

Art as humanization

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30 December 2005

Munich, directed by Steven Spielberg, written by Tony Kushner and Eric Roth, based on *Vengeance: The True Story of an Israeli Counter-Terrorist Team*, by George Jonas

Munich, Steven Spielberg's latest work, concerns itself with the efforts of a team of Israeli agents to track down and kill Palestinian leaders allegedly responsible for masterminding the hostage-taking episode at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich that resulted in the deaths of eleven Israeli athletes. As the bloody act of revenge proceeds, the team members grow increasingly skeptical about the morality and efficacy of their operation.

One is entitled to have ambivalent feelings about this film, but, in the end, it strikes me as an honest, relatively complicated and humane effort—in many ways, quite remarkable—and one that provides little comfort for defenders of the status quo, in Israel or elsewhere. *Munich* is a work that took considerable courage to make, as the genuine hostility it has evoked in reactionary quarters demonstrates. This was clearly not a film made with a commercial return in mind. Spielberg is more than a mere celebrity; he has a serious standpoint and, moreover, a definite commitment to craftsmanship. And that latter quality has consequences. To the extent that the filmmaker is artistically honest, this obliges him to make choices that take him beyond the limits of his conscious political and social outlook.

Avner (Eric Bana) is a Mossad agent in *Munich*, the son of a war hero and former bodyguard of the prime minister, Golda Meir, who awaits the birth of his first child. Claiming that the Munich tragedy “changes everything”—an obvious echo of the Bush administration's rhetoric following the September 11 terrorist attacks—Meir (Lynn Cohen) justifies authorizing a plan to assassinate Palestinian leaders around the world on the grounds that “Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values.” Avner is asked to lead the assassination squad.

The eventual team, of which Avner is the youngest and at first most hesitant member, includes Steve (Daniel Craig), a bloody-minded South African; the Belgian Robert (Mathieu Kassovitz), a toymaker now charged with making bombs; a German Jew, Hans (Hanns Zischler), an antiques dealer and expert forger; and Carl (Ciarán Hinds), a self-described ‘worrier’ and clean-up man.

The team, which has no official link to Mossad and acts autonomously, sets about its work in Europe. Without going into any more detail than necessary, Avner's group carries out a series of operations in Rome, Paris, Cyprus, Beirut and Athens. Initially the most sensitive about the nature of the mission, Avner becomes hardened by the experience. When one of his team remarks how strange it is “to think of yourself as an assassin,” Avner cynically rejoins, “Think of yourself as something else, then.” But events begin to wear on him.

Avner and others start questioning the proof that their targets indeed had anything to do with the Munich killings. All except Steve, the South African, a fascist type, who declares that “the only blood that matters to me is Jewish blood.” Hans, on the other hand, points out that the Palestinians didn't invent bloodshed and terrorism. “How do you think we got the land from them in the first place?”

While in Athens, Avner and his team, claiming to be European leftists, unexpectedly share a room with a group of Palestinian bodyguards. Avner gets into a conversation in a hallway with one of them, Ali (Omar Metwally), who tells him that “European Reds” don't understand the significance of a homeland. Ali goes on: “We can wait forever. You don't know what it is not to have a home. Home is everything.” The two groups share a common ideology, based on land and blood.

The Palestinians eventually become aware of the team's operations. The hunters are themselves hunted. Self-doubt increasingly plagues Avner's squad. Members of the group fall victim to attacks, one perhaps to suicide (after arguing, “Jews don't do wrong because our enemies do wrong ... We're supposed to be righteous.”).

Back in Israel, Avner's mother (Gila Almagor), who lost her family to the Nazis, justifies his activities, without knowing their precise nature, by unconditionally defending the founding of Israel: “We had to take it because no one would ever give it to us. Whatever it took, whatever it takes, we have a place on earth at last.”

But Avner, who has moved his wife and child to Brooklyn, finds no solace. He questions the ethical basis of his operation and comes to the conclusion, “There's no peace at the end of this.” In a meeting with his Mossad controller, Ephraim (Geoffrey Rush), in New York, he once again demands evidence that the murdered men had anything to do with the Munich hostage-taking. Provided with only vague assurances, he rejects Ephraim's entreaties.

History before Munich

One can find fault with Spielberg and principal screenwriter Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*) on a number of grounds. Although there are references to the origins of the state of Israel, the film tends to suggest that the history of violence in the region began in Munich in 1972. In fact, the establishment of the Zionist state meant the expulsion of some 800,000 Palestinians. In 1946, Jews owned less than 12 percent of the land in the area that became Israeli territory; that figure rose to 77 percent after the 1948-49 war.

Palestinians fled their land in large measure out of fear of Zionist violence. In the notorious massacre at Deir Yassin in April 1948, Menachem Begin's Irgun group massacred 250 men, women and children. This widely publicized event was part of a deliberate effort to terrorize the Arabs and empty Palestine of its population. Over a two-year period from 1947 to 1949, the Zionists destroyed and depopulated more than 400 Arab villages, systematically replacing them with Jewish communities. By 1972, then, masses of Palestinians had been living miserably in refugee camps distributed throughout the region for more than two decades. They had only recently taken up arms against their condition.

The killing of the Israeli athletes was an atrocity (how many were killed by Palestinians and how many by German police snipers remains

unknown), but the ultimate responsibility for the violence lies with the Zionist authorities and their backers in Washington and elsewhere.

Moreover, it is reasonable to assume, and research apparently backs this up, that the decision taken by Meir was only in part a specific response to the Munich events. These rather provided the moral and political pretext for the Israelis to eliminate a portion of the Palestinian leadership, many of whom had nothing whatsoever to do with the Olympic hostage-taking. Avner raises this issue in the film, but, again, the reference is only a fleeting one.

The notion of a timeless Jewish moral superiority to which the assassination team's operation supposedly represents an affront must also be rejected. To the extent that a considerable portion of the Jewish intelligentsia and proletariat had links to progressive social movements (a major impetus for the Nazis' anti-Semitism), this was due to specific historic and social, not 'racial,' circumstances. In a tragically ironic manner, the evolution of Israeli society and its official racism and oppression of the Palestinians have put paid once and for all to the idea that the Jews are the 'chosen people' in any social sense. It turns out there are poor and rich Jews, oppressed and oppressor Jews, revolutionary and fascist-minded Jews, just as there are such categories among every other ethnic group on the face of the earth.

That having been said, *Munich* is considerably more than the sum of its obvious and not unexpected limitations. Spielberg and Kushner have accomplished something important and valuable. The film represents an indictment of the politics of retaliation and revenge. It painstakingly demonstrates that such killing has the most horrifying consequences, both for the victim and the perpetrator. Spielberg is deliberately unsparing in this regard, and it is undoubtedly one of the elements that outrages his right-wing critics: the victims are people too, who die in painful and terrible ways. All the deaths are horrible, including of course the deaths of the Israeli athletes in Munich. Spielberg and Kushner take each one singly and carefully. The murder of a woman assassin is particularly devastating, one of the most chilling such scenes in recent memory. A great deal of thought and sensitivity have gone into this work.

The film asks: how can human beings like Avner and his colleagues proceed on such a killing spree, particularly if they begin to doubt the official claims that justify it? Or, as the film's production notes put it, the team members begin to ask: "Who exactly are we killing? Can it be justified? Will it stop the terror?" Are these not critical themes today, especially in the US? If 'left' opponents of the film feel that these are unworthy or insignificant questions, let them explain themselves.

Critics claim that the actual members of Mossad's assassination squads (who, incidentally, murdered an entirely innocent man, a Moroccan immigrant living in Norway, in 1973) never felt the qualms that Avner and his team experience. One can only reply, then they should have, and this is something the artists have contributed, to their credit.

In any event, the existence of the "refusenik" movement in the Israeli military, including more than 1,200 soldiers and reservists who have refused to serve in the Occupied Territories, reveals that this is a burning issue. One of a group of 27 Israeli air force pilots in 2003, which issued a letter declaring its refusal to take part in military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, told a reporter, "Something deep broke inside me. I don't sleep well at night. How many more have to be killed until we realise that we are committing crimes?" Is this not Avner? Spielberg and Kushner are obviously sensitive to this.

Spielberg has gone to considerable lengths, in the face of criticism from pro-Zionist elements, to affirm his love for Israel, his dedication to its existence and so forth. Again, this is entirely to be expected. But the film hardly ennoble the Zionist cause. Are we supposed to celebrate each violent death? Only the most depraved elements in the audience will do so. Whatever the director's intentions, *Munich* traces out a course of official violence and criminality, which only begets more violence.

Clearly, the events of September 11 and their aftermath resonate strongly in the film. A section of the American liberal intelligentsia has concluded that the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington provide justification for the most deplorable and sinister activities by the US state.

"Whatever it takes ..."

And Spielberg-Kushner also hint at the outlook that for some Israelis and their supporters around the world justifies the violence against the Palestinians, as well as its historical origins. One must look in particular to the words of Avner's mother, when she explains about her arrival in Palestine, in the wake of the Holocaust: "Whatever it took, whatever it takes ..." This hardness, formed in part in the concentration camps, while tragically understandable, is a perverse and ultimately poisonous outlook. A portion of the victims, fresh from the horrors in Europe, concluded: "Enough of that rubbish about the goodness of man! Look at what happened to us! We know what humanity is like, rotten, cruel. Well, we too can be rotten and cruel. Whatever it takes ..." In a terrible twist of fate, some of the victims of the worst crime in history absorbed the outlook of their tormentors. Humanism, the Enlightenment, the traditions of socialism and progressive thought were thrown out the window by these people. A new appeal to blood was launched, only this time to "Jewish blood."

In a painful sense, both the Israelis and Palestinians are victims of history, victims of the twentieth century and its thwarted hopes. Avner is assuredly not driven by personal spite or ambition. Something harsh and terrible was taken out of the Nazi camps. His mother's face is that of someone deeply, irretrievably scarred by the past. And one always has the sense that these people are trying terribly hard to convince themselves of the righteousness of their cause—in some cases, fortunately, without success. Kushner explains that *Munich* "became more and more the story of a man whose decency just won't let him off the hook."

The Zionist appeal to blood and homeland finds an echo within the Palestinian nationalist movement as well. When Ali rejects the program of the "European Reds," internationalism and socialism, he shares the same debased and reactionary outlook as the Zionists. *Munich*, inadvertently perhaps, points to the bankruptcy of terrorism as a method of struggle of the oppressed. In the murky world portrayed in the film of international terrorism and counter-terrorism, one never knows precisely who's who. Avner is never certain whether his information from "Papa" and his group originates ultimately with the CIA, Mossad itself (desiring to remain officially removed from the team's operations), a section of the Palestinian movement attempting to settle accounts, and so forth.

Terrorism is almost inevitably associated today with the politics of tribalism and communalism, in the final analysis with the effort to pressure the great powers on behalf of the special privileges of this or that national bourgeois or petty bourgeois layer. The working class struggle for socialism, on the other hand, requires the greatest degree of openness, clarity and mass participation and consciousness.

Right-wing attacks

Munich has come under venomous attack by right-wing forces in the US and Israel, particularly the former. As Michelle Goldberg explains in her "The War on 'Munich'" (*Spiegel Online*), the campaign began well before

the film appeared in the cinema. Leon Wieseltier, literary critic of the *New Republic*, the fiercely pro-Zionist liberal publication, vented his spleen against Spielberg in early December.

The film's "tedium," Wieseltier declared, "is finally owed to the fact that, for all its vanity about its own courage, the film is afraid of itself. It is soaked in the sweat of its idea of evenhandedness." He continues: "The screenplay is substantially the work of Tony Kushner, whose hand is easily recognizable in the crudely schematic quality of the drama, and also in something more. The film has no place in its heart for Israel. ... Zionism, in this film, is just anti-anti-Semitism. The necessity of the Jewish state is acknowledged, but necessity is a very weak form of legitimacy."

Wieseltier perceives the film's dangerous applicability to the US following September 11, 2001. "The Israeli response to Black September marked the birth of contemporary counterterrorism, and it is difficult not to see *Munich* as a parable of American policy since September 11. 'Every civilization finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values,' Golda Meir grimly concludes early in the film. Yet the film proclaims that terrorists and counterterrorists are alike. 'When we learn to act like them, we will defeat them!' declares one of Avner's men, played by Daniel Craig, already with a license to kill. Worse, *Munich* prefers a discussion of counterterrorism to a discussion of terrorism; or it thinks that they are the same discussion. This is an opinion that only people who are not responsible for the safety of other people can hold." People "responsible for the safety of other people" such as George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon, presumably, two of the world's leading political arsonists.

Wieseltier's defense of American and Israeli "counterterrorism," the policies of aggression and repression in the Middle East, was seconded by David Brooks, right-wing columnist for the *New York Times*. Brooks asserted that Spielberg badly misreads the Middle East because he denies the existence of evil, i.e., Islamic radicalism. Brooks comments, "Because he will not admit the existence of evil, as it really exists, Spielberg gets reality wrong. ... In Spielberg's Middle East the only way to achieve peace is by renouncing violence. But in the real Middle East the only way to achieve peace is through military victory over the fanatics, accompanied by compromise between the reasonable elements on each side." From the safety of his *Times* column, Brooks consistently advances the most bloody-minded and brutal conceptions.

In fact, hostile critics were made so anxious by Spielberg's film and its implications that they began denouncing it at the time of the release of his last film, *War of the Worlds*. Edward Rothstein, also of the *Times*, complained last July about *Munich*, simply on the basis of hearsay. He wrote: "It is said to begin with the murders of Israeli Olympic athletes by Palestinian terrorists in 1972—an attack Martian-like in its ambitions. But the analogy, Mr. Spielberg's comments suggest, will be undermined: injustices suffered by the attackers will need to be understood and their victims' tactics questioned." The *Times* columnist added, "Perhaps that idea of terrorists with a cause and defenders with doubts influenced the discomfort felt in the current film [*War of the Worlds*] as well." Earlier this week, it should be added, Rothstein predictably followed up with his own ignorant attack on *Munich*, in the pages of the *Times*.

This reactionary hectoring is entirely to the credit of Spielberg and Kushner. The latter has described himself as "both a God-believing Jew and a historical materialist socialist humanist agnostic. I want the State of Israel to exist (since it does anyway) ... and at the same time ... I think the founding of the State of Israel was for the Jewish people a historical, moral, political calamity." These are ambiguities that cry out for resolution, but nonetheless they contain the possibility of insight, in opposition to the ideological 'death squad' represented by Wieseltier, Brooks and Rothstein.

Celebrating the Israeli killing machine?

Left and Arab critics have also come out against *Munich*. Again, many correct political points can be made against the film's liberal outlook and its serious omissions in regard to the history of Israel and the plight of the Palestinians. But to suggest that Spielberg and Kushner have produced nothing but a "Celebration of the Israeli Killing Machine," and other such comments, is absurd and unworthy. This is not to view the film's images, but simply to watch one's preconceptions flash in front of one's eyes.

The claim is made that nothing goes on in *Munich* other than the "humanization of Israeli killers." Again, this is patently untrue, but, in any event, art, alas, confronts the unavoidable task of humanizing. Serious art cannot function in any other manner. To portray a human being honestly and deeply requires a high degree of artistic objectivity. What do we ask of the artist? Precisely that he or she sensitizes us to the human personality and condition in all its complexities. If not that, then what? People who want the opposite of humanization want propaganda films, which have a very limited value.

We will be told: ah, so you want to humanize Bush or Sharon! To 'humanize' is not to 'condone.' The actions carried out by Avner and his group are horrible and criminal, and that fact emerges from the drama itself to any sensitive spectator. Anyone not disturbed by the events, or who finds them attractive or exciting in any fashion, had better see a specialist. In any case, a Mossad agent is not the same thing as a mastermind of imperialist policy. In his own way, Avner too is a victim of historical circumstances. And he ultimately responds along those lines. We would ask the critics who claim that *Munich* is mere Zionist apologia, based on your conceptions, what kind of film would you make?

Criticism on this score amounts to empty moralizing of the liberal-anarchist variety. Shall we have no films about US soldiers in Iraq because of the crimes carried out there? Those soldiers, even the ones committing terrible acts, are also victims of imperialism. If their stories, and the horrors perpetrated, are not represented, how is mass revulsion and shame to develop in America?

Of course the Palestinian viewpoint must be seen and heard. *Paradise Now*, directed by Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad, about the making of suicide bombers in the Occupied Territories, deserves a far wider audience than it will currently obtain in North America. A film about the victims of Deir Yassin, or the fate of Qibya, the Jordanian village whose residents were massacred by Sharon's unit 101 in October 1953, is entirely in order.

However, if the Jews as a people in Israel are guilty of such sins, like the American population presumably in the case of Iraq, that they cannot even be represented in artistic works, then this leads to the most pessimistic and bleak conclusions. We would prefer a hundred *Munichs*, with its faults, to such dire and blockheaded 'left' thinking.

Spielberg has an instinctive feeling for history. His next project is about Abraham Lincoln. A radicalization is under way in America, and it will be difficult to stop. Once people get a taste for ideas, politics and history, it will prove contagious.



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