a realistic scene in a garage owned by a Jewish Israeli man who runs a small family business, where his son works as a mechanic and his daughter as the secretary. He also employs a Palestinian father and his son. At first sight, it seems that things run smoothly and in accord with traditional gender roles: Men are busy with mechanical tasks, and the only female employee performs administrative work. Under this peaceful surface, however, high tensions seem to accompany every move. Behind this fragile coexistence, displaying a seemingly normalized relationship between Jews and Arabs in a »mixed town« where Israelis and Palestinians live side by side (Rabinowitz and Monterescu), a romantic drama takes place. A forbidden love grows between Mali, the owner's Jewish daughter (played by Dana Ivgy), and the Palestinian mechanic Tawfik (played by Mahmud Shalaby). They successfully kept their love affair secret for a long time, hoping that their relationship would one day be tolerated. However, the animosity between Jews and Arabs has not abated but in fact seems to have worsened. Mali's brother, Meir, who represents the younger Israeli generation, behaves violently and discriminatingly toward Arabs in general, and toward Tawfik in particular. This holds detrimental implications for his sister's love affair.

Like their son, Mali's parents are unaware of the drama in which their daughter lives in their very own family business. As typical middle class Jewish residents of Jaffa, they demonstrate a kind of entitlement toward Arab citizens, and especially the mechanics. While the father's relationship with his two Arab mechanics reveals his professional esteem for and dependence on their loyalty, his wife manifests enormous racist contempt toward them. The vast difference between the father's and mother's mentalities seems to shape their son's views, which are expressed not only in small provocations in the garage but also in racist remarks at the family's dinner table.

The tension at the dinner table is duplicated in the garage, where the father works with his two children. What could have been a recipe for a happy family instead turns catastrophic when the brother learns about his sister's love affair. Meanwhile, Mali discovers that she is pregnant and decides to fly to Cyprus with Tawfik and marry him there, because in Israel such a union is forbidden: not only by her family, but also by Israeli law, according to which civil marriage does not exist. Mali buys a wedding dress and Tawfik buys a ring and the flight tickets. Mali hides their travel bags under Meir's bed in the garage. The day before their planned departure, Meir repeats his provocations against Tawfik, insulting his father, and a physical quarrel erupts between the two, at the end of which Meir is fatally wounded. He is taken to a hospital but later succumbs to his injuries. Tawfik is accused of murder and sent to prison. Needless to say, Mali's family is devastated, and Mali realizes that her wedding plans will not materialize. The family decides to leave Jaffa in an act that can be interpreted as the end of a dream of coexistence. Mali's pregnancy becomes more and more visible, until she must confess it to her parents. The moment they learn of the father's identity they decide to move to another town, where they attempt to force an abortion on their daughter, who refuses. After a violent confrontation Mali leaves home and goes to her aunt's house in Jaffa, where she gives birth to her daughter. The family reunites around the newborn

baby and succeeds to create a seemingly normal life. As time goes by, Mali learns that Tawfik has been released from prison, and she begins planning how to meet with him. However, it is in vain that she walks the streets looking for Tawfik. The film concludes with a sequence in which Mali sits by the seashore with her daughter playing next to her. She looks at the sea meditatively. At that moment, Tawfik appears and looks at the little girl, as if recognizing his own daughter. He thoughtfully raises his head, only to see his beloved sitting on a rock. He again looks at the child, and in this exchange of gazes the narrative builds hope that the Jewish-Palestinian family will (re)unite. The film ends with the view of the waves of Jaffa, an iconic image of the unpredictability of life in this tormented city.

The film's title reveals the filmmaker's intention. The tormented bride of the sea is indeed Mali, but also, and mostly, the mixed town of Jaffa, where for generations Palestinian citizens lived until Jewish Israelis entered, first after the 1948 war for independence and then, a few years later, following the processes of gentrification. These historical details invite an allegorical reading of the setting. The city has been conquered and passed from one conqueror to the other: from the Turkish authorities to the British to the Israelis. But behind these exchanges, there was a people who lived quietly through war and peace, attempting to make a living throughout changing circumstances. These people suffered from discrimination and violence, and, just like Tawfik, they hardly dared to respond to violence with violence—but when they did so it led to terror. At first sight, it seems that Yedaya's film does not stake a position from either side of the conflict, as it focuses on Mali's impossible love story. But the choices of its protagonists and their insistence on their right to love against all prejudices, and, above all, the sea landscape so typical to Jaffa, all work to remind the viewer that this story is about more than just two people's love. It represents, rather, the impossible loving relationship between people and their land, which lies at the foundation of all national discourse. These protagonist lovers accordingly turn into symbolic actors in a decidedly political world.

References

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