

# Duki Dror's Journey of the displaced

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*Stranger here, stranger there, stranger everywhere. I wish  
I could come home, baby, but I'm a stranger also there."*

from "Diary" by David Perlov

This popular song, quoted in David Perlov's documentary, "Diary", expresses precisely the feeling which arises from the whole of Duki Dror's films. This is the story of people who used to belong to a certain place which now is no longer theirs. People who became victims of wars, of oppression and prejudice, and as a result were forced to leave their country and home. People for whom the land they step on is not theirs and will never be. This feeling of having no roots is the main feature of Dror's displaced heroes, all victims of the global and capitalistic new world, a world in which the weak is often expelled of its land. And the land remains silent, passing from hand to hand with no resistance, only providing the background to scenes of alienation of the man returning to the land, an alienation which forever will express the failure of the weak and weakened wherever they are, foreignness as a formative experience which Dror documents in all of his films.

This article deals with one of the recurrent themes of Dror's films: displacement. Duki Dror, one of the most fertile young directors in Israel today, consistently deals with this theme in its different configurations, thus revealing the ever changing faces of today's Israel.

In the past decade, Israeli culture has been enriched by a flow of emigrants, coming from all over the world. The general response to these unexpected cultural resources was that the many voices expressed in the documentary filmmaking create the polyphony of multiculturalism, so characteristic to Israel. And indeed the ten last years have been characterized by an unprecedented blooming of documentary filmmaking. Dozens of films are being created each year, many of them with the support of the New Israel Fund for Film and Television, others with the support of various television channels. Therefore it may be sometimes difficult to identify a creator's unique voice, the voice of one who follows a unique stylistic and thematic line in his art, the voice of the auteur. Duki Dror's voice is as such - a unique voice who continues a long line of creators with personal statement - a statement which this article will try to coherently unfold.

As opposed to many local documentary filmmakers, Dror studied in the United States and not in Israel. He did not plan to become a documentary director but aspired to make feature and experimental films. But the unexpected circumstances have led him to documentary. As he graduated from film school he was searching for a job in the industry and found out that the program for rehabilitation of prisoners in Chicago prisons was looking for a cameraman to film their experimental program of prisoners teaching other prisoners to read and write.

As time went on the project evolved into a dramatic story and became a film called – “Sentenced to Learn”. The film was screened prime time in the states and later in a retrospective of American documentary in the prestigious documentary festival Cinema Du Reel in Paris, along with canonic filmmakers such as Leacock and Weisman. For Dror it was discovering the power of the documentary film.

Upon returning to Israel, Dror directed a very personal film, a diary of a kind called: “My Fantasia”. The ironic name which refers to the “Fantasia” Chanukah lamp factory owned by the family, uncovered deeper topics, topics which deal with what was to be the main concern of the filmmaker in all of his works up to now: migration and exile, memories of the minority in days of cultural displacement

The reason Dror made this film was the return of the family's repressed memories as the image of Saddam Hussein daily appeared on television. The days were the first of the Iraq war, and the director who just returned home from the States, felt like a stranger in his own home, watching his family watching the images from Iraq on television For them it was not only the threat of war but also observing their long lost land appearing on the screen, this same land they left behind many years ago in order to live in a new land, Israel. However, the director who was born in Israel could not understand his relatives' outstanding interest in the country they left many years ago. He started to ask the questions and from here the way to inquire about the family's unspoken past was short. He walked in between the machines in the lamp factory owned by his father and uncles, trying to collect information about what drove them to come here, to leave behind them their culture and language and pretend they don't long for it. As his investigations continue it became clear that one link was missing. The answer was found in an old photo in which his father and two of his friends are seen chained to fetters on their legs. It was a yellowing photo which no one wished to talk about. But the son, the director, was already on the roll and it was impossible to stop him. Towards the end of the film, upon endless inquiries of his father and uncles, the secret was out: it unfolds the story of his father's arrest which was a result of informing by one of the Jewish federation agents, his hard labor in prison, and mainly the humiliation which went along with the last

moments in the home land. At this point the fantasy was blown at once. The factory is being closed down due to low income, and at the same time the father, who wished his past to remain in the shade is being forced to return to the traumatic experience which he did not want his children to be exposed to. It appears that immigrating to Israel was not the happy fulfilling of the old wish stated in the prayer: "Next year in Jerusalem", but also the result of his father's unbearable humiliation that forced him to deny his mother tongue and culture.

As the factory closes down its gates, so is the fantasy of the director to own one clear identity within the Zionist vision, shattered. As opposed to the experience of most of the people in Israel, the frequent appearance of the Iraqi president on television did not arouse the director's anxiety; it rather peeled the silent envelope around the family's tragic displacement. And the parents, who invested all their energy in protecting the children (for instance, changing the family name to make it sound more Israeli), have found out, along with viewers of the film, that the experience of displacement passes on to the next generation. It's a fact that the son, the director, is now torn between "here and there", only that "there" is America.

In this early film by Duki Dror, it's already possible to identify the theme he will investigate in all his films: the tearing between two biographical and geographical milestones. What is the real character of the place which is called exile? Is it the place where our fathers were raised or the place where they ended up due to decisions made by national leaders, people who design ideologies? In other words: this: is exile here or there? And maybe the answer could be found in the song quoted at the beginning of this article: exile for the expatriate has become eternal. It reaches him wherever he goes. It has already left the geographical plane and has become a state of mind.

A few years later, Dror returns to exile to make his documentary "Taqaqim". This time a different exile, the one of the fiddler Felix Mizrachi who was born in Egypt, and goes back to his home land to search for the lost recordings of his brother, Farag, who was known for his work with some of the best Egyptian singers. Here too the recordings are only an excuse to go back home and observe the changes that took place there. The film takes its hero to the house which was his home, to the street where he grew up, to the fiddle constructors who were acquainted with his brothers, and to meet the late Inbal Perlson, an Israeli Folklore researcher who went to Egypt in order to investigate the denied history of Arabic music. It seemed like peace with Egypt would make such journeys simple. But being there, meeting the music which makes up his whole world, the music he tries to pass on the young oriental musicians in Israel, Felix realizes there is no way back. There is no Jewish community left in Egypt. The only place which testifies for the existence of a Jewish community which once flourished here is the cemetery. Felix is warmly welcomed by the local people who are glad to realize that he

speaks their language. And he goes back to practicing Taqasim, the artistic improvisation on violin. . Isn't the film itself some kind of an improvisation of going back to the place where one's identity was once formed? But as Felix confesses to the camera, Taqasim, even though they are improvising, are not plane at all and require a lot of skill. The search for the lost recordings does not succeed and Felix returns home to continue from the same point where he left: training one of Israel's well known singers, Zehava Ben, for her upcoming performance in Egypt. And the journey remains a unique experience where the man who nurtured his exile myth confronts the present to find out that places, just like human beings, do not freeze and that his childhood landscape, like his brother, disappeared into a black hole. Apparently memory is the only thing which can bring back the past, and it comes alive with longing. Felix goes back to Israel to continue to bridge between here and there, a bridge which will doubtfully ever be built.

The same bridge between here and there is also the key to the journey of Johar Abu Lashin, the hero of "Raging Dove". Abu Lashin is a Palestinian born in Nazareth, who became a world boxing champion, married an American woman and purchased a horse ranch in Tennessee. But it seems that for some the American dream is not an answer. Johar Abu Lashin, who at first saw himself as an Israeli hero, (being interviewed in Israeli talk shows, taking photographs with the president), rediscovers his real identity as a Palestinian, and aspires to correct the injustice he caused to his people. For this cause it is not enough to put away the Israeli flag and to raise the Palestinian one. This requires a more extravagant action. Wishing to repay his family and his people for the honor which he received in the USA, he initiates a world championship fight in his home town, Nazareth. But Nazareth is not America and it's impossible for the city to organize a championship fight (the film follows the never ending logistic problems which the American organizers of the fight have to confront). At last the fight takes place and Abu Lashin who wins, decides to go one step further and bring his fame as a gesture to the Palestinian authority on its declaration of Independence Day. For this reason he arrives at various Palestinian offices, and at last at the office of the president, Yasser Arafat, who welcomes him enthusiastically and offers to pay for the fight which is to take place in Gaza.

It seems like everything works well and all of Abu Lashin's wishes come true. But just as he expresses his happiness he learns that the champion title has been taken away from him on account of not participating in any fights in the past six months. Apparently Arafat did not fulfill his promise, and now Abu Lashin has to go back to America to try and regain his lost title. At the same time things are not smooth at home too. His wife decides to leave him and his horse ranch is out for sale in order to cover his debts. In his despair Johar Abu Lashin goes

out to look for local fights. He wanders from one small town to the next. The last scene, taken in front of a typical American town background, shows that he still has faith in the future, and does not expect this as the end. But the film does end with a hero who has no home land, as he himself states, a man with no land who lives in exile hoping to one day regain his champ title, and maybe his land too.

The film itself shows his return as unsuccessful trials to a place which is not prepared to receive him. During the fight in Nazareth, the crowds shout: "my home is not a suitcase". In the eyes of his fellow town people he is considered a traitor, and therefore a man who can not return home any longer. Sharing the fate of Dror's other characters Johar is destined to live in exile, on fighting arenas all over the states. He has become a displaced man who is holding on to life through a dream which will probably never come true.

In "Raging Dove" Dror succeeded in creating the classic drama in its most precise form. It's no wonder the film has won the first prize in the "Doc Aviv" festival and in other documentary festivals around the world. The film is built as a classic narrative which develops towards a climax into which strong emotions drain (and what builds emotions s better than boxing fights at the crowded arena?).

A young director, Ebtisam Mara'ana, who was the director's assistant in this film, adopted the model of a torn identity of the Palestinians living in Israel, and made her own film, this time with Duki Dror as the producer. It's easy to find resemblance between the two films. They both deal with a transparent population known as "Palestinians who are citizens of the state of Israel", and their daily confrontation with the double and conflicting commitment to two states with a long history of bloody conflict: Palestine and Israel.

Just like Abu Lashin, the director lives and works in Israel as a young modern secular woman, besides her family members who passively continue to nurture their religious and national identity. But the young director is an outsider to this society and while searching for a role model for her non conformist ideas, she remembers Suaad, the woman who was brave enough to stand against the village people and paid the highest price for it – expulsion from her home to the cold and unfamiliar England. When Ebtisam goes to meet Suaad in England, trying to comprehend the reasons for which she was expelled, she finds a person who resembles Abu Lashin in many ways. Like him she has become accustomed to her new home, has married an English man and is raising her son in England. But as she talks to the camera she uncovers the gap between the green-grey English landscape to the landscape of her past which she continues to carry with her ever since she was expelled. She packed her past in a suitcase

where she keeps newspaper articles and family letters. Her village is now condensed into these papers and it doesn't let go. Ibtisam, as in Dror's "Raging Dove", follows Suaad in her visit to the village and discovers that the expatriate is doomed to exile forever, even in the place which was once his/her home. The decision to end the film with the director standing on the platform in a train station strengthens the recurrent theme in Duki Dror's films: torn between here and there, between a place in the past and the place that might be in the future, the heroes find themselves painfully experiencing the formation of time, while they continue to long for a lost identity of oneness: man with his land.

The tormented longing for a lost identity of oneness is precisely what Dror's latest film deals with. "The Journey of Vaan" was born out of an idea by the script writer Violet Shitzer, and evolves around Vaan Nguyen, a young Vietnamese woman who lives in Tel Aviv. Vaan is the daughter of a family who arrived in Israel when a decision was made by the government at that time, to join the international efforts to save thousands of Vietnamese refugees who escaped the war cramping into small fishing boats and sailing to an unknown destination. The state of Israel saw this act as a humanitarian gesture which would contribute to its positive "western" image and place her with other countries which chose to absorb the refugees. Once they arrived here the refugees were aided to learn the language and the culture of the new home. Among archival footage of that period, which appears in the film, we see the refugees reciting whole sentences in Hebrew. The man who has filmed this footage, Zadok Farintz, told Dror that he was astonished to realize that the viewers did not grasp the irony in the absurd situation in which the Vietnamese refugees break their teeth trying to pronounce words in Hebrew. (This archival footage points to Israel's position at the time of consenting to help the refugees, giving the Vietnamese refugees a similar yet different status than that of the Jewish immigrants). It was impossible not to notice the slanted eyes and the heavy accent which characterized this group of newcomers. Vaan's father, after twenty years in Israel, a father to five daughters who were born here, all speak and write in Hebrew, three of them served in the Israeli Armed forces, continues to work in a Chinese restaurant while speaking Hebrew full of errors. In his film Dror asks what characterizes this foreign identity which is etched on the displaced. Vaan backs up his search writing in her diary: "I long to become an Israeli, like everyone else here, without people asking about the origin of my slanted eyes..."

The reality abruptly takes a turn when Hoimai, the father, decides to visit his homeland twenty years after he has left. There are a few reasons for this visit: first, to try and regain the lands of the family which were deserted when they escaped. Second, the fear of watching his girls growing away from the Vietnamese language and culture and the even greater fear of watching them become displaced just like he is. The complexity of this situation is being well

expressed in a scene in which the youngest of the girls plays outside with an Arabic friend. Their conversation is in Hebrew yet they both sound and appear foreign in their own home.

The director, Duki Dror, and the cinematographer, Philippe Bellaiche, who has worked with Dror in his previous three films, follow Hoimai in his journey back to Vietnam. Together they experience the way to his home village. Like Felix Mizrachi, in the film “Taqasim”, Vaan’s father recognizes his old home and brings up memories of the past. At the same time he describes the past in his diary. His descriptions are matched by archival footage of the war. Footage taken from karaoke music video tapes, which the Vietnamese refugees watch weekly, illustrates his descriptions of a land at war too. These tapes create a visual package of the story of their lost home land.

As the journey progresses, the father discovers that regaining the lands is not easy. With the change in rulers they were passed on to new owners and now he has to prove his ownership. At this point he asks his assertive daughter, Vaan, to help. Dressed in European cloths she appears foreign to the place. Getting together with the family in Vietnam is no simple matter. She is hugged warmly by the family members but pretty soon the mentality gaps appear. The daughter’s persistence leads the father to various places. Together they confront different people in the area where he grew up and slowly the understanding that there is no way back is starting to clear up. Vaan’s assertive nature is starting to dismantle, and father and daughter decide to go back to Israel, realizing they have failed to regain what was once theirs. Again the tragedy of the displaced is on stage: Vietnam did not save a place for the ones who have left. The lands will not be returned to the family, but at least Vaan had the opportunity to experience the old land and to feel the gap between herself and the place where she could have lived. Vaan and her father each write down their personal impressions from the journey in their diaries, and they each come to terms with the fate which imposed being away from home and making them strangers in their own homeland.

Dror is pleased with the film even though he says that the characters are not dramatic:

“at the most turbulent moments Vaan’s father is smiling instead of breaking a table. He behaves according to the cultural codes on which he grew up. These people have difficulties expressing their feelings and I wanted to enable them to express their tragedy which is the tragedy of their people who were scattered all over, dividing families and dislocating them off their land”.

The story of Vaan, just like the story of Felix Mizrachi, and like the story of Abu Lashin, all tell the story of the director, the story of a man who went a long way and found that

foreignness will follow wherever he goes. This feeling does not depend on the ability to adjust to a new place. Seemingly these foreigners live among us behaving as expected. What Dror tries to bring out in his films is the hidden wound, the wound beneath the skin which comes to life in unexpected moments, while watching an image on the TV screen, hearing a familiar voice or tasting the tastes of home. For this reason the director has a tendency to talk about failure. This is not failure in the regular sense, but the failing to unite with the place, with the history, and say to yourself: this is me and that is my home.

On the ground of the feelings described in Dror's films, the famous sentence uttered by Dorothy, the hero from "The Wizard of OZ", has never sounded more out of place; "There is no place like home" she claimed, and in that sentence she expressed the American yearning in the 30's to create citizens who are totally committed to their own home and to their national home. Dror's films describe an opposite feeling. They unfold the existential discourse led by the postmodern man, who is at constant fluctuating situations of migration. From Dror's films we can only paraphrase Dorothy's words into: "There is no such place as home..."