Love Juliet... and Keep Her away from Palestine. Gendered and Orientalist Representations in Strangers

Ama julieta... E guarda-a longe da Palestina. Representações de masculinidade/ feminilidade e orientalismo no filme Strangers

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LOVE JULIET… AND KEEP HER AWAY FROM PALESTINE. GENDERED AND ORIENTALIST REPRESENTATIONS IN *STRANGERS*

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Abstract: The Israeli film *Strangers* (Erez Tadmor/ Guy Nattiv, 2007) loosely integrates elements from Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* and uses the archetype of the star-crossed lovers to approach the Middle East conflict. This paper questions how the original structure, which relies on a rivalry between two identical parties, is transposed to a setting where the power relations are marked by inequality. By examining the political meanings and the Orientalist overtones that are embedded in the process of gendering Israel and Palestine through the protagonists, this paper argues that *Strangers* affirms Israel's cultural and moral superiority and silences the structural violence of both the occupation and the dispossession of the Palestinians. Granted that a key element in Shakespeare is the final reconciliation between the families, this paper finally questions the pertinence of Shakespeare's play as a hypotext to address the realities of the Middle East.

Keywords: *Strangers*, Romeo and Juliet, gendered orientalism.

AMA JULIETA… E GUARDA-A LONGE DA PALESTINA. REPRESENTAÇÕES DE MASCULINIDADE/FEMINILIDADE E ORIENTALISMO NO FILME *STRANGERS*

Resumo: O filme israelita *Strangers* (Erez Tadmor/ Guy Nattiv, 2007) integra vagamente elementos da peça shakespeareana *Romeu e Julieta*, usando o arquétipo dos amantes desafortunados para abordar o conflito do Médio Oriente. O presente artigo questiona como a estrutura original, baseada na rivalidade entre duas fações idênticas, é transposta para um contexto onde as relações de poder são marcadas pela desigualdade. A partir da análise dos significados políticos e das conotações orientalistas presentes no processo de masculinização/feminilização de Israel/Palestina através dos protagonistas, este artigo defende que *Strangers* afirma uma suposta superioridade cultural e moral israelita e silencia a expropriação dos palestinianos. Uma vez que a reconciliação final entre as famílias é um elemento central em Shakespeare, este texto, questiona, por fim, a pertinência da peça shakespeareana como hipotexto para abordar as realidades do Médio Oriente.

Palavras-chave: *Strangers*, Romeu e Julieta, *gendered orientalism*.

The Israeli film *Strangers* (Erez Tadmor/Guy Nattiv, 2007) is about Rana (Lubna Azabal), an exiled Palestinian woman from Ramallah living in Paris, and Eyal (Liron Levo), a former Israeli soldier from a kibbutz, who accidentally meet in Berlin during the World Cup, when the 2006 Lebanon war is about to break out. The film loosely integrates elements from Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* and uses the archetype of the star-crossed lovers to approach the Middle East conflict.

This paper questions how the original structure, which relies on a rivalry between two identical parties (noble families from Verona), who share the same values, is transposed to a setting where the power relations are marked by inequality, by one group's dispossession in favour of the other group's territorial expansion. The film is analysed as a representation in the sense put forward by Stuart Hall (1997): as a construction of meanings through language as a representational system. Hence, the analysis of *Strangers* is not based on the premise that films are (or are supposed to be) mimetic objects of reality, but assumes that a film, as any other work of fiction, unveils how a member of a given culture/society produces meanings about his/her reality through the use of the language he/she disposes of in order to influence the context where he/she is integrated.

The introductory section briefly calls attention to the pervasiveness of Shakespeare's play as a hypotext to address conflicts where the individual may feel coerced by the expectations of his/her community. The second section examines two previous short films by the directors, *Strangers* (2003)[1] and *Offside* (2006), which depict European practices of discrimination and football as the cultural space where the Palestinian and the Israeli can get closer. The third section is a close reading of the 2007 film that examines the cinematographic construction of the European space in the subjectivity of the Israeli protagonist, namely the tension between the European metropolis as an apparent multicultural liberal landscape and an underlying subtext pointing to European practices of exclusion that bring the Israeli Jew closer to the Arab undocumented migrant. A fourth section examines the political meanings and the Orientalist overtones that are embedded in the process of gendering Israel and Palestine through the protagonists, arguing that *Strangers* affirms Israel's cultural and moral superiority and silences the structural violence of both the occupation and the dispossession of the Palestinians. Granted that a key element in Shakespeare is the final reconciliation between the families – the destruction of the lovers functions as a catharsis for the community's healing – this paper finally questions the pertinence of Shakespeare's play as a hypotext to address the realities of the Middle East.

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[1] In this paper the 2003 short film will be referred as *Strangers (I)*.

1. ROMEO AND JULIET: THE COLLECTIVE AS A BURDEN

> O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
> Deny thy father, and refuse thy name;
> Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
> And I'll no longer be a Capulet
> […]
> 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
> Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
> What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
> Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
> Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
> What's in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other word would smell as sweet.
> So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
> Retain that dear perfection which he owes
> Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
> And for that name, which is no part of thee
> Take all myself.
>
> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, scene ii, 33-36; 38-58

The tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* figures among Shakespeare's most influential texts and is one of the more often staged and screened plays of all time. As a palimpsest – in the metaphorical sense developed by the French literary theoretician Gérard Genette (1982) to refer to hypertextual relations, i.e. to the traces of a prior text (hypotext) in a text (hypertext) – it had an overwhelming influence on the most diverse arts.[2] In cinema it is almost impossible to quantify the number of hypertexts of the play, ranging from more or less faithful adaptations like George Cukor's 1936 film to unconventional translations like Baz Luhrman's MTV inspired *Romeo+Juliet* (1996). The cinematographic transformations of the play also include numerous reworkings of the text (e.g. *West Side Story*, 1961), as well as a long list of films that integrate only particular elements of Shakespeare's plot in their scripts (e.g. *Shakespeare in Love*, 1998).

The popularity of the text in so many different contexts cannot be reduced to the universal themes of juvenile passion and doomed love. Juliet's words quoted above, where her erotic desire for Romeo is expressed by her longing for escaping hers and Romeo's name, hint at a key dichotomy structuring the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* that has made this love story so appealing throughout the centuries. The lovers are caught between two principles – romantic love and family obligation – one, projected towards the future, the other, dictated by the past. These compelling claims make the lovers painfully aware of the gap between their desires (expressed by their bodies) and the

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[2] Genette refers to practices of transmodalisation (e.g. the adaptation of a written text to the cinema or the theater) as practices of transposition (one of his six main types of hypertextual practices). As the many films influenced by *Romeo and Juliet* indicate, a transposition may be combined with other types of hypertextual relations. See, for instance, the French comedy *Romuald et Juliette* (Coline Serreau, 1989).

social forces framing their lives (embodied by their families). In other words, they realize the discrepancy between the identity that they would like to construct for themselves and the identity imposed on them by their social background. Precisely these elements rendered the plot conducive to address long term and/or profound political, social, and ethnic tensions where the individual may feel coerced by the collective. Therefore, the tension between the couple's loyalty to their love and their loyalty to family often materialized in plots that use the family in a broader sense to mean social class, political allegiance, ethnic and/or religious belonging or nationality.

This is the case of several films that transpose Shakespeare's play or use some of its elements to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After the collapse of the Oslo process we can witness a vitality of this theme.[3] The title that attracted wider international attention was *The Bubble* (2006, Eytan Fox), the story of a doomed gay love between Noam, a former Israeli soldier, and Ashraf, a Palestinian from the West Bank with familial connections to the Hamas. *The Bubble* was internationally commercialized as a plea for peace and reconciliation, but it was criticized as an example of "pink-washing", a concept used by critics and some LGBTQ activists who denounce how the Israeli Foreign Ministry and Israeli cultural institutions use gay rights to distract from the occupation (see, for instance, Jankovic, 2013).[4]

Strangers is from slightly the same period and also strove for an international audience (but received less attention). As I will argue, it also uses elements of Shakespeare in a script that asserts Israeli superiority on the basis of its liberal culture. While that stance was sustained by society's attitudes towards gays in *The Bubble*, it is heavily supported by women's rights in *Strangers*.

2. A COMMON GROUND FOR JEWS AND ARABS

Before directing *Strangers*, Israeli writers and directors Guy Nattiv (born 1973) and Erez Tadmor (born 1974) had already worked together in two short-films, *Strangers (I)* and *Offside*, which granted them some international recognition.[5] *Strangers* is based on the first short-film: it transforms the accidental meeting between a Palestinian and an Israeli into the beginning of a love story. The passion for football at the core of *Strangers* in turn structures *Offside*.

Strangers (I) takes place in the Paris underground. An Israeli gets in a subway car and sits opposite to a Palestinian. The close-ups show them looking at each other with

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[3] Among others, *Strangers* (Israel, 2007, Erez Tadmor and Guy Nattiv), *David & Fatima* (USA, 2008, Alain Zaloum), *Jaffa* (Israel, 2009, Keren Yedaya), *Love during Wartime* (Sweden, 2010, Gabriella Bier), *For my father* (Israel/Germany, 2008, Dror Zahavi).
[4] On "pink-washing" see Puar, 2007; Schulman, 2011. See also: http://www.pinkwatchingisrael.com/.
[5] *Strangers* (I) won best short-film at Sundance film festival 2004, and *Offside* was awarded at the Manhattan international short film festival in 2006.

hatred. Suddenly, a group of skinheads enters and begins harassing the man, whom they regard as foreigner, i.e., the Arab. The close-ups reveal the skinheads' facial expressions of hatred and the Palestinian's fear while the Israeli hides his necklace with the Star of David. As he prepares to exit, his ringing phone outs him as a Jew hence making him a target. The close-ups now reveal an alliance between the Palestinian and the Israeli as the two unite to successfully escape their tormentors. At the end, we see both men looking at each other again, but now there is complicity in their eyes as they return their exchanged backpacks and leave in opposite directions.

The analysis of this short-film cannot ignore the recent evolution of Western European far-right discourses and activity.[6] Though most contemporary parties commonly identified as far-right display particular similarities with the inter-war far-right, scholars tend to perceive them as distinct movements (e.g. Ignazi, 2003). Nationalism was pointed out as a key factor to aggregate these contemporary parties (e.g. Mudde, 2000); anti-immigration and anti-establishment stances tend to be highlighted (e.g. Givens, 2005), as well as demands for cultural protection which materialized in rejection of multiculturalism (e.g. Norris, 2005). However there are considerable differences between the various European far-right-wing forces. While xenophobia tends to mark the agenda of most of them, the diversity of their targets "remind us that we cannot generalize far-right movements as if they share the same enemies, agendas, solutions, or even political principles" (Mayfield, 2013).

In recent years fierce debates have erupted in several Western European countries about the role of Jews and Muslims in the construction of exclusionary European identities. One of the most notorious controversies took place in Germany in 2008, when the German historian Wolfgang Benz, director of the Centre for Research on Anti-Semitism in Berlin, organized the conference *Feindbild Muslim – Feindbild Jude* to debate similarities in the arguments and prejudices put forward by 19th century anti-Semites and contemporary enemies of Islam.[7] In the context of anti-multiculturalism and anti-immigration positions, most far-right Western European movements have been increasing their paroles against Muslim migrants, including those parties with direct roots in Nazism (Therborn, 2012: 162). Bunz examines the case of Austria and describes how hostility towards Islam gained ground and became a genuine political issue, while anti-Semitism faded from political parties in the late 20th century (Bunzl, 2005: 502-503; 505-506; 2007)[8]. The analyst even talks about a normalization of the

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[6] There has been a major interest in the recent evolution of the European far-right. In this text I refer to a small fraction of the literature about the far-right on some Western European countries in order to signal the main debates on the topic. The situation in Eastern European countries is not addressed here.
[7] The proceedings of the conference were published the following year (Benz, 2009).
[8] The French Front National is another example. Marine Le Pen, unlike her father and predecessor, has

Jewish presence in Europe (Bunzl, 2005: 502), arguing that, though Jews are victims of anti-Semitic attacks, they are no longer targets of exclusion in electoral politics (Bangstad and Bunzl, 2010: 225).

The discussion about Jews and Muslims as targets of discrimination in Europe is complicated by the role of Israel in European political discourses. Prominent far-right anti-Muslim and anti-immigration politicians like the Dutch Geert Wilders claim that their pro-Israeli positions exonerate them from any suspicion of racism. In addition, supporters of Israeli politics often accuse the European far-left and European Muslims of promoting anti-Semitic agendas dressed as anti-colonialism, anti-Zionism, anti-imperialism, and anti-globalization.[9] Most scholars on contemporary European racism and xenophobia dispute the prompt identification of critiques of Israel with anti-Semitic attitudes but many admit that opposition to Israeli politics may in some circumstances fuel and express anti-Semitism (e.g. Therborn, 2012: 163). Bunzl hence proposes the concept of "new anti-Semitism" to refer to some attacks on Jews by young Muslims in Europe. He argues that, while modern anti-Semitism accused Jews of being different from the European nationalities, "new anti-Semitism", in the context of rejection of Israel as a colonial project, accuses Jews of being colonialists, i.e. Jews are here perceived as intrinsically European (Bunzl, 2005; Bangstad and Bunzl, 2010).[10]

Aware of those tensions, several initiatives have tried to construct a common ground for fighting Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in Europe by arguing that there are similarities between these exclusionary practices.[11] But several scholars contest some of their premises. Bunzl, for example, agrees that Muslims, just like Jews in the past, "are imagined, not by everyone but by a large part of the population, as being Other, as being outside the frame of what is considered normal" (Bangstad and Bunzl, 2010), but he argues for a differentiation: he sees the roots of modern anti-Semitism in the 19th century ideal of an ethnically pure nation-state, while he regards Islamophobia as a late 20th and early 21st century phenomenon fuelled by geopolitics and large-scale Muslim immigration (Bunzl, 2005). Other scholars – see Bravo López (2010), for instance, who links current European discourses and debates on Islam to the context of French colonialism – draw on the literature about Orientalism to dispute the new character of

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not caused uproar with anti-Semitic statements; on the other hand, her political discourse is strongly anchored on Islamophobia.
[9] About the way charges of anti-Semitism are used to discredit the Palestinian cause and about the need to distinguish "Israel" and "Jews" as objects of criticism, see, for instance, Butler, 2004: 101-127.
[10] Recently Houria Bouteldja (2015) contributed to this debate with an analysis that links contemporary anti-Semitic acts to the State's philosemitism. She argues that the "positive racialization" of Jews and the "conflation of Jewish and Zionist" (interlinked with pro-Israel foreign policies) work as a shield for "French imperialist policies and its islamophobic policies", which have been fueling resentment against Jews by "post-colonial subjects".
[11] See, for instance, the European project "The Fight against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Bringing Communities Together" [European Commission/EUMC, 2003: 103].

Islamophobia. Said, as we know, identified the efforts to define Europeanness as civilization within the period of modernity as the breeding-ground for Orientalism, hence identifying the increasing vulnerability of colonized people with the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe.

At first glance, *Strangers* disregards the complexity of the contemporary spectrum of Western European far-right movements and their differentiated attitudes towards Muslims and Jews. It ignores the parliamentary far-right embodied by politicians like Wilders and Marine Le Pen and instead represents skinheads, neo-Nazis dressed and behaving like hooligans, who are regarded by the broader population, including by those who vote for the "new far-right", as street troublemakers. Can it be the case that, as a producer of meanings, *Strangers* intentionally ignores the power dynamics of the contemporary Western European far-right in order to construct a scenario that is meant to convince audiences of a link between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia?

In a time when Israel has the support of several Western European parties of the "new far right", Nattiv and Tadmor "go back" to Europe, namely to Paris, a significant setting of European anti-Semitism (Dreyfuss affair, deportations in World War II), to construct a common ground for Jews and Arabs. This cinematographic construction argues that, in contemporary Western Europe, Jews may not be racially identified as the Other (as the Arabs are) but nonetheless they both share a common history of discrimination and persecution in the continent.

How could this common ground be transplanted to the Middle East? The practices of exclusion that targeted Jews inside Europe fostered very different power dynamics and alliances in the context of colonialism: "Zionism and anti-Semitism had a unified goal – that of the removal of the Jews from Europe – that became the basis for their shared imperial vision" (Massad, 2000: 313). In the absence of a common enemy, *Offside* constructs football as a possible common ground for Israelis and Palestinians.[12] Two heavy-armed Israeli soldiers patrol a barbed wire fence while listening to a report of an invented World Cup final between Italy and Brazil[13] on a small radio-transistor. Suddenly, two armed Palestinians threaten them from the other side of the fence. The plot relies on the juxtaposition between the tension off-screen (the match) and the tension/danger on screen (the men pointing their guns at each other), both skilfully

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[12] The examination of *Offside* and *Strangers* as part of the long tradition of football films as well as the analysis of *Offside*'s hypertextual relations with two well-known football films from the Middle East: *Cup Final* (Eran Riklis, 1991, Israel) and *Offside* (Jafar Panahi, 2006, Iran) fall outside the scope of this article. Football films often use sport as a pretext to address political and social tensions and they tend to represent the passion for football as a possible means to bring people together and help them overcome social/national/ethnic barriers and/or heal ruptures inside the family. The structure of *Romeo and Juliet* has been adopted by other football films, such as the Brazilian comedy *O casamento de Romeu e Julieta* (Bruno Barreto, 2005), or the Portuguese drama *Star Crossed – Amor em Jogo* (Mark Heller, 2009).

[13] The Brazilian team is composed mostly of players from the 2006 World Cup but Brazil never played against Italy there.

intermingled by the words of the reporter. The increasing tension reported off screen by the "intruder" (the radio) seems to calm down the tension on screen as all men get more and more involved in the match. However, when it appears as if that they had reached a common ground by enthusiastically rejoicing over the victory of the multiracial team (Brazil) thanks to the exploits of Ronaldinho – a Black football player from a country that was built on colonialism, the enslavement of Blacks, and the persecution and extermination of the Indigenous population – one soldier inadvertently pulls the trigger and unfolds a deadly shooting. The camera zooms away from the four corpses as we hear rejoicing football supporters and the enthusiastic commentators. Their words "Oh, it's a tragedy. No one could win in a situation like this" are designed to be understood as a comment on the events unfolding on screen and more broadly on the realities of the Middle East. The usual vocabulary of a football match acquires a deadly meaning, and an innocent gesture elsewhere (press hands to celebrate) can unfold a tragedy here. While the world can celebrate joyful national rivalry, Israelis and Palestinians are involved in a deadly cycle – a "tragedy" where no one can "win".

The plea for coexistence is sustained in both short-films by a constructed symmetry between the characters on screen and the construction of a common ground. The roots of the conflict and the military and political situation on the ground, which, contrary to what is suggested by *Offside*, is marked by profound inequality, are simply silenced.[14] As the topics of the two short-films are developed in *Strangers,* the problematic basis of such a plea for peace becomes more striking.

3. AN AMBIGUOUS EUROPEAN URBAN LANDSCAPE

Rana and Eyal have a lot in common: they love football and poetry, they like drinking and smoking. Just like in Shakespeare, they connect immediately. The Berlin part recalls the famous *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, USA, 1995): the accidental meeting of two attractive adults on holidays in a train in a sunny European capital; a minimalist structure relying on the intense dialogue between two strangers who take advantage of the anonymity of a foreign metropolis; the erotic attraction and the awareness of the very limited time they have together. However, differently from Linklater's cult film, in *Strangers* the perception of the impossibility of a future together has to do with political constraints. As we will see, the urban landscape is simultaneously used to hint at the protagonists' haunting identities and as a shelter against them.

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[14] Also silenced in *Offside* are Israel discriminatory policies towards Palestinian football, which motivated an international campaign. See: http://www.bdsmovement.net/tag/sports-boycott.

With its green surfaces, colourful neighbourhoods, cheerful cafés and *Biergarten*, creative graffiti and outdoors publicizing the *deutsche Technologie*, Berlin is depicted as a pleasant prosperous multicultural metropolis, as a modern peaceful destination where tourists from all over the world are welcomed. This multicultural dimension coexists with a "friendly" national pride in the context of the World Cup, which is conveyed by the German flags in support of the *Mannschaft* in neighbourhoods inhabited mostly by immigrants. This initial positive portrayal of a multicultural Europe does not remain unchallenged, though: Eyal does not feel at ease in a Turkish neighbourhood and, when Rana finds a room there, she asks him to visit it with her because she doesn't "feel safe in this place" (00:14:30). A link between his Jewishness and her condition as a woman in the context of a Muslim community is implied here. In the second half of the film (Paris), the multicultural urban landscape loses its appeal. It is depicted as a hostile environment marked by poverty and vulnerability among undocumented migrants who live in constant fear of deportation.

The Israeli Eyal seems less out of space in Europe than the Arab Rana: the colour of his skin does not function as a distinctive feature. However, the symbolic meaning of the scenario constructs him as a historical outcast. His surname – Goldman – suggests that he descends from German Jews. The protagonists meet in a subway to Oranienburg, a Berlin neighbourhood that has a special meaning in the history of Nazi Germany: in 1933 one of the first concentration camps was installed there for the imprisonment of political opponents; since it was inside the capital and visible to the broader society, the name Oranienburg is recurrent when discussing the collaboration of sectors of the German population with the Nazi regime. Eyal's ex-girlfriend was from Berlin and, as he admits to Rana, her nationality was always a problem for him. The memory of the persecutions of European Jews is further invoked in Paris, in the sequence at the hospital when Rana is denounced by a nurse as an undocumented immigrant and violently separated from her son. The cinematographic representation of her arrest by the French police recalls images that evoke the narrative of France as a "country of collaborators" who delivered Jews to Nazi authorities.

Multicultural Europe hence acquires an ambiguous meaning. On one hand, the representations of Europe are permeated with allusions to past persecutions and contemporary practices of discrimination that construct the landscape as threatening. On the other hand, the anonymity of the European metropolis made Eyal and Rana's encounter possible by offering them a foreign landscape where they could become lovers. In addition, since the major threats to their love emanate from the political events unfolding in the Middle East, Europe becomes the only possible place for them to be together.

The happiness of the lovers while watching a match together among a multicultural crowd in Berlin is filmed as a brief parenthesis that is immediately challenged by events taking place off-screen. Firstly, a telephone call forces Rana to return to Paris the morning after, while Eyal remains in Berlin. The composition in the sequence of the finals stresses that it is impossible for him to fulfil his longing for integration in the "uncomplicated universal" that the film links to football. Although he shares French supporters' disappointment in France's defeat, his situation as an Israeli Jew is represented as different: the screen image is progressively divided with shots from the match until war images from the Israeli TV erupt in the upper centre of screen and we hear "High alert on the northern border of Israel"[15] (00:34:58).[16] Footage from the war progressively replaces the match and Eyal no longer appears as part of the crowd: he walks alone (00:35:06) as Israeli tanks prepare for war.

The film thus opposes the political situation of Israel to that of the European nations, especially Germany. It suggests that the country succeeded in a process of "normalization" after the Reunification, as multicultural Berlin could offer its citizens peace and host major international events. Israel, on the contrary, the country where many survivors of the Shoah began a new life, was unable to achieve normality. The film represents it as a country under siege, as a nationality apart.

4. THE ORIENTALIST HIERARCHIZATION OF MASCULINITIES

In *Romeo and Juliet* the hatred between the two families derives from an old grunge whose causes no-one remembers any more. The tragedy itself begins to unfold the moment Romeo sneaks with his friends to the ball at the Capulet house, where he meets and falls in love with Juliet. Tybalt, her cousin, enraged by the presence of his family's enemies, later challenges Romeo for a duel. He refuses to fight, but when Mercutio, who had accepted the duel on his behalf, is fatally wounded, Romeo, enraged by his friend's death, kills Juliet's cousin. Romeo cannot be considered a passive victim of his identity as a Montague, but has to be regarded as an active participant in events that lead to the tragedy: his very actions exacerbated the tensions between the two families and were directly involved in the bloodshed.

While in Shakespeare the love story leads to the irruption of violence, the directors of *Strangers* put the lovers in a setting far away from the war theatre, hence

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[15] The original is in Hebrew. I quote the English subtitles of the DVD edition.
[16] The script freely adapted the dates of the World Cup and the 2006 war in Lebanon to make them simultaneous. The two matches of the film took place before the beginning of the war: the match for the third place was on July 8th and the finals were on July 9th. On July 12th, Hezbollah militants carried out a raid into Israel and ambushed two military vehicles, killing three soldiers and abducting two. Hezbollah demanded the release of prisoners held by Israel. Israel refused and launched a large-scale military operation in Lebanon that lasted until August 14th, 2006.

exonerating them from any direct involvement in the violence off-screen. It is the callings by their communities that threaten their private space together. Their reaction to that pressure diverge substantially though, in part because, as we will see, the film sides with Israel. The representation of the 2006 Lebanon war not only moves the film away from Shakespeare's structure but also subverts the cinematographic constructed equality between Israelis and Palestinians that underlies the plot of the two previous short-films.

The cracks in this forged equality are already perceptive in the Berlin part of *Strangers*. Palestinian and Arab acts of violence are always the prism to discuss the conflict, hence enabling a perception of the violence perpetuated by Israel as strong responses to acts of aggression by its enemies ("Arabs act, Israel reacts"). See, for instance, the sequence of the bar in Berlin. Eyal is "mad" because of the kidnapping of the Israeli soldiers. Rana could have called his attention to Israeli incursions, kidnappings and target killings of militants, but she only mutters about having seen Israeli soldiers doing bad things to Palestinians. His response reminds a spokesman of the Israeli government talking to a Western channel: "every time we try to give them something or to do an agreement or something, they blow it up. They throw bombs, they attack, they do something and destroy it". When she asks him to think about the reasons for that, both decide to change the subject of the conversation, because, as Rana puts it, "we've tried to find a solution since two generations, we won't find a solution tonight" (00:25:37). By preventing the development of the political discussion, the film favours a cycle of violence approach and does not allow the reasons of the violence to be discussed. Spectacular violence (bombs, kidnappings) is highlighted, while structural violence against Palestinians (occupation, imprisonment, discrimination, checkpoints, pollution, limited access to water, etc.) is silenced.

As the Lebanon war becomes more prominent in the Paris segment, the legitimation of the Israeli official narrative becomes more expressive. The escalation of the war is parallel to the deterioration of the health situation of Rana's son, whose suffering is displayed on screen while, on the background, the TV reports about the causalities of war. See, for instance, the sequence when Rana tries to comfort her sick son while Nasrallah praises Hezbollah's war efforts. Hezbollah is represented as a military organization that is unconcerned with the suffering of civilians (the film never addresses why many Palestinian refugees regard it as a resistance movement). Rana complains on the phone "They [*Israelis*] kill everyone but Hezbollah soldiers. Only children are dying" [*original in French*] (01:07:12). Rana is referring to the collapse of a building in Kefar Kana after an Israeli bombardment on July 30th that left 28 civilians dead, including 16 children. Reports referring it as a possible war crime are

immediately counterbalanced by Israeli voices: on the phone, Eyal's father suggests that Hezbollah is using human shields. When asked about the number of children killed, the father dismisses Hezbollah as a reliable source. The cinematographic exoneration of Israel culminates in the café sequence, when the strongest accusations against Israel are uttered by Samir, Rana's former boyfriend. He is organizing a demonstration and acts as if he were drilling his companions on the discourse that had to be adopted to attack Israel more effectively. Accusations concerning the killing of children, that were voiced at the time by pro-Palestinian activists, are therefore represented in the film as an insidious propaganda strategy: "Who do they massacre? Children, innocent people. *This is the message we must get across.* This is the most important issue. The death of civilians." [*original in French*] (01:08:55).

Resuming her notion of "precarious life" (Butler, 2004), Judith Butler noted that the strategy employed by the Israeli media during the 2008 Gaza War of representing dead Palestinians as instruments of war (members of Hamas or civilians put in the targets by militants) turned them into artillery against Israel, hence making these lost lives ungrievable (Aloni, 2010). A similar discursive strategy can be detected in *Strangers*: by suggesting that Hezbollah might be behind the killings, Eyal actually reverses the perception of Israel as an aggressor and constructs it as a victim.

When Samir loses his temper and accuses Israel of bombing roads and bridges, leaving people with no possible escape, Eyal leaves the café. It is then Rana who takes his defence:

Rana: Just because you don't agree with him doesn't mean you have to chase him away like that. You have no right to do this. He is the only one I found when I was in trouble while you were all busy doing I don't know what. He is the only one, so fuck you. […] No one can talk to you. It's impossible. Asshole. [*original in French*] (01:09:45)

Her accusations do not only silence Samir's vulnerability in France: while in police custody, Rana herself said that she could not expect her friends to pick up her son from the hospital because, just like her, they were undocumented immigrants risking deportation. On the political level, her reply most importantly echoes orientalist stereotypes that are often voiced to subvert Palestinian struggles: it suggests that Arabs are intolerant, and no one can reason with them. Turning her back on her friends, she runs after Eyal:

Rana: I don't care of this demonstration. I don't care. I'm sorry. Sometimes they are stupid, okay. But... Okay, I'm sorry. Listen to me. Listen to me. Look at me. I... We are today both... I'm caring about us, okay? So let's enjoy the moment, okay? (01:10:32).

Her reply signals a complete rupture with her friends' political struggles. Could this moment function as the materialization of Juliet's words in Shakespeare's play about her willingness to renounce her family name to be with Romeo? Leading feminist critics like Coppélia Kahn (1977), who examined the gender roles in Shakespeare's work, accused *Romeo and Juliet* of perpetrating an ideal of feminine docility and subordination by presenting Juliet as a woman who is unwilling to give up to her father's wishes but is too willing to succumb to another man's will. Other critics however valued her as an intelligent, strong-willed and courageous woman who exerts control over her destiny and struggles for her autonomy in a world that is hostile to women (see, for instance, Brown's reading of the play as "Juliet's taming of Romeo", 1996). On the surface, Rana seems to emanate from this later understanding of Juliet. She is strong-minded, exuberant, she is the very opposite of the stereotype of the submissive, shy and modest religious Muslim woman that is so pervasive in contemporary popular Western culture. She wears casual Western cloths, she drinks alcohol and smokes, she enjoys her sexuality freely, she travels alone, she chose to be a single mother. The plot establishes a close connection between her emancipation as a woman and her disposition to get involved with an Israeli. Right after their first meeting we hear her inner voice:

I have nothing against Israelis but I hesitated before I phoned him. [...] Then I looked into his eyes. […] Right away, I wanted to spend the day with him. I don't care where he is from, where he is going or who he is. [*original in French*] (00:10:55)

In Paris, the positive portrayal of Eyal as a worthy lover is reinforced by the implicit comparison with Rana's previous sexual partners. She avows that she left Ramallah, the city she had previously described as a horrible place, because of its moral codes. She got pregnant by a married man and, unwilling to do an abortion, she had to live in the diaspora as a single mother. Arab men made her hate that place, not the war. Her representation as an emancipated woman is hence indissociable from the negative representation of Palestine as a retrograde culture and an oppressive place for women. Muslim men abroad are no better: Samir is abusive, silly, ugly, violent and

untrustworthy, no match for the handsome Eyal, who promptly babysits her son and becomes a father figure for him within a few hours of time spent together.

The influential feminist international relations theorist J. Ann Tickner examined the gendering of war narratives and argued that they are often about good men saving women and children from bad men, i.e. a justification for the use of violence (Tickner, 2001: 57). The plot in *Strangers* resonates with this description. What emerges from the film are gendered orientalist discourses that construct categories of masculinities, rank them and defend Israeli masculine power. Eyal, the embodiment of a gendered conception of Israeli military identity, is not only the chosen masculinity for the character that embodies Palestine; more important is the fact that he becomes the saviour and father figure of her fatherless and sick child.

Leading human rights organizations have repeatedly accused Israeli forces of indiscriminate air strikes and disproportionate use of lethal force. UNICEF (2006) estimates that 30% of the Lebanese casualties in the 2006 war were children under the age of 13 (Dolan, 2006). Long after the ceasefire, cluster bombs continued to kill farmers and children. *Strangers* however diverts from such realities: it raises doubts over the responsibility of Israel in the death of civilians in Lebanon (thus echoing official reactions by Ehud Ohmert's government) and it offers Western audiences an eulogy for the Israeli soldier by depicting Eyal as the protector of a Palestinian child who had been let down by Arab men.

The negative portrayal of Arab men resonates with long established orientalist constructions of masculinity and femininity in Western culture. The depiction of Arab men as embodiment of a coward and deviant masculinity has a long tradition in Christian and Western literature in connection with the erotic representation of Muslim women. Hasan (2005: 34-38) surveys several studies about the trope of sexual availability of Muslim women and traces it back to certain Songs of Geste. Muslim women are depicted there as unhappy with Muslim men and longing for Christina knights, with whom they fall in love at first sight. Subsequent travel literature perpetuated such representations:

> Muslim women are depicted as lusty and Muslim men as repulsive in the sight of Muslim women, who are always looking for western/Christian heroes to satisfy their libidinous desire. (Hasan, 2005: 34)

In his far reaching work, Said defined Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient sustained by processes of othering and a binary opposition between a civilized West and an irrational,

backward and exotic Orient (Said, 1978). In the context of colonialism, Western men are depicted as adventurous, gallant, energetic, saviours, and rescuers, whereas Eastern men (Muslims) are lethargic, slothful, inactive, oppressors of women, and readily concede to Western heroes (Hasan, 2005: 35). The deconstruction of the trope of the Muslim seductress, and its function in the binary of Western vs. Muslim men, exemplifies the importance of the work of feminist scholars who intersected Said's thought with the concept of gender to examine the use of women's bodies and language in the service of colonial projects.[17] Rana emanates precisely from the orientalist tradition of sexual-hungry seductresses. She takes the lead in seducing Eyal and, as her inner voice admits in the sequence of their first night of passion, she is totally overwhelmed by his charms: "I wanted him more and more. [...] He speaks Hebrew to me. I don't understand a thing. I forget everything. I may not see him again, but I don't care" [*original in French*] (00:29:18).

By dividing the few Palestinian characters in two groups – on one side, a benign femininity which is docile, attractive, understanding, and sexually available, and a vulnerable and innocent childhood in need of protection and affection; on the other side, violent and abusive masculinities – *Strangers* revitalizes recurrent tropes of Western Orientalism. Rana turns out to be a projection of orientalist dreams, the woman who is a victim of her own culture. By representing Palestine as an enchanting woman who needs to be rescued from violent masculinities, the film is reliving the colonial fantasy of potency. Her sexual emancipation ultimately functions as a projection of submission to what is perceived as a civilized masculinity and order.

When *Strangers* was screened at Sundance, there was another film about the 2006 war at the festival: *Under the Bombs* (2007, Philippe Aractingi, France/Lebanon/UK). This film is about a Muslim mother who, with the help of a Christian taxi driver, searches for her son in a devastated landscape: Southern Lebanon under the Israeli bombardments. The plot confronts the audience not only with the perspective of those "under the bombs" but also with the complex and violent history of the country over the previous decades, namely with the scars of the first war in Lebanon and the impact of the Israeli occupation. Talking to the press, Guy Nattiv, one of the directors of *Strangers*, commented the fact of screening both films at the festival:

> There was another film at Sundance –*Under the Bomb*– a Lebanese movie which focused on the Israeli attack on Lebanon and a woman trying to find her

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[17] There is a broad literature on the theme. See, among others, Kahf, 1999; Lewis, 1996; Mohanty, 1984; Yegenoglu, 1998.

son. It showed only one side of the war, the Hizbullah side. They didn't show that two sides were suffering. It was very important for us to show that balance. (Brinn, 2008)

Such comments suggest that the ultimate aim of this modern day version of Romeo and Juliet was to counterbalance an international "negative" press. Most relevant is the decision of having a character associated with the military forces to represent the nation. The aim goes beyond showing that Israelis suffered as well, but rather offers a benign portrayal of the Israeli military in a context where it had been the target of criticism. Firstly, by setting the plot in the European landscape with allusions to past anti-Semitic persecutions, the film calls attention to the traumatic context behind the Zionist project. In addition, it accuses the outside world of too easily blaming Israel without checking the claims made by its enemies. Consequently, Israel emerges as a victim in world affairs but not as a helpless victim; on the contrary, it is represented as a masculine power embodied by good and emancipated men like Eyal, who are ready to save an Arab child and love a "dishonoured" Palestinian woman.

Ultimately, with *Strangers* we are confronted with a very old structure – barbaric Muslim men, abused Muslim women and good Western men –, so pervasive in post 9/11 Western discourses, that co-opted women's rights to legitimize Western military interventions in the Middle East. Therefore the Romeo and Juliet structure failed in creating a symbolic bridge between the two communities. Embedded in orientalist constructions of masculinity and femininity, it functions rather as a strategy to affirm Israel's cultural superiority.

5. FINAL REMARKS: THERE'S NO PLACE FOR ROMEO AND JULIET IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Some of the particularities of Shakespeare's play that render it problematic to approach the political complexities of the wars in the Middle East have already been pointed out in this paper: while in the hypotext the conflict between the two sides is marked by equality in power relations (both families are aristocrats with similar power inside the Verona community) and the reasons for the rivalry are irrelevant (it is an old grunge which was fuelled by each aggression), Israel's wars and the occupation are marked by military and political asymmetry and have concrete political and economic causes that render the cycle of violence approach insufficient.[18]

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[18] The shortcomings of the plot of Romeo and Juliet in approaching the political conflict were previously examined in connection with other adaptations. See, for instance Yael Munk's article about the Israeli documentary *Compromise* (1996, Anat Even). The documentary is about a project undertaken in 1994 by two theater directors, the Israeli Eran Baniel and the Palestinian Fuad Awad, to initiate their common production of Shakespeare's play at the Jerusalem Khan Theatre. By focusing on the realities outside the

While in Shakespeare the families' identities as part of the territory of Verona are never questioned, these precise elements are the core of Israel's wars. As a late outcome of European colonialism, national identity and boundaries were constructed and negotiated by Zionism and the State of Israel with disregard of and against the indigenous populations, whose very identity and historical attachment to the territory became contentious, as the much cited phrase "a land without a people for a people without a land" exemplifies. According to Massad, in the process of colonizing historical Palestine, the construction of national identities involved processes of contesting the identity of the adversary as part of the territory:

> As a result, the war between the European Jewish colonists and the colonized Palestinians extended to the realm of cartography and archaeology, with Israeli maps showing all historic Palestine as Israel and Palestinian maps showing all historic Palestine as an occupied country. (Massad, 2000: 339)

Identity formation cannot be detached from the conflict. As David Newman notes, in the "Israel-Palestine contested spacial arena", "the internal nationalism post-nationalism dialogue amongst Israeli citizens of the State" and "the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue aimed at bringing about national conflict resolution" are inseparable: "To a certain extent, the outcome of one (the internal dialogue) determines the approaches brought to the other (the external dialogue), with the latter being modified as power hegemonies within Israel undergo change." (Newman, 2001: 236).

The film, however, takes national identities as accomplished entities without addressing how territories, borders, and identities in the region were and are experiencing processes of reconfiguration. It never examines how the acts of violence that accompanied these processes are embedded in the territory by the colonial origins of the State of Israel and the perpetuation of its colonial structures.

A further problem with the transposition of Shakespeare's play has to do with the political significance of its ending. Shakespeare's tragedy culminates with the reconciliation between the families and, as a consequence, the citizens of Verona, tired of the civil disorder brought by the peace-disturbing aristocrats, can finally enjoy peace. The lovers' death acquires a cathartic effect that is translated into a political solution for the community.

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theater, the documentary questions the pertinence of the play: "Not only does the analogy between the two lovers thus become irrelevant, but the documentary also shows that the very use of this analogy seems to be the best way of avoiding crucial questions" (Munk, 2010: 179).

In his reading of *Romeo and Juliet* as a political play, Jerry Weinberger (2003) argues that the play's action is determined by a conflict between secular and priestly authority that transforms the Veronese regime. The lovers are seen here as pawns in the hands of Friar Laurence and the Prince. More important though is the author's portrayal of the aristocrats as a social class whose political power is on the wane, alongside the role ascribed to the "citizens", who emerge as a community that is confident enough to confront the unruly aristocrats and demand civil order from the Prince. The community as an independent entity whose quest for peace is achieved through the loss of the heirs of the two warring sides tends to disappear in transpositions of the play that make the families stand for ethnic and/or religious belonging or nationality. As in the case of *Strangers*, in these hypertexts the community is no longer the opponent to a violent decaying elite, but rather a collaborator that instigates war and shares some of the negative traits that Shakespeare attributed to the aristocracy.

The film itself suggests the impossibility of transposing the key elements of *Romeo and Juliet*'s final to the Middle East. The off-screen threatens again the lovers' idyll in the form of another telephone call: Eyal's father informs that he has been drafted. Rana tries to dissuade him from returning to Israel. Her fear of losing him, not political convictions, seem to lie behind her argumentation. The morning after, when Eyal prepares to leave, her premonition is played in fast-motion: he realizes that their love was doomed, goes back to Israel, is drafted and killed in Lebanon. The premonition ends with her words "You'll go back home. You'll be scared like you've never been scared in your life. It will kill you. It will kill us" [*original in French*] (01:20:48), while we watch a close-up of his injured face staring at the viewer. Such an ending, though in accordance with the tragic death of Shakespeare's lovers, deviates from the cathartic and appeasing function of death in the play. The directors, however, added another possibility for the star-crossed lovers: just after the close-up of Eyal's injured face, the screen-image returns to the Paris apartment where the protagonist closes the door and goes back to Rana and Rashid. He refutes the call from Israel in order to form a family with the outcasts of the Middle East. For the first time in his life he renounced making war on behalf of his country, but his act differs from Rana's rupture with her community. Eyal never contests the legitimacy of his country's demands and so the Israeli official narrative concerning Israel as a besieged country remains unchallenged. Eyal's final decision is solely motivated by a desire for pursuing an individual happiness, which only the exile can offer. The film imagines a private escape for the lovers, but instead of envisaging a political transformation for the region, it reinforces Israel's dominant narratives.

Influential international relations theorist Johan Galtung (1990) defined cultural violence as the elements of one culture that may be used to legitimize direct and structural violence, making it look acceptable, normal or invisible. The concept is useful to examine the film's performative character. Several elements suggest that the film was aimed foremost at Western European audiences: the languages (predominance of English and French), the setting (Paris and Berlin), thematics that are very popular among Europeans (Shakespeare's play, football, the memory of the Holocaust, multiculturalism, the oppression of women in Muslim countries), the engagement of a famous Belgian actress (Lubna Azabal) with a strong French accent for the role of the Palestinian Rana (whose inner voice speaks French, not Arabic). Though they usually voice some degree of criticism over Israel's most brutal military actions, the governments of those European countries are staunch allies of Israel. Among the population there are considerable sectors with sympathy for the Palestinian cause.

The film tries to assert these divergent stances. It expresses concern for the civilian victims of the Israeli military (the issue where objections to Israel tend to be louder among the European public opinion), but ultimately it validates the narratives that legitimize those actions and which are often invoked by Western governments in their support for Israel: Israel is as a country under siege and has the right to defend itself; Israel is a liberal democracy in a region where basic human rights are constantly violated.

In that sense, the film functions as *Hasbara*. From the Hebrew "explaining", the term refers to public diplomacy by Israeli institutions (namely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and its supporters to counter the "negative" international press and promote positive perceptions of Israel abroad. For its critics, *Hasbara* is nothing more than a euphemism for pro-Israeli propaganda.[19] It may point to certain critical aspects of Israeli actions towards the Palestinians and the neighboring countries, but the strategies for contextualizing and explaining them are aimed at their legitimation. *Strangers* refers to issues that were much criticized in the Western news (the killing of children in the 2006 Lebanon war), but points the finger at Hezbollah, which at that time was classified by most Western countries as a terrorist organization. Yet more important though are the silences the film creates regarding the lives of the Palestinians. The colonial power relations on the ground, the continuous dispossession, the systematic violations of international law by Israel, the wall in the West Bank, segregation practices (only-Jewish roads and towns), illegal settlements, collective punishments, confiscations of land, destruction of agricultural property,

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[19] See, for instance, Edward Said's "Propaganda and War" (2001). The site Electronic Intifada (http://electronicintifada.net/) often denounces *Hasbara* initiatives.

usurpation of water resources – all part of the daily life of Palestinians in the area where Rana comes from (the West Bank) – are simply silenced by the film.

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