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History's Broken Wings “Narrative Paralysis” as Resistance to History in Amos Gitai's Film *Kedma*

Nurith Gertz and Gal Hermoni

Amos Gitai's deconstruction of the Zionist historical narrative in his film *Kedma* (IL/FR, 2004) generates a narrative paralysis—by displacing events, disconnecting them from both their real referents and from their normal temporal sequence. This paralysis is tantamount to a post-traumatic rhetoric that marks the historical condition, one in which the movie was created *as* post-traumatic. This rhetoric can be read as subversive because it undermines the linear and teleological hegemonic narratives of both the film and the Zionist ideology that it recounts. The post-traumatic condition is, therefore, political. Thus, the film suggests alternative, if not redemptive, modes of employment that may work through the trauma and create a return to reality.

Kedma belongs, in terms of its structure, to the road movie genre and, as such, is essentially based on movement. It follows the progress of Jewish Holocaust refugees from their European countries of origin, via the ship that brings them to shore, to the Land of Israel, to a military clash with the Arabs, and to Jerusalem. In the course of this voyage, the refugees, as film characters, are expected to participate in the cinematic plot that epitomizes the Zionist narrative: they must forget their erstwhile traumas, overcome the memories of the Diaspora, jettison the Jewish characteristics of their identity, fight the Arabs, and thus be transformed from passive Jews to warring Hebrews who

fight for their lives and their fate. Yet unlike classical road movies that causally progress from a point of departure to a destination—*Kedma*'s journey is deconstructed and directionless, infused with people who move "to" and "from" aimlessly, expressing a journey of obstructed movement characteristic of what Deleuze has called a "sensor-motor crisis."¹ Following Bhabha,² who views the linear, teleological narrative movement as the ideological apparatus of hegemony, the obstruction of movement—and its outcome, paralysis—is perceivable as the subversion of and opposition to the dominant narrative. Thus this paralysis, attributable to the condition of post-traumatic stress disorder, as suggested by Freud,³ is, in this sense, the post-traumatic condition and should be read as one of historical-political resistance.

A Journey in Paralysis

Kedma's paralysis reflects a struggle between progressing toward the future and the inability to make this progress due to a post-traumatic condition that has not yet been worked through and cannot be worked through as long as the survivor-characters are compelled to move forward and relinquish their past.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is characterized by the repeated experiencing of symptoms long after a trauma has occurred.⁴ Thus, the original event is displaced and set within another experience that signifies it. This causes a state of behavioral block. The way to deal with such a block, Freud claims, is to reinsert the occurrence in the chain of causal events from which it slipped away, i.e., to integrate it into a narrative, since post-traumatic stress disorder is actually the deconstruction of a mental narrative that is based on cause and effect. Therefore, a post-traumatic condition is one of narrative failure or the deconstruction of a sequence of events. Such a deconstruction is a way of resisting the coherent linear hegemonic narrative.

The first indication that *Kedma* is a film about movement (and thus one which can be seen as an expression of the failure of movement) is in its title. The Hebrew word *kedma* alludes to movement through both geographical and ideological space: forward toward the future and toward the east, a direction that carries the memory of an ancient past. *Kedma* is also the name of the illegal immigrant ship in which the film's protagonists begin their travel.⁵ By starting with the ship sequence, *Kedma* reveals, *ab initio*, the paralysis aesthetics that characterize the film throughout. A ship is a space that moves but it is also immobile—its exterior moves but its interior and all its contents remain static. The two opposing and mutually obstructive vectors create a paralysis that, at the aesthetic level, is indicated in the opening shot in which the camera follows a character from the bottom of the vessel to the ship's deck.⁶ There he is "swallowed up" by a crowd who fill the deck's space, sitting, standing, and lying. The contrast created by the camera movement through the ship's space and the motionlessness of the people forms an impression of stasis. Thus, the immobile objects neutralize the motion that the camera captures.

This formal paralysis recurs in the scene of the survivors' disembarkation, which reverses the relationship between the film's content and the way it is shot. The event is one of hectic activity: hosts of refugees descend to shore and scatter frantically, some escaping from waiting British soldiers and others arrested by them. This event "invites" intensive cinematic delineation that should cater to the frenetic activity. However, this does not happen. Instead, the intense, crowded scene is filmed in a wide-angle long shot, a take accompanied by slow and consistent tracking. The content and the form of the shot clash acutely. The distance from the objects, the width of the cinematic space, and the speed of the camera's motion seem to neutralize the movements that flood the screen, draining them of their intensity, and, therefore, interrupting their movement in space.

The accompanying score also creates a static space and therefore functions harmoniously with the camera. The music is based only on this progression without a leading melodic line to follow, i.e., without movement. Although the units of the score alternate and occur in time, their exclusive use with no linear melodic or narrative line creates a motionless auditory space.⁷ This musical space, backed by the camera that operates under the same kind of ethical and aesthetic code, is an additional impediment to any flow in the scene.

A Journey under Flooding

The clash between opposing movements in *Kedma* may be described from an additional angle that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari⁸ call linguistic "flooding." In their reading of Kafka they observe a flooding effect in his work and suggest that its purpose is the obstruction of the referential, the signifying role that language should play. Flooding is a subversive act against the hegemonic language or, as they call it, the "major language." The effect can be attained by artificially enriching the language by invoking the full range of symbolic devices and by an extroversive overacting.⁹ *Kedma* floods its film language by overloading both the cinematic frame and the cinematic grammar with objects as well as with quotations, references, ideological slogans, and allusions to historical events. All of these details produce a formal, temporal, and ideological excess that simultaneously reveals and conceals the reality to which it refers. This subverts the very hegemonic narrative that it recounts.

In the disembarkation scene, the camera pauses at the face of one of the survivors, capturing her in close-up as she gazes ahead. It seems as if she continues to weave her memories that have begun unfolding aboard the ship as her image is superimposed on a shot of the British attack on the refugees. Thus the notion of the past, reflected through the remembering refugee's eyes, blends with the future—the struggle against the British—and both tenses flood the present.¹⁰

The film parallels the flooding of time with a flooding of historical periods.¹¹ According to Charles Tesson,¹² the film *Kedma* reaches back to a certain point in the past in order to leave open the historical options. In fact, however, this overlapping rules out such options. The events in the film occurred during 1948 when the fate of the war was still undecided. The mass escape of the country's Palestinian Arabs had not yet occurred, and the Israelis had not won major victories. Yet, the film makes the unknown future present through the details of the landscape that it displays: ruins, mountainside agricultural terraces, and unkempt prickly-pear cacti. In 1948, even Arab villages that had already been deserted were still intact and surrounded by these cacti-like hedges. In 2004, when *Kedma* was shot, the deserted localities lay in ruins and the cacti were strewn around the landscape as mere tokens of their existence.¹³ In 1948, a prickly pear and an Arab stone house signaled the existence of a village; in 2004 the same landmarks denoted the destruction of a place where people had lived. By lingering on them, the camera reverses the future—the results of the war and deportation to a point in the past at which these outcomes had not yet occurred. Such a temporal mixing creates a temporal paralysis. It disturbs the unfolding of linear time, arrests its movement, and renders past, present, and future simultaneous.

Kedma is also flooded with signifiers. It is composed of a system of quotations—some literary, some essayist, some cinematic—harvested from various sources, both Jewish and Arab, all within the road movie episodic structure. These quotations are in fact signifiers that are disengaged from their signified. The film reduces them to cinematic clichés and slogans, disconnecting them from their original context and signified objects,¹⁴ inserting them into a new context and granting them a new meaning—new signified. This disconnection allows the film to accumulate signifiers from various sources side-by-side and to weave them into a tapestry of concealments, contradictions, and clashes between ideological and historical narratives and between spatial and temporal directions. Such a weaving of contradictions conceals and blurs the reality that the film ostensibly describes and paralyzes the classic plot that is progressing toward the Zionist redemption.

The film's major combat scene is a case in point. During the 1948 war, Jordanian legion soldiers occupied a strategic point on the road to Jerusalem—the Latrun police station—and thereby imposed a siege on the city. Israeli troops attempted three times to conquer the place and retreated each time after suffering heavy losses. Some fighters were Holocaust refugees drafted immediately upon arrival and led directly from ship to battle. Some did not know Hebrew, and eight of them were killed. *Kedma's* cinematic war scene, fought on the way to Jerusalem with the participation and death of survivors from Europe, is based on the actual Latrun combat. Gitai even initially titled his film "Latrun." His depiction of the clash, however, is not true to historical fact. Instead, Gitai leaves it as a mythic signifier, distant and distinct from the historical signified, and confronts it with other versions without bothering to

locate the historical occurrences themselves. The survivors in the film are not drafted upon arrival and are not told why they have been inducted and what the military engagement is supposed to accomplish. They are first sent toward a kibbutz. For some vague reason, however, they arbitrarily change direction and turn to the road to Jerusalem. Then the battle occurs—a surprising event for which no preparations are made. It looks more like a signifier than a real fight, a quote of cinematic warfare. Narrow framing, unsteady hand-held camera movements, and close-ups that try to capture the characters strongly suggest a Hollywood action-and-war film. Something about this intensiveness, however, does not work. Something seems fabricated or fake. The explosions look and sound like theatrical representations and do not do justice to the intensive hysteria. The characters die cinematic, Hollywood-style deaths. The blood that gushes from their corpses is but a signifier of blood, just as the entire armed skirmish is only a signifier of an armed skirmish. In a broader sense: this is a signifier of a myth rather than a signifier of reality. Therefore, it makes no effort, as a true-to-history description would, to identify reasons, demarches, and outcomes. On the contrary: this signifier, disconnected from its signified, may be organized in a system of contradictions and oppositions alongside other signifiers in order to create cinematic flooding.

Similarly, *Kedma* is flooded with contradictory historiographic narratives, stories, arguments, and myths that are assembled and condensed into a fictitious narrative serving as signifiers to the familiar texts that are absent. But by patterning the film after the episodic structure of the road movie, Gitai allows *Kedma* to bring these narratives together cumulatively rather than causally. Two successive episodes evoke claims about the Jewish victim turned victimizer when settling in the land. In one, the survivor retells his orphanhood, the loss of his parents, and his distress during the war. In the other, he attacks an Arab refugee with curses and threats. The historical analysis that has been worked through in countless books and films, describing the Israeli public's unwillingness to listen to the Holocaust survivor's story, is presented in one episode where the survivor is asked to sing a song and is immediately hushed after it becomes clear that the song is not an Israeli song. Another episode alludes to the historical and literary analysis arguing that the correction of a wrong done to one people, the Jews, wronged another people, the Palestinians, i.e., that the Palestinians paid the price of the Holocaust. This episode describes an encounter between a convoy of Jewish refugees traveling to a new settlement and a party of Arab refugees leaving their old settlements. In all of these cases, the myths, the recounted histories, and the texts are condensed into a few episodes that signify them but without attempting to elaborate, develop, or establish a causal relationship or a historical logic. The flooded text creates an overloaded density, halting the film's narrative, its ideological and cinematic movement, and veiling its referents. This flooding is another dimension of a post-traumatic condition.

Elsaesser claims that the postmodern condition, experienced as a state in

which the referent, the signified, and reality are absent, is only a post-traumatic outcome of the historical event of the Holocaust, emerging after a delay of several decades.¹⁵ But, according to Elsaesser, the referent, the signifier, and the reality are not really absent. Rather, referentiality is wholly displaced because an event that cannot be described or referred to, because it is traumatic and unreachable, will be inserted into a different locus and become veiled by other events. Thus, postmodern rhetoric as rhetoric characterized by a referential break is in fact post-traumatic.¹⁶ To return to the referent and pave a new path to reality, one must understand it as such and be able to read the past as a fractured historical condition that evades narrative movement.¹⁷

Thus, it is arguable the interplay between signs and their referents in *Kedma*, as a quintessential post-modern play, indicates a post-traumatic condition. In this sense, it is the post-traumatic condition that enables the film to crumple the Zionist narrative on which it is based and replace it with one that is fractured, disconnected.

Deconstruction as Post-Trauma

Kedma is a good example of a film that deals with trauma. The film confronts the Holocaust of European Jewry by telling it, discussing it, and re-inserting it into a narrative, thereby paving the way to overcoming it. Furthermore, the film expands this narrative to include the story of the Palestinian refugees and so creates a variety of accounts—an essential element of dealing with intense disturbance. If the way to deal with trauma is to recount it, insert it into a narrative or several narratives, turn it into a link in a sequence that has a past and a future, and perceive it as a part of a story that allows recognition of the lost object and as a result facilitates release from it,¹⁸ then *Kedma's* collection of stories should act in such a manner and work through the trauma. If so, however, why does the rhetoric of the film remain a post-traumatic rhetoric of blockage and paralysis? The answer is that behind the Holocaust theme lurks a trauma that has not yet been worked through.

According to Freud, traumas are chained, so to speak, such that behind every overtly traumatic event, a covert one, through which its true feeling is expressed, may hide. If so, we must not stop probing the psyche when we discover an upheaving event. Rather, we should see it as a signifier of another trauma, since every “overt” trauma might be a secondary symptom of a “covert” one.¹⁹ In this respect, one may suggest that while treating one shock—that of the Holocaust—*Kedma* neither identifies nor copes with the trauma behind the trauma, the one that is displaced and hidden away. This concealment may be perceived as the reason why *Kedma* does not construct a consistent linear narrative nor act therapeutically.

But what is the hidden trauma—the trauma behind the trauma? To answer this question, let us return to the scene at Latrun. The historical clash at Latrun took place on a hill topped by a British police building where the Jor-

danian army gathered. In the film, the skirmish takes place on a hill topped by rural buildings surrounded by trees and stone walls. The historical battle was waged against the Jordanian Legion soldiers. In the film, it is waged against unidentified fighters who may be Palestinian. To identify these fighters, the soldiers arrest an Arab who had escaped from his village with his donkey and belongings and attempt to question him to find out where the warriors have gone. In the actual struggle for Latrun, the identity of the fighters was clear, the local inhabitants took no part in the warfare, and the refugees with their belongings were unlikely to be encountered at its end because the villages at the foot of the hill and the police station at the top were evacuated before the hostilities.

The director explains these factual changes in the combat scene as manifestations of his intent to depict a battle between two populations: the Jewish and the Palestinian. This is why, as he told us, he created a fusion of two different episodes in the War of Independence: that at Latrun and the skirmish in Kastel, a hamlet on the outskirts of Jerusalem. However, the fighting depicted in *Kedma* does not correspond with the Kastel incident either. The occupation of Kastel, which dominated the supply route to Jerusalem, was completed within ten minutes without any casualties. Consequent battles in the area occurred when the Arabs attacked the site to regain it and force the Israeli troops to withdraw. The place was indeed reoccupied, again without any casualties on the Israeli side and, in fact, without any fighting: the Arabs were caught asleep and hand grenades were tossed, killing several Arabs and forcing the others to flee.

Thus, neither of the two real battles at the core of *Kedma* fully corresponds to the film's cinematic versions. However, another clash, neither mentioned in the film nor referred to by the director, matches its war scene in various details: the bloody engagement in Deir Yassin. Deir Yassin was a small village near Jerusalem that maintained friendly relations with the organized Jewish community and even signed a peace and nonaggression treaty with the adjacent Jewish neighborhood, Giv'at Shaul. Just the same, on April 9, 1948, fighters from two Jewish underground movements, Irgun and Lehi (Stern Group) attacked the place. The operation evolved into a full-fledged battle in which more than a hundred residents, including women and children, were killed. The attackers claimed that even if the local Arabs had concluded a peace treaty and were interested in honoring it, they had allowed foreign combatants, Iraqis and others, to enter the village, occupy it, and prepare for war. The killings at Deir Yassin shook the Jewish community, was denounced by its institutions, and became a painful memory for both peoples.

Although *Kedma* is concerned with the battles at Latrun and Kastel, the details that construct the war scene seem to refer more aptly to Deir Yassin. The intense fighting over the contested locality, the sight of the house at the top of the hill from which shots are fired, and the attempt to discover the foreign fighters all correspond with the bloodshed at Deir Yassin rather than to

the other two confrontations. The victors' guilt, evoked in the film's battle, corresponds to the Deir Yassin clash and not to the other encounters, in which dozens of Israeli fighters were killed in hard struggles with Arab fighters. More than anything else, the fighting and the killing are alluded to in the words of an Arab who says, "They ran when they heard what the Jews were doing." It is commonly assumed that the mass escape of Arab villagers during the war was the result of rumors that had spread about the bloodshed in Deir Yassin. The Arab's words allude to these rumors and, through them, to the fracas itself.

Neither the battle of Deir Yassin nor the killing is portrayed in *Kedma* but both are present in absentia. The fact that the signifier of the encounter is distilled to a cliché of an armed engagement, as described above, facilitates the replacement of the signified—the struggle for Latrun (from which the description is disconnected)—with another signified—the killings in Deir Yassin. Thus the narrative of victimization—the Holocaust narrative—conceals another narrative, that of the victimizer. Therefore, *Kedma* transforms the story of the Holocaust to a tale that can be recounted by inserting it into a situation that has a narrator, a listener, and a basis for working through the trauma. But beyond the stories of the survivors who were led into battle at Latrun, beyond the memories of the Holocaust, and even beyond the story of the Palestinian refugees, lies another tale that Israeli culture has yet to address—a story both absent and present in *Kedma*. It is the tale that floods the film with signifiers that mask their signified and obstructs the film's progress. It both prevents a genuine transformation of the original trauma and creates the current condition in which the well-known Zionist narratives are being questioned.

Kedma, then, is, to use Elsaesser's expression, a narrative of failure that recounts the failure of a narrative. The cinematic narrative fails, cinema as an apparatus that generates and is driven by narratives fails, and—as *Kedma* tells us—the historical/ideological narrative that overshadows and guides our lives has also failed. By means of this failure, we may read the post-traumatic rhetoric that paralyzes it and signals us to stop, look back, and try to come to terms with the events that generated it. Thus, perhaps, we may succeed in clearing the screen of broken splinters of reality and extend our hand beyond it to touch . . . something—if not reality itself, perhaps the reasons for which we are unable to acquaint ourselves with it and face it directly. Beyond this rhetoric, we may reconstruct the reality that is lost behind the dust screen that history has left behind, created by the flutter of its broken wings.

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Gal Hermoni is an MA student in the Multidisciplinary Program in the Arts at Tel Aviv University and teaches film theory and narratology in the Department of Film and Television there. He also teaches film studies at the Open University of Israel.

Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image; Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, c. 1983–1985). Deleuze perceives the cinematic image as an organism based on action, a motor reaction to a conceived situation. This is the “sensor-motor schema” that underlies the “movement-image” on which classic film grammar, particularly in Hollywood cinema, is based. Deleuze notices a reversal of the movement and time relationship in cinema worldwide as a result of the crisis of World War II. This cinematic time has a direct and independent representation—a “time-image”—that is no longer subjugated to a “movement-image.” Deleuze associates the independent existence of this image with what he calls “the sensor-motor crisis,” which is realized in the inability of the character, from whose point of view the image is experienced, to respond in action to the situation perceived.
2. Homi K. Bhabha, “Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 291–323.
3. Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (1914; London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1974), 12:147–156.
4. Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,” 147–156.
5. For a discussion of the cinematic representation of the Zionist narrative, see Nitzan Ben Shaul, *Mythical Expressions of Siege in Israeli Films* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).
6. For a contemporary discussion of the long-take, see Aharon Kashels and Eran Sagi, “On the PCS or ‘The Fear of the Cut,’” *New Views on Film Philosophy* (Thesis, the Academic Periodical of the Bauhaus University, forthcoming).
7. On the subject of harmony as stasis in musicological discourse, see Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998).
8. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, tr. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). According to Deleuze and Guattari, the other way of subverting the hegemonic language is to “dry it up” by intentionally using scanty, restrained language to attain intensive material expression against any symbolic, meaningful, or simply signifying use.
9. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*.
10. This survivor’s gaze may also be read as a manifestation of the Deleuzian “sensor-motor crisis.” The character’s inability to respond with action is the result of shock.
11. For further discussion of cinema, cinematic apparatus, temporality, and historicity, see Leo Charney, “In a Moment: Film and the Philosophy of Modernity,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001);

- and Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
12. Charles Tesson, "Le chemin de Jerusalem," *Cahiers du cinéma* (2002): 30–31.
 13. For further discussion of temporality in ruins as allegory, see Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, tr. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1988).
 14. The original Saussurean distinction between the signified as a mental concept and the referent as an object in the corporeal world is not as crucial to our argument. We use these terms in a more metaphorical and, in turn, a more flexible manner.
 15. Thomas Elsaesser, "Postmodernism as Mourning Work," *Screen* 42 (2001): 193–201. For a discussion of the connection between postmodernism, history, and the Holocaust, see Anton Kaes, "Holocaust and the End of History: Postmodern Historiography in Cinema," *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
 16. For further discussion on post-trauma as access to reality and meaning, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Dominick La Capra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate," *History and Memory* 9, nos. 1–2 (Fall 1997): 80–113; Christine van Boheemen-Saaf, *Joyce, Derrida, Lacan and the Trauma of History: Reading, Narrative, and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 17. See Thomas Elsaesser, "One Train May Be Hiding Another: Private History, Memory and National Identity," *The Low Countries: Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands—A Yearbook, 1996–1997*, ed. Josef Delau et al. (Rekkem, Belgium: Flemish-Netherlands Foundation Ons Erfdeel, 1999). Elsaesser uses the term "parapraxis," coined by Freud to define a state in which the absent (something that has been forgotten or distanced) appears as present—not fully, but in the wrong place at the wrong time. He associates this state with trauma.
 18. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Second Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (1917; London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1974), 14:243–258.
 19. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia"; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (London: Johns Hopkins University), 1996.

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