

## **The View from Perlov**

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In 1963 I went to the Esther cinema in Tel-Aviv to see ***Murder, She Said***, adapted from one of the Jane Marple novels by Agatha Christie. The ads for the film noted that the feature would be preceded by an Israeli documentary entitled ***In Jerusalem***. I was less than thrilled by that announcement. Israeli movie theatres of that era occasionally screened such films before the feature presentation. Most of them were produced by the Israel Film Service and other official institutions and were no more than propaganda films, traditionally directed and lacking creative inspiration. So I prepared myself for gaping at some mind-dulling documentary in anticipation of the film about the elderly British female sleuth.

Then David Perlov's ***In Jerusalem*** came on the screen. I didn't yet realize the full importance of the film and its director in the history of Israeli cinema, nor could I know the place that Perlov would come to occupy in my life. What I did know was that this was an Israeli film the likes of which I had never seen before: neither a documentary nor a feature film. I had the feeling that Israeli cinema was being born before my eyes.

David Perlov, the doyen of Israeli filmmakers and the greatest of them, died last Saturday at the age of 73. Israeli cinema has had many beginnings. ***Oded the Wanderer, This is the Land, City of Tents*** and ***Hill 24 Doesn't Answer*** are some of them. Two of those beginnings belong to Perlov: first in ***In Jerusalem*** and then, a few years later, in 1968, in an interview with him that appeared in a special issue of the arts journal *Keshet*, which was devoted entirely to the cinema.

That issue itself was a special event in the cinematic wasteland of the 1960s, as was the interview with Perlov, which took up more than 70 pages and was elegantly conducted and edited by the film critic Moshe Natan. As no one had made films like his before, so too had no one in that period talked about filmmaking the way David Perlov did: about the cinema as an art and as history, as a medium that merits one's complete enthusiasm, complete commitment and complete love.

The very fact that a film text – *In Jerusalem* – had a written text – the interview in *Keshet* – can be seen as two equal beginnings in the history of Israeli cinema attests to David Perlov's importance in the history of filmmaking in this country. Above all, Perlov was the harbinger of cinematic creation that fuses theory and practice. But the greatness of his work lies in the fact that it is at once personal and private, revelatory and mysterious, intimate and all embracing – like all great art.

At the center of Perlov's work is the gaze: the gaze in "In Jerusalem" that glimpses East Jerusalem through the cracks in the wall that separates the two parts of the city; the gaze in the same film that he fixes on the children who looked at his camera and shouted, "Take my picture! Take my picture!"; the gaze through the window of Perlov's house, which gave rise to his most important film in the history of Israeli cinema, *Yoman (Diary)*; the gaze in *Yoman* at his twin daughters, Yael and Naomi, who are peering at themselves in the mirror before they enter the army and before they return home for their first leave, now in uniform; his gaze at the surroundings close to his home in Tel Aviv; and his recurring gaze at Paris, where he spent a few years in the 1950s, and at Sao Paulo, the city in which he grew up, in his native land, Brazil.

Over the years, through the totality of his work, David Perlov's gaze became our gaze; and this place, this house, where he made his films, became our house, the house to which we returned anew whenever he made a film.

### Dramas and Secrets

David Perlov was born in Brazil in 1930. Details of his tangled early life were revealed in *Diary* and in other films of his such as *Updated Diary* – three chapters that were added to the original film a few years ago. One key piece of information that is divulged is that Perlov's father was a magician, a fact that played a crucial role in his work, which took pleasure in the ploys and tricks that the cinema can offer. But as someone who was his friend for exactly thirty years, I know that many more dramas and secrets remain hidden in his biography.

He moved to Paris in 1952 and there began his cinematic work. He worked in the Cinematheque Francaise under its legendary founder, Henri Langlois, one of the most significant figures in the development of the French cinema in that period, which soon gave rise to the "new wave". Perlov met filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini,

Georges Franju and, above all, documentary filmmaker Joris Ivens, whose work was one of the seminal influences on Perlov's work. It was in Paris that he directed his first film, *Old Aunt China* (1957), which was based entirely on drawings of a young girl.

Perlov immigrated to Israel in 1958 with his wife, Mira. Throughout his life he never tired of relating how fascinating he found Israel in terms of the cinematic opportunities it offered him, and also how difficult it was to integrate into the local society. From certain points of view, he always saw himself as an outsider here, but at the same time as an enthusiastic resident who was committed to the place. That attitude stemmed in large part from the treatment he received at the hands of the establishment, which often placed serious obstacles in his path and until the end didn't know exactly how to deal with him.

In the 1960s, apart from *In Jerusalem*, Perlov made a series of short films, including *Tel Katzir* (which he described as a "report" rather than a documentary film, a distinction that was not really grasped in the Israel of the period before the founding of local television) and *Old Age Home*, which was not screened because Perlov dared to show that this is an institution in which people die, too.

In 1968 Perlov began to make his first feature film, *The Pill*, based on a screenplay by the acclaimed playwright Nissim Aloni. The film was a highly inventive fantasy with many charming flashes of brilliance. Production was very prolonged, and the film was not released until 1972. Even more serious problems plagued his second feature, *42:6*, an Israeli-Swiss co-production in which Perlov took over at the outset of the filming from the original director, Paul Davis, from Canada. [The title, *42:6* refers to Isaiah *42:6*: "I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles."]. The film was a biography of David Ben-Gurion, which fused feature film and documentary and included archival footage that Perlov colored in various shades. Not surprisingly, neither the audience nor the critics of 1969 – the year of the film's release – were ready for this kind of subterfuge.

## Private and Public

I first met David in 1973 when he joined the teaching staff of Tel Aviv University's Department of Film and Television, where I was a second-year student. The academic year got off to a late start because of the Yom Kippur War. In his first class, Perlov talked about the connection between impressionism and the New Wave in the French cinema and Italian cinema, which was also flourishing, drawing a comparison between Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa Vie (It's My Life)* and Pierre Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone*. That lecture was one of the most meaningful moments of my life. In that first class with David Perlov, studies in the film department became true studies – that is, a true source of inspiration.

It was at this time that Perlov began to film *Diary*. The film was born out of an act of despair. As Perlov himself says in the narration that accompanies the first chapter of *Diary*, because he was not given the opportunity to make films, he decided to get a camera and film through the window of his house, as though it was the window of a tank (this became one of the best known images in Perlov's work). This was genesis of the six chapters of *Diary*, each an hour long, which were filmed in the course of the decade that followed. There is no other Israeli work of cinema that has intertwined the private and the public in this manner; that has gazed in this way at the Israeli reality; that has attested with such power to control over the possibilities that the art of the cinema offers the local filmmaker.

From despair emerged a work that celebrates this place and the place of the cinema within in. There is no doubt that David Perlov's work had a tremendous influence on filmmakers who followed in his footsteps. Whether the art was understood correctly and whether that influence was assimilated in an enlightened, productive way are questions for the research students.

In the wake and in parallel with *Diary*, Perlov made a number of documentaries, including *Biba* (1977) and *Memories of the Eichmann Trial* (1979). In 1999, Perlov became the first winner of the Israel Prize in the cinema category. In July of this year, the Jerusalem Film Festival screened his last film, *My Stills 1952 – 2002*, which consists entirely of photographs taken by him and photographers he admired. More than a film about photography, this is another lovely work of cinema, dealing with the essence of commemoration and with meaning of the transitory days that such commemoration creates. It was also the closing of a circle of a filmmaker who was

both a painter and a photographer, whose cinematic path led from the drawings of ***Old Aunt China*** to the stills of his last film.

David Perlov was an artist, a teacher and a friend. That is how I will remember him. I will remember his films, and I will remember his voice, too. That warm, deep, slightly hesitant voice that was immediately identifiable by its timbre and by the foreign accent that characterized it: the voice that accompanied all his films since ***Diary***. I will continue to hear that voice, and above all to listen to it.