

## “Cinema is more authoritarian than literature”

### An Interview with Amos Gitai

Marie-Pierre ULLOA

Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai discusses the relationship between cinema and literature, memory, space, and language. In particular, he tells us about his screen adaptation of Jérôme Clément’s autobiographical novel, which portrays the story of a son’s quest in search of his Jewish mother’s painful past.

Films directed by Amos Gitai include in particular: *Kadosh*, *Kippur*, *Alila*, *Free Zone*, *Disengagement*, *Ana Arabia*.

**Books and Ideas:** Over the course of your career, you have adapted several literary works for the screen, for example *Alila*, an adaptation of *Returning Lost Loves* by Yehoshua Kenaz, and *Roses à crédit* by Elsa Triolet. You directed the theatrical adaptation of an episode from *The Jewish War* by Flavius Josephus for the Avignon Festival, as well as *One Day You’ll Understand*, based on the novel by Jérôme Clément. What is it that attracts you to the process of adapting a literary work for the screen?

**Amos Gitai:** Literature does not need cinema. Unlike cinema, literature functions on several levels. In literature, you do not have a set, rigid image attempting to flesh out a text. A reader can flesh out the text in many different ways. Cinema, on the other hand, is more authoritarian. It gives us a single interpretation of a text. I always say to the writers I am adapting for the screen: “I don’t want to illustrate your text, because it deserves to exist on its own. The reason I am doing this screen adaptation is to create a dialogue in between two independent disciplines. Each one has its own strengths. I am involved in a process of interpretation: I will remain very faithful to the spirit of the project, but not necessarily to its letter.”

In theory, cinema is linear. You watch a film from beginning to end, in the sequential order in which the scenes are constructed, while you can stop reading a novel whenever you like. Of course, now, with all the technology we have at our disposal, you can stop the film, but this is different. With a book, you can leaf through it, go back to page one. Its chronological order is more elastic than it is in a film. I approached the project of adapting *One Day You’ll Understand*

by Jérôme Clément<sup>1</sup> for the screen in full awareness of all of the obstacles that limit cinematographic interpretation. When Jérôme asked me to adapt his story, I wanted to know why a student of France's most prestigious school of administration, a high-ranking civil servant of the French state, with a driver and a handsome salary, felt the need to enter into all of this Jewish misery and reveal it.

***Books and Ideas: One striking difference between Jérôme Clément's book and your film is how the roles are distributed. Were there any major changes in protagonists between the book and the film?***

**Amos Gitai:** The book and the first version of the script had left out certain characters, for example Catherine Clément, Jérôme's sister. I put her into the film. I asked Jérôme and Dan Frank, the first screenwriter, why they had left her out. Then I brought on board my own screenwriter, Marie-José Sanselme, who has written almost all my films with me for the past fifteen years. Jérôme told me that his sister was not included in the story because they did not agree about how to interpret the letter written by their father to the French state authorities in 1941. His sister believed that the father's letter, which stipulated that he was Aryan, baptised, the father of a young Aryan girl and married to a Jewish woman, had been written to save her, Catherine, whereas her brother believed that such a letter, written in 1941, was handing over his wife to the Gestapo.

It was discovering this letter that made him want to investigate his family history. This is a story that is connected to History, to the history of the Second World War, but for him, it was about his father and his mother, his father handing over his wife to the Gestapo. Catherine Clément, who is a very highly regarded intellectual, has another view on the matter.

***Books and Ideas: There is another figure in the film who is not included in the book: the pharmacist Toubiana, who is played by Serge Moati, a French journalist of Tunisian descent. In the scene of the preparations for the burial of Rivka, the mother, with the recital of the Tehilim and then the Kaddish, Toubiana expresses a relationship to Judaism that is very different to the Ashkenazi relationship pictured in this scene. He shows that he is not familiar with Hebraic liturgy by raising his arms to the sky. He cannot speak Hebrew, and complains about the rabbi, whom he finds too orthodox. In this short scene, you seem to be offering your own take on the way mourning is dealt with in its Ashkenazi and Sephardic versions. Why include this perspective at the end?***

**Amos Gitai:** To talk about the present. I believe that, in terms of the Holocaust, there can be no forgiveness. It's a black hole. I included several characters in the film who are not in the book, like Serge Moati<sup>2</sup>, Jérôme Clément's sister and his wife, who is also absent from the book. His wife is not Jewish, but she is extremely generous. She allowed their children to bask in all of this

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<sup>1</sup> In this film, Victor (Hippolyte Girardot), a graduate of the ENA, France's elite school of administration, a Catholic, married man and father of two children, finds out about the past of his mother, Rivka (played by Jeanne Moreau), whose parents, Russian Jews who were exiled to France in between the two World Wars, died in the death camps. The film begins in 1987, at the time of the trial of Klaus Barbie. In the film, the son knows about this while his mother is still alive, while in the book, the narrator only really becomes aware of the facts after his mother has died.

<sup>2</sup> Serge Moati is also one of the producers of the film.

existential misery. I believe we must also talk about the discussion that is taking place now, in the present, and not just remember the past. So I wanted to pay homage to his wife.

***Books and Ideas:* The subjects of the Shoah and of the French collaboration with the Nazis are present from the start of the film, with the Klaus Barbie trial being shown on the television, which immediately locates the film in 1987. Why did you choose to show these images of the trial?**

**Amos Gitai:** France took some time to acknowledge the crimes of the Vichy regime. The French people created a *cover-up*<sup>3</sup>, by creating the myth of resistant France, when the resistants were only a minority. There were the Communists and the Gaullists, but the great majority did not join the resistance. Mitterrand refused to acknowledge France's responsibility as a state in the deportation of the Jews. Strangely, it is Jacques Chirac, a Gaullist, who acknowledged the responsibility of the French state in his Vél d'Hiv' speech in 1995.

***Books and Ideas:* Don't you think that it was necessary to wait for the next generation, that of Jacques Chirac, who was ten years old during the war, to acknowledge the responsibility of the French state?**

**Amos Gitai:** No, I don't think that. There were very brave French films much earlier than that, like *The Sorrow and the Pity* by Marcel Ophüls, which portrayed the collaboration with the Nazi regime that took place in Clermont-Ferrand. This is a major film, which was censored for years. There was a complete refusal to acknowledge France's responsibility. I think that, in these kinds of matters, the French are a bit slow. The Klaus Barbie trial did not take place until 1987, over forty years after the end of the war. It was the first of its kind, and it came very late. I decided to include the trial in the voice of this woman, Léa, whom Rivka hears coming out of her television set at the beginning of the film.

***Books and Ideas:* The film opens on the Klaus Barbie trial and closes on the son's escape through the corridors of the committee for the compensation of the victims of spoliations.**

**Amos Gitai:** I wanted us to come up to the present day. The compensation provided by France for the victims of the Holocaust was minimal, as is described in the film. Anyway, there is no comparison between the damages incurred and the reparations, even in a material sense. In the film, Victor refuses to accept this financial compensation. This scene of the refusal is a homage to my father, Munio Weinraub. He was not in France, but in Germany. He was tortured by the Nazis. After the war, the Germans paid out considerable sums to the Jews, but he refused to take this money. He thought it was dirty money and he didn't want any part of it.

***Books and Ideas:* What is your perspective on the issue of compensation?**

**Amos Gitai:** I believe that France should pay, that Germany should pay. They haven't paid enough. They should pay much more. The Swiss should give back the banks' stolen money, the stolen paintings should be given back. On this issue, I'm very strict. No mercy. These are things that were pillaged from the Jews who were sent to the camps. There is no reason for the

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<sup>3</sup> In English in the original text.

despoilers of the Jews to be sitting on these riches. It's the same as with slavery, we should be without mercy.

***Books and Ideas:* Are you in favour of compensation for the descendants of slaves?**

**Amos Gitai:** Why not? Westerners exploited Africans like animals. They also exploited the Indians.

***Books and Ideas:* In your film, Victor has the opposite opinion and refuses this money.**

**Amos Gitai:** Yes. Too bad for him!

***Books and Ideas:* Up until now, we have talked about the relationship between cinema and literature through a “subject”, but there is also the form, which may be the *raison d'être* of cinema. The visual language of *One Day*, just like that of another literary adaptation for the screen, *Alila*, favours single-take sequences, a type of shot that gives viewers the impression that the camera is going through walls.**

**Amos Gitai:** I often shoot single-take sequences. In *Alila*<sup>4</sup>, every take illustrates one chapter from the book. The film thus keeps an almost literary structure. This is connected to my work as an architect. It's to link up space. I believe that a good film must walk on its two feet: its themes and its form. I am always concerned with innovating with this very seductive aspect of cinema, its form, through sound, music, colours, the production design. In *Alila*, there is a series of single-take sequences that penetrate space, at our level as viewers, always in between the public space and the intimate space.

This is also present in the opening scene of my film *Kippur*, where we are involved in an intimate scene of a couple making love, but then, just afterwards, the general alert is sounded and they are called up to go to war. There is no boundary between one and the other, especially in Israel. In *Alila*, the public space has a sort of power of veto over the couple's intimate space. It is not the eruption of war that invades their intimacy, as is the case in *Kippur*, but other people. The lovers in *Alila* have rented this studio so they can meet hidden away from other people's eyes, but within five minutes, the whole neighbourhood knows about it, even the dogs. There is no refuge in the public space. The camera movements of the single-take sequence emphasise this absence of a refuge. Breaking a kind of convention, like with the single-take sequence, destabilises the viewer's gaze. I think it's interesting to not always offer a classic view of “shot, counter-shot”.

***Books and Ideas:* You often say that artists only have symbolic power. Don't you think that, sometimes, a film can have a political impact, like in France with Rachid Bouchareb's film, *Indigènes*<sup>5</sup>?**

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<sup>4</sup> *Alila* portrays the daily lives of the residents of a building in a working class district in Tel-Aviv.

<sup>5</sup> In 2006, following the release of the film *Indigènes*, the French president had the 1959 law modified in order to reassess the military pensions of former soldiers, and to thus attempt to compensate for the inequalities in treatment received by French and foreign veterans. See [http://www.liberation.fr/evenement/2006/09/25/indigenes-fait-craquer-chirac\\_52394](http://www.liberation.fr/evenement/2006/09/25/indigenes-fait-craquer-chirac_52394)

**Amos Gitai:** Yes, there are such cases, but we should not overstate the impact of culture in general. We artists do not have real power. We should be aware of that. Then you have filmmakers who want to be statesmen. I think that this is not our role. The impact of cinema is mainly on people's consciousness.

**Books and Ideas: In that sense, is filmmaking a way of doing politics by other means?**

**Amos Gitai:** Yes. If I shoot a film in Israel, this won't just have an impact in Israel. In the case of *Kadosh* (1999), the Israelis were a bit mistrustful, because I talk about religion in the film. It was the first Israeli film in competition at the Cannes Film Festival, in the official selection, in forty years. It was only after it had received the "Cannes" stamp of approval that *Kadosh* was able to return to Israel and have an impact. This isn't a linear process.

**Books and Ideas: Architecture has been feeding into your work as a filmmaker from the beginning. What are your other sources of inspiration, in particular cinematographic ones?**

**Amos Gitai:** Cinema was not a huge part of my education. I grew up in a family that was passionate about literature, in particular Russian and German literature, and Marcel Proust. Classical music was very important in our house. Opera was considered to be a bit kitsch, in our very secular circle, and cinema was viewed as a bit superficial. I was not very exposed to cinema. I'm not even a cinephile. I know this isn't very acceptable in France. I tend to love filmmakers more than films. I love Fassbinder, Rossellini, Bresson. They all have the project of describing a territory. I find that very fascinating.

Rossellini is an all-rounder. He makes melodramas, TV films, documentaries, but his project is always to describe a territory. I am inspired by this figure of a filmmaker. I find Godard really interesting, especially his approach in terms of sound, editing, rupture. Godard is a kind of cinematographic James Joyce. I also really love Éric Rohmer, because he manages to create cinema with limited means. I think that, unfortunately, the current French cinema has lost this quality. It tries to imitate American cinema, but it has neither the means nor the skills to do this.

There is also an interesting phenomenon, like with Alfred Hitchcock, a British filmmaker whom I find more interesting when he is displaced from his home territory. The American Hitchcock who creates *North by Northwest* is more interesting than the English Hitchcock, who stays on a somewhat anecdotal level with his bobbies and his telephones. When he is in America, he does not know the territory very well, so he becomes spectacular. He understands that cinema is an artifice. He does not need to be a naturalist. It's wonderful cinema, *North by Northwest*, with these faces from Mount Mont Rushmore that inspire this unforgettable scene. Hitchcock uses the American landscape as something that is completely exotic, non-realistic.

**Books and Ideas: Do you mean to say that the Amos Gitai films that are displaced from their home territory are more interesting than those shot on your native land?**

**Amos Gitai:** You have to be the judge of that. *One Day You'll Understand* is a displaced film.

**Books and Ideas: It's not your first displaced film, but it's the first displaced film you shot in France, after over twenty years of toing and froing between your native country and**

**your country of adoption. One of the formal aspects of *One Day* lies in the long periods without any speech, scenes without voices, but set to music or inflected by a silence that we can hear.**

**Amos Gitai:** There is a rhythmic aspect in literature too, but it's even stronger in cinema. In my last film, *Tsili*<sup>6</sup>, which was shot in Yiddish, and was an adaptation of a novel by Aharon Appelfeld, there are twenty minutes without any dialogue at the start. There is a whole choreographic aspect to cinema. I didn't go to film school. I learnt the craft by making films, during my first film, *Esther*, with the Director of Photography Henri Alekan<sup>7</sup>, and also with the great filmmaker Samuel Fuller. I learnt choreography and rhythm with Pina Bausch, in my film *Berlin-Jerusalem*.

***Books and Ideas:* The choice of language in your films is both disconcerting and fascinating. You have shot films in English, Arabic, French, Hebrew, and Yiddish, to mention but a few of your most recent films, but also in Russian, Tagalog, and Japanese. The question of language is infinitely political.**

**Amos Gitai:** Language is the supreme identity of culture. The Hebrew language, for example, is a language that is three thousand years old, but which hadn't been used for centuries and which was only recently resuscitated. The French people have an older relationship to their language and pay a lot of attention to language, because it is the main factor in their identity.

***Books and Ideas:* In a sense, even if French is not your mother tongue, *One Day* is a very French film, because there is no resolution at the end, no "closure"<sup>8</sup>. This issue of an absence of resolution often unsettles American audiences, who are more used to a cinema with happy ends<sup>9</sup>.**

**Amos Gitai:** I'm a bit French too! I owe it to France that I am able to make films. France took me in in 1983, after I had directed *Field Diary*, a political documentary about the war in Lebanon that was censored by Israeli television. I really love French people's relationship to culture. It is unique. For a filmmaker, there is the American option and the French option. The American one is to go to Hollywood, but Hollywood "converts" you into an American filmmaker. The French attitude is far more sophisticated. It supports Israeli, Iranian, Arab, Polish filmmakers etc., who all exist thanks to the support provided by France.

These are two diametrically opposed concepts of culture. In this sense, France is the country that is in the best position to offer another concept of culture. I hope that French people will continue to defend their strategy, which is both cultural and political. Unfortunately, it seems to me that, for some time, they have been going through a rough patch of confusion and calling into question their own model.

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<sup>6</sup> *Tsili*, which is due to be released in France in 2015, is somewhat reminiscent of *The Wild Child* by François Truffaut (1970).

<sup>7</sup> Alekan was the Director of Photography of Jean Cocteau, Julien Duvivier and Wim Wenders.

<sup>8</sup> In English in the original text.

<sup>9</sup> In English in the original text.

**Interview carried out by Marie-Pierre Ulloa**

Published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), on 7 January 2016

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