

On broken dreams, in *My Beloved Uncles*

Ohad Landesman, Published on Doctalk.co.il , January 29, 2016

At the center of Eran Barak's very personal documentary, to be screened throughout February at cinemathèques across Israel, is the search to resolve a mournful family secret. Barak sets out on a quest for his lost Uncle Yisrael who, as a one-year old infant, disappeared decades ago from Pardess Katz, a neighbourhood of Bnei Brak. The family describe Yisrael Amroussi as a beautiful blond child with blue eyes. He was hospitalized in the nearby Malben institution, a small government hospital treating infectious diseases; founded in the 1930s, it eventually became a general government hospital. Four days after the little boy was taken there, the hospital announced his death. But there was no body, no statement on the cause of death, nor a real place of burial. Yisrael vanished from the family's life, and the enigma haunts them and Barak to this day. Was he kidnapped from Malben, and the state authorities preferred not to tell his parents? Do the circumstances justify re-examining the bitterness of North African immigrants regarding the establishment's racial discrimination?

In *My Beloved Uncles*, delving into the affair seems only an excuse for a much more riveting personal journey. Revisiting his childhood neighbourhood, Barak discovers his family's shattered dreams. If Uncle Yisrael was alive today, he wonders, would he resemble the other uncles? Scarred by the vagaries of life, without hopes for a better future, Barak's uncles sit around aimlessly, reconciled to their fate in a sort of tragic irony. "I could have been in movies, like Paul Newman," says Uncle Aryeh, and the similarity is indeed striking. Barak tells him "I want to find your brother, Yisrael," to which Aryeh replies with chilling accuracy "Before that, find me."



My Beloved Uncles By Eran Barak

Eran Barak's film exemplifies what Michael Renov, the scholar of documentary film, terms 'domestic ethnography', where filmmakers draw a silhouette of a family-member. It's a diary-form cinema where 'the self' portrays 'the other' within the latter's domestic space. Ethnography of that kind isn't set in a different or geographically distant culture - its starting-point is the home itself. It aims to transform the other, someone that the

filmmaker knows little about, into a more familiar person in his natural setting. In fact the cinematographer tries to get a better understanding of himself, by intimate learning about that relative. Contemporary domestic ethnography has many examples: *Tarnation*, Jonathan Caouette's 2003 film, is a loving homage to the director's schizophrenic mother, where in tandem he tries to understand his own fate that's inextricably linked to hers. Alan Berliner's film *Nobody's Business* (1996) explores a family dynasty despite his father's objections, to discover if the father's refusal is driven by the family's tragic past. And like those films, *My Beloved Uncles* is both associated with the tradition of family pathology movies, and tries to understand how trapped he is in the family's embrace. Considering the family's DNA, how would Barak's life have unfolded if he'd never left Pardess Katz? Uncle Gabi ventures a guess, in one of the film's entertaining moments - "You would have become a successful delinquent, you're not a fool like me, not dumb."



Barak was always motivated and driven by the silenced tragedy of Uncle Yisrael, because it signified for him the threatening power of his childhood streets, the place he longed to put behind him. And yet in *My Beloved Uncles* he also draws up an indirect charge-sheet against the Israeli state's atrocious treatment of its Mizrahi citizens, its divisive policy that worsened their already unequal status in society. Repugnant, racist propaganda films produced by the IDF's film unit dating from the state's earliest years are interspersed with Barak's personal documentary/diary. Residents of the immigrant transit camps who originated in North Africa are presented as inferior to their fellow immigrants from Eastern Europe. "Ruthi descends from her world of light, into Sa'adia's world of darkness", is just one of the lines that will leave spectators open-mouthed. Throughout the film, the affair of the kidnapped Yemenite children in the 1950s constantly rises to the surface.

In that sense, *My Beloved Uncles* recalls another frantic search in Israeli cinema, the journey in the footsteps of Daniel Wax in Avraham Heffner's magnificent *But where is Daniel Wax?* (1974). It tells the story of Benny Ziv (Shpitz) a successful Israeli vocalist living in the USA, who comes back to visit. At a school reunion he meets a classmate, Dr. Micha Lipkin, and the two go in search of Daniel Wax, a mutual friend whose traces

have disappeared. He was a legendary figure for them – most popular in class, smart, and with a promising future ahead of him. Lipkin and Shpitz travel Israel, meeting other school friends, and eventually track down Wax in a grim Be'er-Sheva apartment. He's become a bore, a balding, boring teacher of philosophy at university. The image of the mythic childhood hero shatters, deflating the dream of recapturing their youth. Heffner created a brilliant parable of the Zionist dream and its decay, a journey film that is much more than a quest for the self, and is in fact a deeper plunge into the essence of Israeli society overshadowed by the Yom Kippur War. Watching Barak's film, it's hard not to recall that dual theme, because the self-exploration in *My Beloved Uncles* goes beyond the narcissistic, and highlights more than Barak's family roots. Here too, the personal quest gradually reveals a deeper rupture – the vicious cultural colonialism prevailing in Israeli society during its first years.

Like in his previous film, *Hunting Time*, Barak frequently blends the fantastic with the documentary. His latest film has several splendid moments when his personal documentary grows more cinematically experimental and daring, when he creates an imagined, fantastic space. In one such moment, he hangs on thin wires pictures of the kidnapped children (who were never photographed) and the documenting of time freezes momentarily, creating a quasi-communion with the disappeared. Other scenes present what appears to be a formal conflict between image and sound, when the camera remains stubbornly static and sounds are heard off-screen. Arguably the film's most outstanding scene is towards the end, when Barak looks for the place where Yisrael disappeared in the 1950s. As he indicates the imaginary spot where the Malben hospital for infectious diseases once stood, Barak marks out the boundaries of the room where baby Yisrael was hospitalized, and builds a sort of temporary hut. Seated at a table inside it, he waits for his fabled uncle to join him. In a series of self-shots with a sequence of shot and reverse shot, Barak structures a cinematic analogy between himself and his lost uncle, suggesting their strong reciprocal and inseparable links. Perhaps Barak and Yisrael are one and the same? At the film's end, is acceptance and understanding created by abandoning Pardess Katz and the imaginary Yisrael, who leaves the hut? It's a constituting and thrilling moment when Barak's voice joins Yisrael's and they talk in unison, as if a single person. Once again viewers sense the anxiety Barak evoked at the start of the film, about setting foot once more in the old neighbourhood. Something will break on his journey, he fears, his camera or his heart. But one of them, it seems, will remain whole.

My Beloved Uncles won “Cinema South” young Directors award and was premiered at Haifa International Film Festival 2015.