

"The Museum": In his film, Ran Tal exposes the ideological-manipulative element of the Israel Museum

Uri Klein, Haaretz 10.12.2107

Ran Tal is a talented documentary filmmaker with a gift for observation. "The Museum," his new film about the Israel Museum, comprises a mosaic of stories that combine to create a single Israeli narrative - lucid and bruised

Quite a few documentary films are made in Israel each year. Even if they reveal an interesting story and they're of significant historical and ideological importance to domestic cinema, esthetically speaking many of them are more like an expanded news item than a work of art whose form is weighty enough to combine with their narrative essence and the statement they convey. Very few current Israeli documentarians have a unique cinematic vision and viewpoint of their own. These filmmakers form works of art that are created in their creators' image.

Of this handful of documentary film directors Ran Tal is one of the most outstanding as he proved in his films "Children of the Sun" in 2007 and "The Garden of Eden" in 2012, and he proves it once again in his new film "The Museum" now in theaters. One indication of the uniqueness of this type of filmmaker is his choice of subject for his films. In Tal's case they underline his awareness and recognition of the heritage of documentary filmmaking throughout the ages while manifesting his intention to reveal in his own way the Israeli ethos he observes.

In each of his films, whether dealing with the memory of the kibbutz children's houses and is comprised entirely of archive footage, as he did in "Children of the Sun," or focusing on the human, national, socioeconomic and ethnic variety of people who gather at Sakhne National Park as he did in "The Garden of Eden," Tal takes a broad overview of this ethos. This perspective is focused and concentrated so that from his films emerges a portrait which is both personal and collective. This is true of his new film as well, in which he chose as a point of departure to deal with one of Israel's leading cultural institutions - the Israel Museum.

Some of the greatest documentarians in the history of filmmaking chose to deal with institutions in their films, including cultural institutions. These include French filmmaker Alain Resnais, who in his short masterpiece "Toute la mémoire du monde" from 1957 delved the depths of the National Library in Paris, and American filmmaker Frederick Wiseman who, in his film from 2014 focused on the National Gallery in London. Like Wiseman and Resnais, in his film Tal chooses not to explore the Israel Museum in terms of its administrative function, budgetary essence and artistic undertakings. Even when he chats with the museum director, originally an American, the emphasis is on the director's place in the overall mosaic described by the film.

In Tal's eyes, the Israel Museum is a hub of local ideological historical symbolism, national and nationalistic. Upon this creative and conceptual basis he creates a film which deals not with the physicality of the institution, choosing instead to create an

associative and impressionistic work. Its structure resulted from Tal's roving view of the inner meanings that the Israel Museum as a leading cultural institution bears within. This viewpoint gradually morphs into a rumination on the essence of the ethos within which this institution is situated. Like most ruminations it has a focused yet open-ended aspect at one and the same time.

This rumination is drenched in the same irony that pervaded Tal's previous films as well, but which is very pronounced in his new film. This irony isn't agenda-based or bitter, for although Tal's statements are lucid, it isn't in his personality as an artist to be agenda-based or bitter. He's conciliatory and cheerful even if his statements are trenchant. The human element dominates his films, allowing him to shift between the comical and the touching, to unite the two, even in situations with a patently satirical tone.

Like the documentarians who preceded him, Tal uses the Israel Museum as a site that contains the national historical memory. This memory has colored the Israeli ethos since its inception and in fact grips this ethos in heavy practical and ideological chains in the present in which the film is shot. More than anything, the film succeeds in conveying to the viewer the growing schism in the local ethos between its abstract historical, cultural and national essence and its physical, day-to-day conduct - a schism into which the Israeli reality seems to be diving and crashing into more and more. In a scene which appears shortly after the opening, in which a statue by Giacometti is described to blind people who are even allowed to touch and feel the statue, the film - which is entirely an act of observation of the reality presented in it - casts doubt on the power of vision, and, by association, on our ability to properly observe the reality that surrounds us.

I won't go into the documentary highlights of the film since much of the enjoyment it provides results from our response to its motion from scene to scene, and from the personal which manifests in the encounter with a collection of characters who spark interest and emotion to scenes which document mostly amusing moments in the routine running of the museum and the nationally oriented events which take place there such as a special government meeting marking the museum's 50th anniversary.

Tal divides the film into three parts in whose titles the word "story" appears - "Building a Story," "Hearing a Story" and "Story." The film comprises a mosaic of impressions which create memory, mold the present in which this memory functions, and yield the clutch of narratives which the film brings together and contrasts. From the Exodus from Egypt to Emperor Hadrian ("Whom we don't like," as the cashier announces as she tells a group of young visitors about an exhibit devoted to him), from the destruction of the Temple to the Holocaust and from the Holocaust to emigration - one interviewee is a musician who emigrated from the former USSR and works as a restorer at the museum - all these accumulate to create a collection of stories which Tal seeks to build through his film, demanding of the viewer to listen to them until the story itself, which is the personal and collective story of all of us and over which the Israeli narrative hovers subtly in parallel with the Palestinian narrative, emerges from the film, simultaneously lucid and bruised.

Nearly every concept the film touches on, from observation to restoration, bears both a real and a symbolic meaning. The film even addresses the question of what the

Israel Museum is in its real and symbolic essence, revealing yet concealing. The revealed and the concealed are also an element in the molding of the conceptual weight of the film which manages in its associative and impressionistic way to create a rumination on the connection between culture and historical memory. He also reveals the ideological-manipulative element inherent in this connection and its role in the Israeli ethos to this day. None of this would work if Tal weren't a talented documentarian with the gift of observation. This ability results in pleasurable viewing. It's intertwined in the film's overall fabric and underlines the encounters, confrontations and contrasts from which it's composed and which provide the basis for its creative validity.

"The Museum" Written and directed by Ran Tal; Cinematography: Daniel Kedem;
Music: Asher Goldschmidt