

The Corner of Hollywood and Sinai

Review: *Body of Lies*

By Guest Columnist Naomi Hecht

“On the whole, life gets more and more complex every day and moves on at its own sweet will, and people get more and more foolish, and are isolated from life in ever-increasing numbers.”

(attributed to Anton Chekhov by M. Gorky)

“Stay a stranger in this land.”

(Genesis 26:3)

Is it a good movie?

-- What's a good movie?

Well, do you want to see it again?

-- Even when a wicked dream informs you of some vital facts, do you ever wish to dream that wicked dream again?

Are there intriguing characters?

--Yes, but would I invite any one of them into my psyche for tea, or care if I never saw them again?

Is there a significant message?

-- Is the message: we are not safe, there is no loyalty, innocence will not protect, everyone deceives in the cause of personal interest, love matters most, might wins when there is no discernible right: significant?

What about just that one – love matters most – is that this movie's white light?

--If love is a sentiment that robs us of skill and mental precision and sets life at risk on the battlefield, and if life's every decision, every inclination and aspiration places us without respite on a battlefield, is there space for such a sentiment?

Is there a satisfying ending to this movie?

-- Oxymoron, isn't that?
Are there no answers?
Ah, that's the question.

This movie's shadow is that there are no answers.

The movie is about Americans fighting terrorism but only one American is consistently and physically engaged in the fight, stationed in the middle-east – the others are fighting it from a distance, electronically. The American operative is a brave and combative and significant warrior but he is overwhelmed and afflicted by mistrust and the centre-of-the-earth insensitivity of his superiors. The terrorists are diabolical or dim or both. Really, it is a remake of Goldilocks and the 3 Bears only there are many Goldilocks and the bears are generally present when she invades their home.

Martin Buber wrote: "The basis of man's life with man is ... the wish of every man to be confirmed as what he is, even as what he can become, by men; and the innate capacity in man to confirm his fellow-men in this way."

But what if, as this movie suggests, every man is dangerous to his self and to others and all that any human can hope to be is so isolated as to be safe from others, and still never able to be protected from his own self. What if?

Is it the obligation of Art to manufacture hope?

Or truth?

Does a picture capture reality and is a moving picture captive reality in motion?

Is reality a synonym for truth? Or is reality each individual's perception and, by definition, subjective?

Why have you forsaken me?, is the present unspoken question of each human to the other in this film. Still, there is no dialogue without a barrier to truth within it between the characters: we grow parched, as we watch, from the deprivation of the sustenance of truth.

The desert, with no sound of human elicitation, no motion that conceives, bears, and breeds breath is the setting to best describe merciless human loneliness and that wail against futility: the wounding Why? We are frail and defeated in the horizontal eye. It is in this ghost-town of human endeavour that hope burns into air.

This movie is a desert.

The Jews, freed from slavery and indignation, had an integral and restorative chapter in the desert. And, yet, they were enslaved (servants to the Will of God) and indignant (against the Will of God). Still, we have a sense from this moving picture – people marching from unwanted to chosen servitude – of a vertical, a climb. Even the falls seem to promote the climb.

But in this movie there is no apparent vertical.

The female Jordanian nurse (the romantic interest of the main character, an American CIA operative) does tell this American that the Man exists apart from his job but since we have been told that the ego of the Muslim terrorist leader is greater than his beliefs (and certainly this seems to be true of the allied leadership against terrorism in this film as well) it appears that only a job that is not bound to creed presents no danger to the emergence of a positive essence and the worthy spirit of man.

But what is the shape and substance of this human whose work does not reflect his inspiration?

Do we distinguish between manifest and ideal truth?

Does one have value without the other?

Can one exist without the other?

In Shakespeare's *MACBETH*, Lady Macbeth declares:

'That which hath made them drunk

Hath made me bold,

What hath quenched them

Hath given me fire.'

And then she sends her husband to kill the good king.

The reader wishes she had chosen a higher boldness, a sheltering fire – and that her actions would then reflect temperance and forbearance. Still, the play allows us these reflections, it beckons and leads us to them. But, while we watch and inhale the drama, we respond with sentient thought and, only after, articulate conscience and consciousness. IF the Art kicks down these doors and lifts these windows.

It is a week since I saw this movie, time enough for the seven days of mourning, and still I can not rise to reason or locate the vertical.

“Judaism does not want man to rationalize evil or to theologize it away. It challenges him to defy evil and, in case of defeat, to give vent to his distress. Both rationalizing and theologizing harden the human heart and make it insensitive to disaster. Man, Judaism says, must act like a human being... The encounter with death must precipitate a showing of protest, a bitter complaint, a sense of existential nausea, and complete confusion.” (Rav Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind*.)

So, perhaps, Ridley Scott has succeeded in his portrayal of pervasive corruption and inescapable hopelessness. And all the viewer is left with is a cry. E. Gombrich wrote: “The artist gradually eliminates the discrepancies between what is seen and what is drawn.” To see through the eyes of a single man – vision and commentary – is that Art? But I ask again: what is the purpose of Art? Is it a portrayal of reality or truth, and, if hope is absent in reality, is hope not inherent to truth?

Those two biblical miracles: the parting of the waters of the Reed Sea and the opening of the earth to swallow Korach and his cohorts alive – challenge faith. Any challenge to faith summons or stifles it.

This movie challenges faithlessness. It states: there is nothing to be trusted to endure your faith. And what are the miracles here? The ambidextrous weapons, the vehicles able to navigate badlands, the men who sit in armchairs and audience war and torture on huge high-definition screens, the tiny telephones with far-reaching powers, the human ingenuity to plot and manufacture vanishing acts of ambiguous heroism and debauchery.

This movie summons faithlessness by its moral exhaustion. Where is its necessary ability to stifle faithlessness?

It is capably acted, photographed, written – we are a capable generation. But from what is our capacity born, and directed where?

I think there isn't one book displayed in this movie.

(Except for some mention of the Koran: which is quoted and argued in a limp hysteria, with much (too much) room for interpretation, which doesn't at all elucidate; which treats this book as contraband – so it does not navigate the calm cutting blade that other many missing and unquestionably well-placed gifting and gifted works do.) Should I assume this film's characters, with their missive responsibilities, read behind the curtain? What do they read? That we are a people of the Book is indisputable – this Book is not a coat of arms, it is a manual. What is the manual of these men who say who should live and who should die?

The CIA boss declares, in his defense: 'Nobody's innocent.' Does he defend everyone then? Does he imagine there is no such thing as innocence? Does it exist at least as a concept? And repentance? Is the American operative's repentance, his attempt to return to innocence, in his decision not to return to America or to his job, to reject complicity? To stand alone? Is the movie's most pressing message that only the unaffiliated are safe? We are a communal species but the Tower of Babel that our efforts (as illustrated in this movie) construct today is shaped by dissonance and unnerving paranoia and this will not stand.

Must we admire any effort at creativity? Because what we allow to enter our minds makes an easy or uneasy home there.

Deuteronomy 28:34 – "...until you are driven mad by what your eyes behold."

Ha'amek Davar states: The madness comes not from physical suffering but from the disruption of normal causal relationships.

There is the story within this film of a bystander who, unknowingly, is used to further the cause against terrorism. In Ridley Scott's GLADIATOR, the idea of the single man sacrificing his life for the greater good is glorified. But there is the matter of choice. The man in this movie does not choose a cause, does not choose to die for the cause – he is bewildered and frightened and dis-arm'd as he dies.

Are we to think that in a far-away time of poverty, disease, strife, and lesser knowledge – a time when citizens were entertained by torture -- there was yet a nobility in living that has been lost?

“Both Yaakov (Beraishit 49:1-27) and Moshe (Devarim 33:1-29), before their deaths, blessed the children of Israel. On both occasions, Zevulun received his blessing out of the chronological order of his birth. According to Rashi (Devarim 33:18), Zevulun, although born after Yissachar, deserved priority because it was only by virtue of his labor that Yissachar was able to study Torah. Hence, he is always blessed first.” (Moshe Sokolow, Studies in the Weekly Parsha)

Zevulun is praised for his choice and his efforts to honor the choice and efforts of Yissachar. This is similar to the secret-service man who chooses to guard the president. If the secret-service man is wounded in the line of duty, he is regarded as a hero, a patriot and a brave soldier. Still, it is the president who receives the reverence and avowal of this soldier. There is the one who serves and the one who is served. Would they both agree who is the more indispensable man? By definition of their actions, it would appear so. This is a ‘normal causal relationship.’ BODY OF LIES abounds with the careless disruptions of ‘normal causal relationships.’

There is conflict in this web, but is there integration?

This movie tells us that when you ask – who is my enemy? you will only know the answer by determining – who is my friend? And if you go independently further by suggesting that, for all men, the first enemy is within, the first friend is within – then the critical protagonist is Me, the critical antagonist is Me. Would this then eliminate the fights of man against man? The movie suggests there are labels to be attached to the existing politic and even to our self-referential politic – and that the labels’ determinations merge somewhere between damaged and damaged beyond repair.

If asked: Would you rather be Zevulun or Yissachar; or, who would you hope to want to be, and why? – what would you answer? How you answer would tell me much about who you are. How I respond to your answer would self-inform.

“There’s nothing to like in the Middle-East.”, the CIA director says – then adds, “Maybe that’s the problem.” His assumptions are reckless; his candor, although irritatingly elitist, raises questions.

Questions must be posed, it is true. And this film certainly asks. But for some reason the query appears rhetorical, even hollow.

If we hear the questions formed by existence and sweat to answer them with an oral confession, aloud, in complete sentences – then our responses are likely to be revelational, possibly the only significant revelation available to us. But there can be no such exchange in a vacuum – is this movie a theatrical vacuum?

The movies are constructed with subjectivity and viewers of the movies respond, initially, as we view, with subjectivity and it cannot be otherwise. But if it doesn’t lead to self-awareness and to an appraisal of the day and the dark and the sound and unsound, and on, then what is the purpose of this war of feelings and thought?

Is there still a need to write so elementarily, so savagely, so primarily, about the ripping sadness of war or the incomprehensible roots of terrorism or the haze of corrupt or unsupported anti-terrorism? -- to make movies out of these writings? – to encourage the young and the middle and the old, the pristine, the deluded, and all prayerful people to see these visions? – yes, I would say, yes. IF they are the moving pictures that cast a light, that have the scent of redemption. Don’t set before us, Mr. Scott, the pictures that will not deliver or sustain us, that are autistic -- locked and self-enclosed. For “I am one of those machines that sometimes explodes.” (Nietzsche) And so are you.

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