

“The Green Prince”—Film Documentary beyond Politics

Dr. Hartmut Heep

Associate Professor of German and

Comparative Literature

The Pennsylvania State University

200 University Drive, Schuylkill Haven, PA 17972-2208

United States of America

Abstract

Film is an essential form of entertainment. Unlike the written text, whose critical interpretation is a part of any school curriculum, the film audience is often unable to decode the visual text critically. Unaware of an underlying subtext, the director of a film can exert different levels of influence in order to manipulate the outcome. The film “The Green Prince” comes labeled as a documentary with its built-in trust factor of cinematographic genre conventions. A didactically arranged narrative, the use of color tints and clever camera angles, subtle editing devices that influence the pace of the otherwise slow interview process, as well as monochromatic color palettes and make-up create a political subtext. Sounds, apparently casually recorded, are in studio produced pre-recordings, and crucial scenes are accompanied by mood-altering music selections. Carefully staged and selected scenes develop an opinion that is critical of Israel, while creating a more positive visual response towards Hamas. The director, Nadav Schirman, achieves this goal by reducing political complexities to personal stories. This study will decode the different texts of the film by combining a visual analysis of the image with the critical interpretation of the sounds.

Key Words: Film Studies, Cinematography, Middle Eastern Studies, History, Jewish Studies

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The flavor of one’s favorite ice cream is clearly marked on the packaging. For that same reason, we go to the movies: we buy what we like. Heavily advertised films immediately reveal their flavor: thriller, drama, action, western, musical, etc. Thus, we know what we are buying before we pay for it. Certain movies come with a built-in audience, such as Halloween or Christmas themed films, whose popularity increases with the appropriate season. The documentary is a very specific film genre. It attracts a limited audience that is interested in an objective presentation of a specific topic, and it does not work from a script. Dirks (2015) defines documentary as: “non-fictional, ‘slice of life’ factual works of art—and sometimes known as *cinema verite*” (“Documentary Films,” para. 1), while the host of the website www.mediaknowall.com, Wilson (2015), suggests that documentaries are texts “which aim to document reality, attempting veracity in their depiction of people, places and events” (www.mediaknowall.com/as_alevel/Documentary/docu_index.php). Fuller (2015), the publisher and editor of the website www.desktop-documentaries.com, admits that “documentaries are often used to reveal an unusual, interesting or unknown angle. Topics are limited only by one’s imagination” (“Ready to make your dream documentary,” para.1). Fuller’s definition with its emphasis on “imagination” is closer to the genre of fiction than to a documentary. Surly, any director of a documentary selects camera angles, cuts, editing devices, and some mise-en-scène staging scenes that reflect the content truthfully. But “The Green Prince,” released in the U.S. on 16 January 2014, and written and directed by Nadav Schirman, violates that rule.

Conventionally, the director might lay out questions for an interview, for example, but once the interview begins the filming develops its own momentum.

The main objective of the documentary, in the interview format, is to be trustworthy by presenting arguments in a manner that is not only perceived as being objective but is, in essence, objective. When documentaries violate this convention of objectivity, they can manipulate the viewer. This analysis will decode the visual message of “The Green Prince.” By applying cinematographic techniques, it will point out the film’s discrepancy between image and sound. The key to an analysis that will decipher this visual text is its duality: its various implications, as they occur on the visual and content levels. The self-labeled documentary, “The Green Thief,” pursues a subtle but one-sided political agenda.

The viewer is tricked into believing that “The Green Prince” follows the traditional conventions of a non-scripted interview. It is the story of Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of a prominent Hamas leader, and Gonen ben Yitzhak, an agent for the Israeli secret service, Shin Bet. Yousef is arrested by Israeli soldiers, when he tries to smuggle weapons into Israel. The director minimizes the potential impact of Yousef’s terroristic activities by overemphasizing Yousef’s age. He is seventeen at the time of his crime. Yousef, while being incarcerated in an Israeli maximum security prison, begins to collaborate with his archenemy: Israel, without ever explaining his motivation. He finds a permanent contact person in the Israeli handler Gonen ben Yitzhak, and a friendship develops through a gradual rapprochement between terrorist and agent. Schirman applies a similar cinematographic technique as does Tim Robbin’s 1995 masterpiece, *Dead Man Walking*, in which the demarcations between villain and possible victim gradually become blurred.

The camera fulfills the viewer’s cinematographic expectations of the documentary genre: the shots are medium close-ups, close-ups, and on rare occasions, extreme close-ups. The camera angles in the staged interview scenes are straight-on, allowing the audience to become part of the interviewing process. Also, the length of each take corresponds to the conventions of the documentary genre conventions. The dominant editing process consists of back and forth cuts, which are equally common to the taping of an interview. Moreover, the plot is laid out like an interview as well. The viewer is presented with two different political views, two different people, and essentially with two different stories. The narrative is set up to create the impression that those two stories, with their very different ideologies, will be presented in a fair and balanced manner. Visually, this difference is expressed by positioning attached shadows on the sides of re-enactors faces. Yousef’s face is lightly shaded on the right side, Yitzhak’s on the left. Equally obvious is the position of these re-enactors in the frame and the chosen camera shots. Although Yousef and Yitzhak are the real personas in the story, the film is reenacted, therefore, I use the term re-enactors. Yitzhak is shown mostly with medium close-ups and close-ups, while the director chooses the occasional extreme close-up for Yousef who, according to Atkinson (2014), is “seething with wide-eyed urgency, narrates his tale in English directly to the camera,” (“The Green Prince,” para.3). This technique visually creates an intimacy between the terrorist and the viewer, while the agent is kept at a neutral, almost impersonal, distance without any extreme close-up shots. It is this subtle kind of viewer manipulation that provokes Nelson (2014) to call the movie “an extremely uncinematic experience,” and “problematic is Schirman’s slew of awkward visual annotations” (“Sundance Film Review,” para 1 and 3).

The duality as a basic structure in the movie is also expressed in its content. While the plot is set up like a traditional interview, the narrative follows nine clearly marked chapters: “Torture,” “Olive Tree,” “Green Prince,” “Responsibility,” “Trust,” “The Game,” “Two Worlds,” “Lies,” and “America.” Through these chapters, the director takes the viewer on a calculated journey. The viewer, however, does not realize that the re-enactors are following a tight script, based on Mosab Hassan Yousef’s 2010 autobiography, *Sons of Hamas*, and rewritten by Schirman himself. In essence, the documentary is Yousef’s story with ben Yitzhak almost as an obligatory extra.

The subtle distortion of the story begins with the statement that Yitzhak’s father had warned his son about the dark and dangerous quality of the Israeli secret service. Although Hamas is an internationally recognized terror organization, the film is void of its dark and dangerous quality. The viewer cannot help but identify with Yousef, who is portrayed as a son and brother, in short as a member of a family with a community. Andrews (2014) concurs by pointing out Schirman’s clever abuse of *mise-en-scène*: “Mosab’s face, lit as if by the glow of an interrogation lamp, and Mosab’s voice, forceful and conviction--impelled until a momentary late cracking with emotion, make him an irresistible storyteller” (“The Green Prince,” para. 3). The impact of a balanced, truthful documentary should not contain adjectives such as “irresistible.” No such scene is included for Yitzhak, neither as a father, nor as a member of a Jewish community. Holden (2014), who writes for the *New York Times*, calls Schirman’s narrative style “dispassionate objectivity” (“A Spy,” para. 5). Through his statements in the film’s script, the viewer is informed in a matter-of-fact style that Yitzhak is married and has three children.

The fact that the viewer does not know and see him with his family or as a part of his community creates an immediate, and intentional, distance between viewer and agent.

The obvious discrepancy between image and sound concerning Yousef can easily be overcome. Schirman presents Yousef in a suspicious, possibly even dark, manner within the screen by creating attached shadows on Yousef's face. Through such lighting, the audience might identify Yousef as a villain. His message, however, neutralizes the negative visual images, and the viewer is able to emphasize, if not identify, with Yousef's family-friendly message, thus negating his terroristic background. Moreover, the monochromatic color palette, in which shirt, make-up and background are merged into a harmonious whole, evokes harmony and trust in Yousef. Yousef is eventually allowed to break out of his beige color palette after he arrives in the United States. The audience sees him in different colored shirts with different haircuts. This physical transformation tries to reflect the multicultural and diverse aspects of the United States.

Schirman's clever staging of objects within the screen achieves the same result. At the beginning of the movie, he composes carefully arranged tableaux that evoke shocking, graphic scenes from the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib, so reminiscent of American soldiers engaged in torture. The staged scene of a hooded actor in what appears to be an Israeli prison cell at the beginning of the movie swings the public's emotions in favor of the tortured victim. Again, the audience finds empathy for the victim. Schirman erases the Western philosophical basis of cause and effect. The audience is faced with the effect of a man who is being tortured, but the viewer forgets the cause for the torture. The prisoner, after all, is a terrorist whose stated goal is to harm Israel.

The monotony of prison life is reflected in a technique called frequency. Schirman fluctuates images of a toilet in a prison cell and food delivery. By showing the same images frequently, the director alludes to the monotony of prison life. The audience empathizes once again with the terrorist but Turan (2014), who writes for the *Los Angeles Times*, reminds the viewer of the true intentions of Yousef who is, after all "determined to kill Israelis" ("The Green Prince," para. 8). The same effect is created in the staging of victim and prison cell. Schirman arranges the human body in the lower right corner of the screen in order to show the marginalization of the prisoner. Left helpless by his Israeli torturer, the victim remains crouched in his corner. It is hard for the audience not to extend a helping hand to the tortured terrorist.

A cinematic analysis of the arranged nine chapters underlines Schirman's clever narrative techniques. Keough (2014) and Pevere (2014), among others, realize the complexity of the topic but Pevere also understands that Schirman's narrative choices of sacrificing "complexity for dramatic clarity... are conspicuously reductive" ("Spy," para 1). The first chapter, entitled "Torture," begins with a matter-of-fact description of Yitzhak. This scene is quickly followed by Yousef's comments. His remarks are accompanied by selected studio produced sound effects, such as fear-instilling music and screaming voices. The human brain immediately associates the sound with the image, and like Pavlo's dog, draws a connection between the torturer, namely Israel, and the tortured terrorist, namely Hamas. In addition, Schirman has arranged objects in a canted way in the screen, thus re-emphasizing the lop-sidedness of his argument, and the injustice of Yousef's imprisonment. Andrews (2014) understands the power of the camera when he states that Schirman stages these scenes "lit and angled for teasing obliquity," ("The Green Prince," para.1) but without ever stating it.

The interpretation of the second chapter, "Olive Tree," provides cultural challenges for most Western viewers. Schirman allows Yousef to narrate a scene from his childhood by using a flashback technique. The director takes the audience into the pastoral setting of Mediterranean olives groves which may remind the Christian viewer of the Garden Gethsemane. This setting serves as a plausible content bridge for Yousef's imminent conversion to Christianity. The scene quickly capsizes when Yousef tells the camera that he was raped by an older, stronger family friend. Too ashamed to denounce his rapist, and too afraid to be suspected of having been raped, Yousef must keep this incident a secret. The viewer is forced into a Western interpretation of this scene in which male rape is not only a social taboo but also a crime. But the audience should resist an interpretation that is based on Western values. The 2007 blockbuster film, "The Kite Runner," directed by Marc Forster, had introduced a broader Western audience to homosexual practices in Afghanistan. In "The Kite Runner" young Hassan is brutally raped by a group of older boys. The rapist, Assef, later in the movie, keeps Hassan's son, Sohrab, as a dance boy and rapes him with regularity. Strict Muslim cultures are homo-social, implying that women cook, work and socialize only with women, whereas men spend their public lives with other men. Sodomy among young, unmarried men is not uncommon in a culture in which women are excluded from the public eye.

Obviously no official document will attest to homosexual practices between unwed men; however, popular homosexual internet websites document the high interest of such practices, even in ultra conservative Muslim countries. Thus, Yousef's experience, while horrifying for the Western viewer, is a moral taboo but also a social practice within his own culture.

The third chapter, "Green Prince," offers a thematic duality. If Yousef, the prince of Islam, as implied in the color green of the chapter's title, is a member of the Hamas aristocracy, then Yitzhak is a member of democratic Israel. Schirman correctly applied the hereditary quality of any aristocracy to Yousef, who, as a Sunni Muslim believes in the direct succession of Mohammed as spiritual and political leader. Today's prince will turn Yousef into tomorrow's king. But the audience must rightfully ask king of what? The terrorist organization Hamas? Consequently, Sachs (2014) criticizes Schirman's strategy to generate "a fair amount of suspense simply by relating the facts in sequence, but moral complexity is beyond his grasp" ("The Green Prince," para. 1). DeMara (2014) notices the choice of color filters: "through a range of tints—most notably an eerie green—throughout the documentary, effectively creating a shifting sense of mood" ("The Green Prince," para. 7). DeMara calls the quality of Schirman's use of the color green "eerie," when in effect the director evokes green in reverence to Islam. There are no blue and white color moments in the film that would permit the slightest association with Israel's national colors. Such color images could have been evoked in brief shots of blue skies and Israel's white Mediterranean beaches. These technique are not qualities of a truthful documentary. For that reason, Lewis (2014) states that Schirman's film deviates from the concept of documentary and calls it "a narrative thriller that effectively employs many elements of a John le Carré spy novel: international intrigue, arresting twists and turns, and characters with complicated motivations" ("The Green Prince," para. 1).

Chapters Four and Five, "Responsibility" and "Trust," allow the viewer greater freedom to interpret the story. Is it Yousef's responsibility to spy for Israel because he wants to avoid the senseless killing of Israelis, or is Yitzhak responsible for Yousef's well-being, even after Yousef leaves Shin Bet? The friendship between both men effortlessly leads into the chapter "Trust." Schirman underlines the importance of trust as foundation between Yousef and Yitzhak. The critical viewer must ask the question whether Israeli and Hamas politicians can begin to develop an equally meaningful relationship that is built on trust between both nations. This chapter represents the moral climax of the film. It presents a moral imperative and a valuable lesson: peace is possible when started from the bottom up. Henderson (2014) points out that "the story plays well regardless of what one's opinion is about the conflict, because it primarily operates on the more universal, relatable aspects of human nature" ("The Green Prince," para. 8). More people-to-people contacts, as well as economic stability, might lead to a deeper understanding and respect between them.

Chapter Six, "The Game," returns to the world of thrilling espionage stories. For Yousef and Yitzhak, the thrill and the excitement of their jobs were a game. The same seems true for the director whose "inter threadings of historical film, surveillance footage and re-enactment scenes" (Andrews, 2014, para. 1) turn the documentary into a thrilling espionage story that loses its message in the abundance of superfluous visual stimuli. For Smith (2014), this type of directing mars the credibility of the documentary "by a visually static format—it mostly consists of a long interview with each of the two principals—and by its cheesy spy-movie score and docudrama reenactments" ("The Green Prince' Chronicles," para. 4). Jolt cuts, increasing the amount of visual stimuli, create fast action that translates into suspense. This editing technique does not serve the purpose of a fact-finding documentary.

This philosophy inadvertently leads to the seventh chapter: "Two Worlds." The world of Hamas and the world of Israel, Islam and Judaism, ideology and idealism, the East and the West are all gradually left behind when Yousef and Yitzhak are able to meet in their own, harmonious world filled with trust and friendship. These moments of peace, however, become rare as their lives and their surroundings were filled with "Lies," as portrayed in Chapter Eight. Both men must make a decision if they are to remain true to their principles, and both men do make a change. Yitzhak leaves Shin Bet and becomes a lawyer; Yousef leaves the West Bank for San Diego. The heavy moral burden of lying provides another content bridge towards Yousef's conversion away from Islam. The beguiling New Testament message of forgiveness and the hope for redemption are particularly attractive to a Western, mostly Christian audience. Thus this chapter flows into the ninth and final one, entitled "America."

The film's ambivalence or duality is apparent in its final chapter. Yousef seeks refuge in America. In San Diego, he is able to express himself freely and to develop into his own persona. Simultaneously, Schirman points out that America does not embrace Muslims readily. Although Yousef converted to Christianity, his newly-found brothers and sisters keep their distance. At last, Yousef is free but alone.

The American viewer would like to believe that freedom is worth the sacrifice of losing his family, his community, his country and his faith. Here Schirman slips too easily into a market friendly, pro-American ideology. He knows that 400 million U.S. Americans constitute his largest audience and his message plays well there.

Since funding for “The Green Prince” was primarily provided by the Hessian, Bavarian and Israeli public broadcasting companies, the movie is free from commercial obligations, and yet, the film is not free from political one-sidedness. The footage in the movie related to Hamas is in Arabic only. All official statements by Israeli politicians and news anchors are in English, providing immediate transparency. Pevere (2014) recognizes that Yitzhak’s action and his persona are completely transparent as well, whereas when the camera “returns to Yousef himself...the movie reverts to its enigma” (“Spy,” para. 5). Moreover, the audience is moved by an alleged attack by Israel on the West Bank. Yousef points out that the detonation was an accident, caused by Hamas itself. Sheik Hassan Yousef, however, Yousef’s father, uses this scene to vilify Israel. His words are accompanied by the graphic depiction of injured or killed Muslim children. The names of the victims of the Hamas attacks on Israel during the intifada of 2001, however, are merely listed without pictures of the victims. This fails to evoke the same emotional response in the general audience. Merry (2014), who writes for the *Washington Post*, realizes the one-sidedness of Schirman’s presentation when she claims that “it would have been nice to hear from more than just two people, but given the sensitive nature of the story, it’s understandable that Schirman couldn’t find more sources to go on the record. There’s also a limited cache of archival footage, so we end up seeing the same video over and over” (“The Green Prince,” para. 7). On the other hand, a film crew should have no problem finding sources critical of Israel.

The director used the repetitive technique of frequency in the prison scene at the beginning of the film. The elimination of a cause-effect based analysis leads Henderson (2014) to state: “I found myself asking...if I would have been filled with more hatred after the treatment I received” (“The Green Prince,” para. 9). Keough (2014) even claims that “Mosab Hassan Yousef had every reason to hate Israelis” (“The Green Prince,” para. 3). Yousef was interrogated because he is a terrorist who wants to kill Israelis before he was incarcerated. He was incarcerated because he tried to smuggle weapons into Israel to kill Israeli citizens. Schirman’s unbalanced docudrama invites critics, such as Atkinson (2014), to deny Israel the right to protect itself from terrorists who infiltrate Israeli territory with the intent to kill: “Frustratingly, the two witnesses, and the film, overlook the larger picture of the widely condemned injustice of the Israeli occupation and the imperialist conditions that compelled the creation of Hamas in the first place, something only an Israeli or occupation-sympathetic filmmaker would care to do” (“The Green Prince,” para. 4). Is Atkinson advocating for Israel to surrender the West Bank? Would Atkinson deny the sovereign and internationally recognized nation of Israel the right to defend itself? To call the possession of territory an occupation is yet another level of anti-Israel sentiments. The viewer would want to blame Israel for the conditions in the West Bank and Gaza. Here, Schirman’s duality has slipped into film criticism: Israel should not interfere with the West Bank or Gaza, and yet Israel is responsible for those territories at the same time. Schirman’s film has successfully erased a cause-effect based argument.

“The Green Prince” is an example of a new kind of anti-Semitism. Unlike the direct verbal and physical attacks on Jews during the Third Reich, this new form applies the media-effective strategy of omission. It is not the direct vilification of Jews through image or text, but the one-sided documentation that creates an emotional response in the general audience. “The Green Prince” received several international awards, such as the Sundance Film Festival award in the category of Audience Award for World Cinema: Documentary in 2014, the Best Documentary Feature Award by the Israeli Film Academy (2014), the Audience Award during the Moscow International Film Festival (2014), and the Bayerischer Filmpreis Best Documentary Feature (2014). These self-congratulatory awards legitimize Schirman’s political agenda which is enhanced through effective visual cinematographic techniques.

Summary

Films contain different coded messages. While the viewer is mostly focused on the interpretation of the sounds, the visual text plays an important part in the overall perception and reception of the message by its target audience. “The Green Prince,” hailed as a documentary about Israel and Hamas, seemingly follows the genre conventions of a truthful documentary in the form of interviews. While Nadav Schirman applies the cinematographic techniques of a standard interview, his sensational postproduction scenes and the diegetic inserts of historical footage undermine the director’s claim for authenticity. His manipulation is subtle and never overt. After having shared Yousef’s emotional journey, the viewer has become his friend by the time the film ends. Yitzhak, although presented fairly, is not allowed to develop into an emotional persona. Thus the viewer is unable to establish a personal connection with him. After a lost media-war for Israel post the 2014 Gaza conflict, it seems difficult to bridge both worlds. Nevertheless, the documentary establishes the beginning of what could become a meaningful dialogue.

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