

---

# Teaching Competing Narratives through Film

OLGA GERSHENSON

At the start of my teaching career, my department received a number of complaints about my Israel-related courses. As one of the students put it, “Professor is not sufficiently pro-Israel.” Other complaints were nearly identical and came from Jewish students indoctrinated in their Hebrew schools and synagogues into an unconditional, unquestioning support of Israel. “What am I to do?” I asked James Young, who was then my department chair. “I never propagate any kind of position, pro- or against Israel. I just teach students the best research there is on Israeli culture. Some of it is pretty critical, but it’s not like I can scratch it from my syllabi to appease my students.” “Teach them about competing narratives,” he said. James was a good mentor. Like other things that he told me back then, these words became my teaching mantra.

I changed my teaching. I still give my students “the best of” contemporary writing on Israel, but I also make sure that I cover more ground, teaching cultural expressions that represent competing points of view.

The University of Massachusetts is a big public university in an overall liberal-progressive state, and my students’ composition reflects this fact (many of our students are from in state). The Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies, in which I teach, has a small number of majors, and in order to survive in the current climate, where enrollment is emphasized above all else, I structure my courses to satisfy general education requirements. This means that my courses on Israel attract students from majors all over the campus—some of them committed Jews with a strong Zionist background and a few Palestinians (or students of Palestinian descent)—but most of my students have no particular agenda or background and are there to fulfill a general education requirement by taking a course on a subject that is vaguely familiar from their news feeds. Some students take the course to fulfill requirements in the Film Studies program or simply because it is “fun,” as my courses usually deal with film

and popular culture. Most students are white, but there are also African and Asian Americans, as well as a smattering of international students. For this diverse student audience, teaching competing narratives proved to be a critical strategy in making the course successful. It is a way for me to introduce the uninitiated to the lay of the land and to let the believers and ideologues soak in the arguments from the other side. Here is how I do this in one of my courses, “Film and Society in Israel,” a 300-level (i.e., relatively advanced) seminar capped at thirty students, a course that qualifies for both the Judaic Studies and Middle Eastern Studies majors, as well as the Film Studies Program, and fulfills general education requirements.

First, let me define the terms: What are these competing narratives as I regard them? Whose narratives are they, and why are they in competition? The most immediate answer I offer is Israeli and Palestinian narratives: what for Israel is a triumphant War of Independence is a tragic Nakba (catastrophe) for Palestinians. What for Israel is a heroic Six-Day War is the start of the occupation in Palestine. The list goes on and on. Often there are no unified terms to discuss historical or present events; by just naming something, we commit to a position. If it is difficult to agree on terms, it is nearly impossible to arrive at a mutual understanding of historical facts. It is a familiar story. But these are not the only competing narratives: there are also different voices within each narrative. Zooming in on Israel, we have the Zionist and the post-Zionist narratives. The question here is not, for instance, whether Palestinians in 1948 were expelled by Zionist forces but, rather, how we assess this event today from an Israeli perspective. Was the expulsion justified? The so-called post-Zionist perspective is a part of the Israeli narrative, but it is a more critical, more probing examination of its assumptions and foundations. So both sets of narratives are competing, but in the first case, the competition is over the actual story, whereas in the second, it is over how to tell it—the perspective, the assessment. These two sets of narrative tensions reflect the biggest ideological divides, but the course on film and society in Israel is not limited only to those questions. In units dealing with Jewish immigration, for instance, the competing narratives may occur between insider and outsider representations (films made by Mizrahi or Russian-immigrant filmmakers and talent versus films made by Israeli filmmakers who are not members of the community they are portraying). These films may have similar plots but tell very different stories. Another set of competing narratives can be generational, as in artistic production and representations of Holocaust survivors and their second- and third-generation descendants, also covered in this course. I do not want to reduce “competing narratives” to Israeli-Palestinian ideological divides but rather take an approach based on dialogue—on defining and understanding different stories.

Second, let me define my methodology. Since I am interested in exposing students to competing narratives, I structure every class meeting around competing represen-

tations: two films telling somewhat similar stories in profoundly different ways. For instance, in a class about the foundation of Israel, I place side by side a Hollywood blockbuster, *Exodus* (1960, dir. Otto Preminger) and a much-later art film, *Kedma* (2002, dir. Amos Gitai). Both films deal with the events taking place in Israel/Palestine in 1947–48, including illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine and relations between Zionist Jews and Palestinian Arabs; yet the overall messages of the films are dramatically different. *Exodus* represents a Zionist narrative, whereas *Kedma* can be described as representing a post-Zionist narrative. But if I wanted to focus on competing Israeli and Palestinian narratives, I would choose a different pairing of films, such as an early Israeli film of the so-called heroic-nationalist genre, *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (1955, dir. Thorold Dickinson), versus a sweeping family drama, *The Time That Remains* (2009), by an exilic Palestinian filmmaker, Elia Suleiman. It is easy to notice that these films differ not only in their conflicting ideological positions but also with regard to their genres, styles, and times of production. In fact, in-depth analysis of the films' representational strategies is an excellent way to arrive at their ideology and politics. The focus is always on a close-up; the movement is always from the specific to the general; the method is always inductive.

The pairings of the films are accompanied by readings—usually a reading per film. But sometimes one reading focuses on the actual history (or subject), and the second reading focuses on film. This choice depends both on the availability of film research and on the need to provide background to students. For instance, in a session dealing with terrorism/freedom fighting, I pair an Israeli Oscar-contending thriller, *Bethlehem* (2013, dir. Yuval Adler), with an equally engaging thriller, *Omar* (2013), by an Israeli-Palestinian filmmaker, Hany Abu-Assad. Both films revolve around a similar idea—an ambivalent relationship between an Israeli handler and a Palestinian informer—but from very different perspectives. Since this is such a loaded subject and the films are new (it usually takes at least a year or two for peer-reviewed research to appear), I assign a research article on Israel's use of Palestinian collaborators along with a critical and comprehensive film review.<sup>1</sup> But in cases where the literature on films is already available and sufficiently covers the background, I may assign only film-specific readings. For instance, in a session that approaches the Israeli-Palestinian relationships through the prism of romantic love, I pair Israeli films on the subject (such as *My Michael* [1974], *Hamsin* [1982], or the more recent *Trumpet in the Wadi* [2001] or *Jaffa* [2009]) with two chapters in Yosefa Loshitzky's book on Israeli cinema.<sup>2</sup> In this case, the conversation with the students is not about Israeli versus Palestinian perspective but rather divergent Israeli attitudes to Israel's "internal others": the Palestinian Arabs. Considering films made in different eras and taking different artistic approaches gives students a chance to trace the nuanced changes that took place in Israel over time and to articulate their significance.

Here is how it takes place on a practical level, made possible entirely, I should say, by technology. The course meets once a week for a three-hour session. The first hour and a half is a discussion, the second hour and a half is an in-class screening of a film to be discussed the following week. Usually, I screen a more challenging or simply less accessible film in class, leaving it to students to watch the second film at home. All the homework films, which the library streams for my class, are linked to the course's web module (currently Moodle, but I have used others). All the readings are available on the Moodle site as well. But the most important part of this course is homework, identical for each week, also due on a discussion forum on Moodle. The homework is to post a three- to four-hundred-word response to my question based on the two films and the two readings, forcing the students to consider the films' divergent ideologies and aesthetics. The questions are open and do not have a "right" or "wrong" answer.<sup>3</sup> However, they are structured to make students articulate positions expressed in the films and in the readings, rather than voice their personal opinions or attitudes. (In fact, I teach them to watch films "differently"—for learning and understanding, not for entertainment or pleasure.)

To encourage students to do their homework, I assign a large chunk of the final grade to it (usually 40 percent of the final grade does the trick). Moreover, along with posting their own responses, students are required to read everyone's posts. To motivate them to do that, I ask them to bring their favorite quotes from others' responses to class. I open the class by asking a couple of students to share and briefly discuss their favorite quote. These quotes become the launching pad for discussion.

To allow for all this to happen, and also to give me a chance to read and grade, the online responses are due two days in advance of the class meeting, and late responses do not receive credit. As a result, before the class, I know what students understood, how they perceived the films and the issues raised in them, and consequently, how I need to structure the in-class discussion. Also, this assignment and grading structure creates a classroom culture in which it is not acceptable to come unprepared. Because it is so challenging for students (as well as for me) to sort out the distinct positions of the two films and the relationships between them, to incorporate the voices of critics or scholars analyzing the films, and then to express it in their own writing, the work endows students with internalized knowledge and understanding of the material. It forces them to develop almost a stereoscopic view of the issue. This is the goal of the method.

The in-class work opens with small-group discussions. These discussions are structured; I usually design the questions for discussion on the basis of the online responses, allowing students to review and expand what they found out on their own at home. I circulate in between the groups, listening and answering questions and taking notes

for the larger discussion. When we come together, the groups share their findings (a large chunk of the participation grade counting toward the final helps), and I conclude with a summary and more theoretical take on the material. I will often add discussion of related works from other cultural genres—visual arts, music, poetry—which complicate the narratives.

The midterm assignment in this class also contributes to developing this kind of dialogical perspective on the issues. I call this assignment “An Interactive Presentation,” and it consists of a small group of students (two to three people) facilitating a brief discussion on the film clip of their choice. Each presentation lasts just a few minutes, but a staggering amount of preparation goes into it. Students form their own groups and choose a film to work on. I am available for guidance, but overall, they have to pick on their own something that is relevant to the course but has not been included in the syllabus. Then they research the film and its historical and cultural context, select a film clip, and meet with me to discuss their clip and a plan for their in-class discussion. Usually, students are socialized to perform monologically—and to the singular audience of a professor. This assignment flips a classroom, as they are required now to listen more than to talk, and to rely on their peers (as copresenters and as discussants) for the success of the assignment. Their goal is not to show their own understanding or mastery of the material (although it is necessary) but to engage other students in a discussion of the film clip in relation to the classroom material. It is this reversal that results in the most profound revelations for students; as a final stage in this assignment, they are required to write pieces reflecting on what they learned in the process. Although they all talk about learning a lot about their particular film, mostly their writing is about learning to listen, to interpret, and to connect. In other words, this assignment that cultivates dialogical thinking serves the principle of teaching competing narratives.

The final paper is a traditional academic paper, but dialogical aspects are present even there. Students are required to work on it in a system of multiple drafts, developing each draft on the basis of feedback received at different stages of writing, not only from me but also from their peers, during structured review session.

Since my first years of teaching, the campus climate (and possibly Hebrew school) has changed. Not a single Jewish student has accused me of being “insufficiently pro-Israel” for years. I would like to think that this a good sign, a sign of American Jews moving beyond their PEP (progressive except on Palestine) position. But the times are changing again, and with the new set of political players, who knows what kind of ideological positions will dominate? Whatever they may be, the dialogical perspective will help us and our students to identify these positions and see them in the context of other competing narratives instead of as received wisdom.

## Notes

1. The research article is Hillel Cohen and Ron Dudai, “Human Rights Dilemma in Using Informers to Combat Terrorism: The Israeli-Palestinian Case,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17 (2005): 229–43. The review is Dorit Naaman, “Oscar Hopeful ‘Bethlehem’ Yet Another Film That Celebrates Israeli Victimhood,” *Mondoweiss*, November 11, 2013.
2. Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), chapter 5, “In the Land of Oz: Orientalist Discourse in *My Michael*,” and chapter 6, “Forbidden Love in the Holy Land: Transgressing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” 90–154.
3. A sample question: “Both *Exodus* and *Kedma* reflect a moment in the foundation of the state of Israel—arrival of post-WWII immigrants and an armed conflict with British and Palestinians. But the stories that emerge from the two films are quite different. How so? Discuss the differences in the ways the two movies portray ‘sabras,’ new immigrants, and Palestinian Arabs. Rely on your notes from watching both films and on readings by Loshitzky and Ginzburg.”