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# Beautiful Dreamers

## “Unsettled Returns: A Screening and Dialogue with Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan”

*Negotiations: From a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace*

review by Richard Fung

“People are saying, ‘be realistic, be realistic. We need two states, we need to separate: this is realistic.’ But realism has failed, so we should see what utopia can offer.” Thus reasoned Eyal Sivan during the lively question-and-answer period at “Unsettled Returns,” a cinematic and in-person dialogue between the Israeli filmmaker, best known for *The Specialist*, his acclaimed 1999 documentary on the 1961 trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann, and Michel Khleifi, whose *Wedding in Galilee*, the first fiction feature film directed by a Palestinian, won the 1987 International Critics’ Award at Cannes.

Sivan’s prescription typifies the provocative thinking that made *Negotiation’s* Saturday evening program one of the freshest and most defiantly hopeful events mounted in Toronto on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The event included the screening of an extended excerpt of a four hour and thirty minute, collaborative work-in-progress by Khleifi and Sivan, titled *Route 181, fragments of a journey in Palestine –Israel’* as well as an earlier short film by each of the directors.

Khleifi’s *Ma’aloul Celebrates Its Destruction* (1984) captures to great effect the fate of the Palestinian village of Ma’aloul, which was razed by the Israeli armed forces, its Christian and Muslim dwellers dispersed. Since then, the former inhabitants and their families have been allowed to return on only one day a year, the anniversary of Israel’s independence, when they hold a picnic among the ruins of their homes. Village elders recall the destruction of both their property and harmonious way of life, as youngsters scramble to savour and absorb their forbidden heritage in a single, precious day. Intercut with these scenes, a teacher in a Palestinian classroom explains to his teenage students the history of Palestine, the Holocaust and the creation of Israel. As the title suggests, the film’s tone is both wistful and biting irony — and surprisingly generous.

By contrast, Eyal Sivan’s *Aqabat Jaber: Peace with No Return?* (1995), is sober and sobering. Sivan’s first film documented the Palestinian refugee camp of Aqabat Jaber just before the first Intifada, and now he returns a day after the Israeli military has left the region under Palestinian control. Its nominal status has changed but its inhabitants remain refugees



Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan in Toronto, 2003. Photo: Babak Salari.



Above: View of the segregation wall at Kalkyia  
Below: Israeli soldiers in Ramallah  
*Route 181, Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel.*  
Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan, 2003, film stills.  
Courtesy: the directors.

stranded in a camp. In one particularly wrenching interview, a young woman ponders her life and future, having known nothing but the dusty, desolate camp, devoid of facilities and entertainments, with all food and clothing rationed from the United Nations. Meanwhile, she yearns for the ancestral family home she has been barred from seeing. The film questions the prospects for peace without Israel's recognition of Palestinian refugees' right of return to their homeland, now within the state of Israel.

*Route 181*, the cornerstone of the evening's program, is a "road movie" that follows the directors along the imaginary borders proposed by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181 for the partition of the British-ruled Palestine Mandate into a Jewish and an Arab state. Accepted by the Jews in Palestine, but neither by the Palestinian Arabs nor the Arab states, the Resolution passed by a majority of voting members, though it has been noted that in 1947, the year of its passage, much of Asia and almost all of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific were without voice at the UN, being colonies of Europe.

Travelling from south to north, the directors not only document the military apparatus and physical barriers deployed to separate Palestinians and Israelis, most notoriously the wall under construction by the government of Ariel Sharon, they demonstrate the contentious yet inextricable link between the two peoples. Unfortunately, the range of possible interactions seems limited, often taking the form of Israeli soldiers monitoring Palestinians at the frequent checkpoints, or Palestinian workers in the employ of Israelis, as in a candid interview with an Israeli archaeologist and his Palestinian work crew.

In the discussion period, Sivan used an anecdote to further illustrate how Israel functions as an "ethnocracy": approaching a checkpoint, the film's production manager, his sister, would stop only after being ordered to, and she would pull up right beside the soldier. Khleifi, on the other hand, would halt the vehicle 100 metres before the checkpoint and wait for the soldier to summon him. "This," Sivan explained, "is how [the soldier] knows who is Israeli and who is Palestinian." "But at the end of the shooting,"

The latter two chapters of the book extend this thesis as Hassan elaborates upon his earlier arguments to discuss cultural products, such as language and art. Hassan argues that like demography philology is born of the colonialist enterprise; as such, it is consumed with the question of the zero, or the worth of language. In other words, it preoccupies itself with questions such as: which languages are disappearing, which are robust, which are great. Hassan suggests that philology, a demography of language, would have remained a tangential intellectual enterprise were it not for the rise of capitalism and colonialism.

In making this argument, he suggests that philology began with the colonial creation of the dragoman,<sup>2</sup> whom Hassan defines as a “trickster [who] lurked everywhere and nowhere in the social web of exchanges.” In the early colonial period the dragoman became (and even now continues to be) an all-important vehicle for legitimizing the authority of colonial languages, such as English and French. Moreover, the dragoman who, over time, becomes the philologist has had to “scientifically” account for the marginality of certain indigenous languages, which are said to be dying or in decline, such as Cherokee, Quechua and Kiswahili, for example. In this regard, the philologist establishes a lineage that, like all racialized knowledge, is hierarchical. This hierarchy is necessary given capitalist colonialism’s inability to equally conceive of social difference or diversity. Regarding this point, Hassan notes that “it is not the diversity of languages which divides humanity.” Rather, “[c]apitalism is a monolithic form of economics which competitively seeks to eliminate or repress alternatives.”

These insights are a useful corrective to contemporary governmental discussions of multiculturalism and “diversity” that, while illuminating and celebrating cultural diversity as existing among different ethnic groups (for example, Somalis, Portuguese and Koreans) within the nation, ignore one crucial detail. This is that capitalism is a cultural form in itself that organizes labour, consumption, distribution and indeed culture itself. As such, capitalism allows for, even employs, certain displays of diversity

or ethnic difference, to the extent that these do not impede the accumulation of capital. Thus, Hassan’s discussion of capitalism’s “impulse for monoculturalism and monolingualism” is crucial in the contemporary moment, when “diversity” is all the rage.

Continuing this line of argument, and arguing against the monoculturalism of capital, Hassan’s final chapter discusses art and consumption. In this chapter, he argues against metaphysical descriptions of art positing abstract and universal notions of beauty. Once again, he suggests that these descriptions are haunted by the question of the zero, meaning which is declining and ascending. He notes that,

The desire to expel materiality from cultural analysis is the basis for the construction of hierarchies. Comparisons of greatness, establishments of canons, and more generally the ranking of cultures, societies and civilizations neglect that a culture’s production has to be considered relative to its own capacity for production and to its own interpretive modes and use values.

In other words, when cultures are ranked “equally” or in a false hierarchy, the zero, which names such things as “primitive art” becomes the ideological tool to accomplish this work.

Ultimately, the strength of Hassan’s work is his breadth, which is quite frankly stunning. In that regard he is a devoted student of Samir Amin, the prolific and poignant Egyptian political economist, who brings a phenomenal linguistic and historical capacity to his voluminous body of work. Unfortunately much of Amin’s work is out of print, and *Velocities of Zero* successfully develops some of Amin’s more crucial insights, for example his theory of eurocentrism. Following in Amin’s footsteps, Hassan shows the importance of being a global thinker. This skill is especially important at a time when such truly global work is more and more relevant, and less and less favourably regarded, given both the post-9/11 rush to parochialism and the revival of what Tariq Ali calls the “clash of fundamentalisms.”

Hassan’s global scope means that his work should also be of interest to many people other than demographers and statisticians. Specifically, academics and activists reading and working in the area of globalization need to read this book. Particularly because much of the literature on economic globalization reads globalization as a new phenomenon, beginning somewhere around the late 1960s and early 1970s. While this is to some extent true, given that capitalist modes of production did change significantly around that period, Hassan’s work is crucial in demonstrating that capitalism, given that it works through and is only possible via colonialism, has always been about globalizing production, the labour force and so on. Hassan’s twinning of capitalism and colonialism (persuasively argued with deep historical knowledge) is crucial, especially given that it has been overlooked by the gurus of anti-globalization, who have made otherwise cogent, albeit fairly ahistorical, arguments — witness the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and Naomi Klein. Moreover, Hassan’s work demonstrates that questions of globalization are not merely economic, as too many on the Left presume, but also deeply cultural. Hassan’s ability to speak to questions of culture and economics means that he should be read both by those engaged in diaspora or transnationalism and transculturation studies, as well as those doing work on political economy. *Velocities of Zero* is worth reading not simply to be informed, but to seriously engage Hassan’s methodology.

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## Notes

- 1 The “zero” in the title perhaps resonates more loudly if we think about its meaning in Arabic. *Sifr*, the Arabic word for zero, can mean the number zero, but it also has incredible cultural power to negatively define things. As such, it can mean for example, “nothing,” “worthless,” or “shit.”
- 2 Also known as tarjuman or turjuman, which as Hassan notes, comes from the Arabic word *tarjama*, meaning to translate or interpret.