

# “...I will move the underground”: Slavoj Zizek On Udi Aloni’s *Forgiveness*<sup>1</sup>

SLAVOJ ZIZEK

## SYNOPSIS OF UDI ALONI’S FILM *FORGIVENESS*: A PREFACE TO SLAVOJ ZIZEK’S “I WILL MOVE THE UNDERGROUND”

A hybrid of realism and fantasy, “*Forgiveness*” is a psychological examination of the tragedies of the Middle East. David, a young American-Israeli, returns to Israel to join the army, only to find himself in a catatonic state after accidentally shooting a Palestinian girl while on patrol. He is committed to a mental institution which sits on the ruins of a Palestinian village that had been attacked by Israeli forces in 1948. The head psychiatrist offers medication for David’s tortured guilt-ridden amnesic withdrawal, while another patient in the hospital, a Holocaust survivor ironically named Muselmann, tries to redeem David by encouraging him to respond to the child ghost that haunts him, to acknowledge his crime and to bear his guilt as a prerequisite for reparation and forgiveness.

Flectere si nequeo Superos, Acheronta movebo.

– Virgil, as quoted by Freud

A short circuit is a condition in which a short electrical path is unintentionally created, causing a power fault – this is what Udi Aloni does in both his book (*Forgiveness, or Rolling in the Underworld’s Tunnels*) and his film *Forgiveness*, causing a power fault of the ruling liberal attitude by way of short-circuiting between different levels of ideology, art, and thought. Aloni achieves a tremendous poetic power by creating new myths with the perspicuous mind of a cold theoretician, grounding a ruthless critique of Zionism in his unconditional fidelity to the Jewish tradition.

In the present world, what we call the normal state of things has become indistinguishable from the state of emergency. The West is more and more often evoking some figure of fear and then promising us protection from it. This comes at a very high price, because in such a scenario, the rhetoric of fear and emergency attempts to eclipse the act of thinking. All of this comes at precisely the

time when the dignity of theory is urgent – not in the service of some kind of theoretical narcissism, but because we must undermine the ultimate goal of the politics of fear, which seeks to prevent us from questioning and thus from acting. The very logic of the emergency state, then, is to prevent us from doing what really should be done. Today more than ever, we need a thinking which is not a simple reflexive response to the state of emergency. I'm not an abstract-idealist here, I'm a Marxist. My favorite passage from Marx comes in a letter he wrote to Engels; in which he asked in so many words whether the revolution couldn't wait a year or two until he finished writing about the spirit it was meant to obtain, i.e. *Das Capital*. So in the spirit of this letter, it is precisely in these times that a film like Aloni's *Forgiveness* is so needed. We have to remember that a film shouldn't intend to answer questions; it should advocate the formulation and reformulation of the questions themselves.

*Forgiveness* is not an avant-garde post-modern film playing with multiple narratives; it is a film that, on the one hand, thinks with emotions, and on the other hand, functions as a simple moral story, the story of a young, perplexed but essentially honest Jewish boy who eventually learns, and becomes able to say: "I'm a killer." This simple recognition saves him from an ethical catastrophe and acts as an ultimate moment of reconciliation; it opens the possibility of seeking redemption through accountability. And redemption through accountability is the very opposite of that which results from granting forgiveness to oneself as the perpetrator.

Israeli and American films dealing with war in the Oliver-Stone style often forge an image of the soldier not as a righteous superhero, but rather as a sensitive individual who acquiesces to his own moral weaknesses. In a dialectic way, because he reveals his moral failure, the soldier then receives moral sympathy from the audience. Not only is a liberal audience ready to forgive him for his war crimes, but the fact that these crimes make him so human is the very impetus for us to embrace him as an errant child. Take, for example, the protagonist (who also happens to be the director) of the recently released Israeli film *Waltz with Bashir*. The director took part in the massacre of Sabra and Shatila only to, years later, make a documentary about his post-traumatic state journey, the end of which includes a scene where he is redeemed by his shrink, who, in so many words, tells him: "You are good person. It's true you made a mistake, but don't ever forget: You are not a killer." In *Forgiveness*, on the other hand, the soldier arrives, at the end of his journey, to the terrible understanding that he's part of a perpetual killing. The crime he commits is not an individual failure within a healthy ethical structure, but an ethical failure built within the ideological structure itself.

Moreover, the film questions itself on the validity of the standard atheist-ideological argument used to explain terrible experiences such as the Holocaust or the Gulags: "God couldn't possibly have allowed such horror; thus it cannot exist." But as Habermas admitted, when we are dealing with our era's immense discontent, it becomes too obscene to dismiss these horrors as petty human

egotism. Aloni's film exemplifies why we need this excessive dimension, what we call the theological dimension, which works in tandem with the political. If anyone needs a proof that political theology is well and alive, here it is! The film introduces this notion of the ontological openness of the universe, the idea that the reality in which we live is not fully, ontologically constituted. This openness is something terrifying, horrible, but it simultaneously gives us hope.

Aloni plays with three versions of alternate realities: the protagonist, David, commits suicide (martyrdom), or he kills the girl (murderer), and only in a third version does our hero achieve reconciliation. This is something like what you encounter in *Run Lola Run*. In fact, *Forgiveness* could have been subtitled *Run David Run*, even though in *Run Lola Run*, the contingency is temporal (alternative endings are determined by the time at which events occur), and in *Forgiveness*, it's a psychological contingency (the ending depends on David's awareness of the events). In order to arrive to the right solution, which is reconciliation, you have to enact, to play with all the wrong solutions at a virtual level. It's a little bit like the metaphors one might encounter in quantum physics: when one of the quantum options is realized, when the oscillation is contracted into one reality, the other notions are not simply annihilated. To understand properly what really happens, you have to also understand what might have happened, but did not happen. Now, one can say that this is empty speculation; what does it mean in terms of ethical experience? It's a very Benjaminian idea. It's not simply that "what is" is and cancels possibilities, but rather that "what is" is accompanied by the echoes of other possible alternatives that are constitutive of ontological openness. I think that without this ontological openness, we live in a closed universe and, to put it in brutal terms, there is no place for morality.

In the last scene of *Forgiveness*, we have an ontological openness; it takes place in the underground obscenity, with its motif of underground and comedy. Note that the actor who plays Yaacov, the Muslim, Muselmann, is one of the best known Israeli comedians. Comedy is precisely – at its most radical, the comical effect – a comedy of character. Something happens to you that comes from outside, entirely contingent. There is an external accident, catastrophe, but the tragic insight is that the hero realizes it was his own *hubris* that caused the tragic fault.

Another of my solidarities with the film relates to Aloni's use of the Palestinian-Israeli rappers. I really think that there's some hope in here, and this relates to my own personal experience. Here I refer to the terrible war in ex-Yugoslavia. At that time, one of the bright moments was the alternative youth culture, which simply ignored the full extent of the nationalist conflict. But what we're talking about here is more radical, and I'm more and more convinced of this: there is a redeeming power of obscenities. When you really love your neighbor, certainly you don't adhere to a sterile, boring multiculturalism. You open yourself to them, and they to you; you tell each other dirty jokes. Maybe the ultimate meaning of Aloni's film lies in this alternative youth culture that

ignores the nationalist efforts –and it ignores it only *because* of its deep understanding of the psychological reasons behind this pre-designed conflict. Here we find the actualization of Freud's quotation of Virgil in the *Interpretation of Dreams*: "If I cannot bend the Higher Powers, I will move the underground." Maybe now, the arms are talking. Maybe we can't change the events at large. But we can at least move the underground.

In the context of the underground we also find the mechanisms of rules, and I cannot emphasize enough how crucial it is that we examine the relationship between ideology and rules today. When it comes to rules, we have plenty of them: rules of contact, how one can act, what one is allowed to think, the ways in which one can be ordered around or instructed, the ways in which one can be prohibited from acting. But in a concrete social space, rules are not enough; in order to truly be a member of a certain social space, a community, what one must know are not simply the rules but the meta-rules, rules which tell you how to treat these rules. On the one hand, we have many rules that basically solicit you secretly; they push you to do what they formally prohibit, like in the naïve oedipal example of a father telling his son to fear women, to stay away from them, when what he's really saying is "do it." The parallel in the political space is – in a democracy for example – when you are given the freedom of choice precisely on the condition that you do not use it. This apparent freedom conceals a much more powerful order: not only do you have to visit your grandmother, but you have to do it out of your free will. I think this is the best metaphor for our present political constellation. And why am I mentioning this? Because I think at the level of the unwritten, the implicit, this is the underground, these other rules that tell you how to deal with rules, i.e. the meta-rules. Officially, we are all equal, Jews, Palestinians, etc. But there is this whole set of implicit rules; you are given a right on the condition that you do not exercise it, or you can exercise it but only secretly, and so on and so forth. Paradoxically, this is when we have to move the underground, and sometimes this is much more important than changing the explicit rules. This is what Udi tries to do; he is moving the underground, changing those unwritten obscene rules, like one of his protagonists, the Muselmann, who calls himself a "mole."

And this is exactly what Hegel called the work of the mole: this underground work which is the magic of revolutions. As Hegel put it, all the glitter of the display of power can stay there, but they're not even aware of how the mole works via the underground. And then at a certain point, you just have to touch them and say, "Hey, look down, you are there" and all collapses.

## NOTE

- 1 Edited from lectures in Tel Aviv and New York 2008.

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