

CANCELLED FACES

A FILM BY LIOR SHAMRIZ

공백의 얼굴들



A man, striving for autonomy, in fear of being absorbed by his lover

Written and Directed by **Lior Shamriz**

with

Kim Won-mok 김원목

Lee Je-yeon 이제연

Ye Soo-jeong 예수정

Won Tae-hee 원태희

Kim Hye-na 김예나

Music by **Ohal Grietzer**

80 minutes. B/W. 2015

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DIRECTOR MINI-STATEMENT

Lior Shamriz

A recursive search for an autonomous identity or a selfless submission to a global monolithic power: These are the two main options the world gives a film director today. Neither I wanted to take with this project. *Cancelled Faces* is rather a journey yielding to partly imaginary histories of cinema and hopeful bodily geographies. It comes into a fictive realm where poetic queer cinema aspires to carry the same shamelessness of its foreignness that Sergio Leone had when arriving in the Wild West. Absorbing imperfection with loose ends that let the viewer breath in their possible inner expansion, instead of consolidating power and form.

On the surface level, the film is pretty much straightforward a Korean film, not really a film about me making a film in Korea. I understand this might be seen as a reactionary interference with a certain status-quo. In the same time, I can assure you that beneath this surface, it is very much connected to my own personal perspective on places I've journeyed through in life and on histories in the shadows of which I had lived.

This approach I believe is more invoking.

In writing, directing and editing the film, I did all I could to make sure that a viewer will not make the connection between what is seen and what is being referred but I might have failed in concealing.

The Imperial Unconscious of the Jews

Ron Naiweld*

1.

Cancelled Faces alludes to a historical event – the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The event has a great poetic potential and this potential has already begun being explored in the years following the Jewish defeat. When the Roman army, led by the Emperor's son Titus, broke the walls of the city and burned it to ashes, it gave the cue to the creation of new stories about God, the Empire, the human being and the relationship between them. Naturally, the event had a huge impact on the history of the Jews, but it also played a crucial role in the development of Christianity and influenced Rome's conception of its own imperial power. It constitutes thus an important turning point in the story of the specific cultural, theological and political cluster that we call "the West". We can say it differently and more radically: there is a way to tell the story of the West with the eventful summer of the year 70 as its starting point.

The Jewish war against the Romans started four years earlier, in 66 CE, but Jewish hostility towards the Empire went a long way back. According to the Jewish-Roman historian, Flavius Josephus, the rebellious movement of the zealots (he calls them "the fourth philosophy" of Judaism, next to the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essens) was formed in the year 6 CE, when Quirinius, the Roman legate of Syria, instituted a census of all the habitants in the region under his jurisdiction. Roman soldiers were sent to towns and villages in the land of Israel, in order to count its habitants and transmit the data to the imperial government. Even if the census did not have immediate political consequences, the zealots saw it as a violation of their liberty.

We may define the zealots as radical monotheists: they refused to accept any human government that is not fully accountable to God and his laws. Here is how Josephus describes them: "they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord." - (Antiquities 18:23-5). For the zealots, Rome was a foreign power: not only it occupied their land but it also relied on different gods. Being counted by the Empire meant becoming subjects of a foreign government. It meant having your money spent according to foreign considerations; having your life evaluated according to the standards of someone else.

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Whether or not the zealots constituted an organized movement during the decades that led to the war is not clear. But we know of several Jewish attempts during this period to undermine the legitimacy of Roman power in the name of biblical-monotheistic values. One of these attempts, perhaps the most ambitious, is recorded in Paul's letters from the New Testament. A few decades ago, the German-Jewish thinker Jacob Taubes has proposed to see Paul as a zealot, since his universalistic message is a radical statement about the redundancy of the Empire. In Paul's letters, written between 40 to 60 CE, the story of Jesus is articulated in imperial terms. Paul's Jesus is Anti-Cesar: once he (Jesus) comes back, the Empire will be to no avail.

Between the writing of Paul's letters and that of the Gospels lies a gap of one or more decades. During this time two important events took place: Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, and Paul died. A third event, so longed for, failed to occur – Jesus did not come back. All this meant that Jesus' message had to change once more. And this time, those who took the job on themselves were not spiritual thinkers such as Paul, but storytellers. Their stories attenuated the nihilistic dimension of Paul's theology in what was probably a natural reaction to the awful display of imperial power. Indeed, from that moment on, mainstream Christianity worked hard to present itself as a religion compatible with the imperial order.¹

The Gospels were not the only stories that were inspired by the Roman victory. The Empire itself had a share in the creative activity that followed the war. In fact, the victory over the Jews occupied an important place in Roman propaganda. Besides the visual depiction of the victory in imperial monuments such as the Arc of Titus in Rome, the Empire issued in 71 a series of coins with the inscription *Judea capta* (Judea conquered) and the image of a woman mourning under a palm tree. The other side of the coin showed, of course, the portrait of the Emperor. The defeat of the Jews became thus a sign of his power. If the coin were a poem, it would read something like this:

The Emperor

His superior authority

The radical monotheist dream of the Jews will never be realized

¹ According to Paul, it was God's job to replace Jerusalem with his heavenly kingdom. When the Empire destroyed the terrestrial Jerusalem, it lent itself to the role of God's helper.

2.

It is impossible to think of the history of the Jews without the concept of the Empire, and not only the Roman one. According to Flavius Josephus, the name “Jews” itself was given to this group of people after the Persian Empire allowed them to repopulate Judea and to establish there a province in the sixth century BCE. But the story goes back farther. Its roots are found already in the ancestral traditions of this people, assembled in the narrative part of the Hebrew Bible.

The main intrigue of the biblical myth can be described as follows: A god named Yahweh chooses a group of people, makes them miracles in order to gain their trust, and then provides them with the two main components that every group needs in order to exist: a place (the promised land) and a law. It is the second component that makes Yahweh a unique god: unlike other national or ethnic gods, he provides something else than guidance, inspiration or protection – he promulgates political, economical and ethical rules of conduct. He gives his people the keys to their perfect government.

Yahweh is “the greatest king over all gods”, as the enthusiastic psalmist repeats several times. The psalmist is a poet. He chooses his words carefully. He doesn’t say that Yahweh is the god of all gods but that he is their king. And he wishes for him to exercise his kingdom forever (146,10). This exhilarated poet isn’t subtle at all when it comes to his message: Yahweh should be superior to all gods and kings.

If the biblical poets had to dedicate so much of their genius to promote Yahweh’s kingship it was because very few people accepted this god as their ruler. In fact, large parts of the biblical narrative demonstrate how hopeless is the agreement signed between the people and its god, how difficult it is to observe. In spite of some punctual success, in the long run it always fails.

Here lies the biblical root of first century zealotry (and also of Paul’s political nihilism) – there is such thing as a perfect law, but it is impossible to follow. The zealot is the one who throw on someone else the full responsibility for this depressing fact. If he cannot fully live according to “his” divine law, the fault is not his or the law’s. It is someone else who prevents him from doing so. This someone else is the Empire, whose representatives and leaders, knowingly or by ignorance, played the part ascribed to them perfectly well.

3.

The fall of Jerusalem did not put an end to the hope to establish a Jewish kingdom governed by Yahweh's law. It is only the colossal defeat of the Jews in the Bar Kokhba war (132-135) that succeeded to temporarily silence the zealots. It became clear that Rome was here to stay, and that no desire for liberty could be realized in a non-imperial world. The categorically negative attitude towards the Empire had to be abandoned.

The formation of rabbinic Judaism dates to this period. The authors of the first rabbinic documents, from around the year 150 CE onwards, created an ideological and legal discourse that allowed the members of Israel to live under both Yahweh and the Emperor. Like the Christians after Paul, they too decided to renounce on the monotheist dream of total independence, and to learn to live inside the imperial world.

A few centuries later, a rabbinic legend about the origin of this renunciation was forged. It told the story of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai, a famous Jewish master from the end of the first century, who succeeded to flee Jerusalem before the Romans burned it down. According to the legend, when the Emperor met him outside the walls of the city, he granted him a wish. Yohanan, to whom one rabbinic source refers as "Cesar lover", asked the Emperor to spare "Yavne and its sages".

The legend about Rabban Yohanan indicates that in rabbinic thought the Empire is given an important function: it provides the objective structure necessary to the accomplishment of their project. The ancient rabbis continued to consider Rome as "the evil kingdom", but they also recruited it, without its consent, to the accomplishment of their Jewish desire. This is, in a nutshell, the masochistic solution of the sages of Yavneh. It reduces hope back to its human dimensions, reminding us that alienation is both the problem and the solution.

Yavneh's sages were not poets or historians, but rather masters and judges. Their message should be formulated as an instruction:

If you want to satisfy your desire for liberty, you have to incorporate into it the presence of another person. This person thinks that he has an imperial power over you. Don't be afraid of it! Use it to your satisfaction!

*Don't Truth Me, Unk,
And I Won't Truth You!*

(Kurt Vonnegut / The Sirens of Titan)



An Indiscreet Lagging of the Absolute

Ramzi Hibri*

If falling in love is a reclamation of liberty, actualizing a forbidden love is an atomic implosion of that liberty. It is an ideological freedom as well as a sensational one. In a confession to his brother, Unk makes this ideology clear. His brother tells him that since he joined the army he has become more aware that he is “*a part of a bigger thing. We all know it’s true, but forget it too often*”. Unk replies: “*When we were in high school, I used to imagine myself inside your body. Thinking inside your body, experiencing the world. I used to jerk off imagining that I was you, fucking your girlfriend from inside your body. It used to turn me on.*” This then is his conspiracy: To dress up in someone’s skin, to find ecstasy in a mask, his myth, his liberty.

It is easy to wonder if Shamriz did the same, an Israeli expatriate making a Korean film. Indeed it is not that simple, for what he preserves is a certain sanctity, a sanctity which lives in the face of the other, the foreign. This can be seen in the film’s architectural excursions, absent of people, for a naked city is the right of the imposter. It can be seen in the faces, resonating in the dissonance of stillness at the edge of motion, like statues, icons-faces like empty rooms. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas:

[A]ccess to the face is straightaway ethical. . . . There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill¹.

Not speaking the language, Shamriz communicates, a foreigner, in his icons - the icons of globalization, the myth speaking out through Unk’s phone and TV, a myth of early Judaism, of the feudal intuition of man, as Unk says of his lover, ‘*He was so rich, and I was so poor*’, it produces a double-bind of exile, a monument to feudal capitalism, to lose

* Ramzi Hibri is a Lebanese performance artist and filmmaker based in transit.

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* p.85-86

oneself at the vanishing point, and set a wrecking ball to that monument, to reconcile the irreconcilable in death - an iconography, as the radioactive skin of language.

The predicament is simple. As nationals, failure to abide by normative legal behavior leads to direct consequences, visible, actual, open for manipulation - one can lose everything. As an expat, the smallest acts of disobedience could lead to deportation, but otherwise one can gain everything. This difference exists just as much in a single place, despite the options of leaving and staying behind, and it is the consequence of globalization, which places the expat in their own land.

Exile is the process with which a body, born in endless wealth, is deformed and deprived of its myths. This occurs by regulating and predetermining the individual within a rigid stratification of class and inflicting them with the skewed materialism of an unconquerable poverty. They are thus subjugated to the helplessness of a bureaucracy notated in blood, driven to the paranoia of surveillance and censorship, and made docile at the fragility of their survival. This spurs a crisis of the intuition. The crisis of intuition is caused by the illusion of irrevocability in institutional frameworks. It is when a system exists solely to maintain its own invulnerability by actively assaulting and eradicating all outliers of change in its community. Since intuition is a reactionary, reflective element that is nourished by the auspices of change, it withers in the absence of transformation, unpracticed and numb.

If time is always changing, and changing all else with it, and asking for nothing more, it is then indeed the nourishment of intuition. Our subterranean selves, our seismic interiority is all we have left when we are oppressed. When refugees and prisoners, the spatially oppressed, need escape impossible confines, and haven't the means to do so, having been forced to relinquish control over mobility and space- it is through meditation on their becoming in time that their surrounding walls become multiple, become as limitless as their ability to perceive them. It is the same when exiles experience the abuse of racism: this meditation boils all excess to its essence, and those in exile are capable of momentarily estranging themselves from their own flesh, to see beyond themselves, and find that they, in their locked exteriority and unbound interiority, are infinitely more free than their oppressors, locked either way.

*The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence.
At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.*

Emmanuel Levinas



DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Born 1978 in Ashkelon (Israel), lives in Berlin & Los Angeles. At 18, skipping the army, moved to Tel-Aviv and started making films, music and taking part in collective art projects. Studied film at the *Jerusalem Sam Spiegel Film School* and media at the *University of Arts Berlin*.



His work was presented in numerous international film festivals, including *Berlin Film Festival* ('10,'13), *Locarno*, *Torino*, *Frameline*, *Sarajevo*, *BAFICI* and venues such as *MoMA NY*, *KW-Berlin*, *Centre George Pompidou* & the *National Museum of Art Washington DC*, winning prizes at the *Oberhausen Kurzfilmtage* ('13,'14), *Achtung Berlin* and others; Nominated to the *Max Ophüls Prize (2010)* and the *Preis der Nationalgalerie* of Germany (2013); Received retrospectives at the *Thessaloniki Intl Film Festival*, *Israel Film Festival Berlin* and *Ars Independent Katowice*.

His works often capsule a tensed narrative, tying scenery and duration, submissive pre-camp pathos and neo-decadence, spectacle and textuality, acting and being. Also makes music.

Starting late 2013, for his film project *The Cold Desert*, he conducted a series of performances in Los Angeles and Berlin, that explored filming as both a recording process and a live stage. These performances will continue with a new film project, *The Cage*, that will be staged and filmed in Seoul and Taipei in summer 2015.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2014 * **“L’amour sauvage”**, 25 mins
- 2013 * **“The Way of the Shaman”**, 50 mins (video installation)
* **“The Present of Cinema”**, 7 mins
* **“The Runaway Troupe of the Cartesian Theater”**, 18 mins
- 2012 * **“Beyond Love And Companionship”**, 18 mins
* **“A Low Life Mythology”**, ca. 80 mins
- 2011 * **“Mirrors for Princes”**, 63 mins
- 2010 * **“Ritenuto”**, 48 mins
* **“Titan”**, 40 mins
* **“Return Return”**, 26 mins
- 2009 * **“Saturn Returns”**, 93 mins
- 2008 * **“The Magic Desk”**, 10 mins
* **“The Vacuum Cleaner”**, 7 mins
- 2007 * **“Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded”**, 7 mins
* **“Japan Japan”**, 65 mins
- 2006 * **“Ho! Terrible Exteriors”**, 28 mins
- 2005 * **“Return to the Savanna”** – 6 short films, 75 mins in Total
- 2002 * **“Albania”** 7 mins





All around is dark, and silent.
The city has drawn in,
Extinguishing its windows. The houses have approached.
They crowd in close, attentive:
This audience of cancelled faces.

[from The Couple - Tomas Tranströmer / Translated by Robert Robertson]



With 출연진
Kim Won-mok 김원목
Lee Je-yeon 이제연
Ye Soo-jeong 예수정
Kwon Ki-ha 권기하
Kim Hye-na 김예나
Won Tae-hee 원태희
Park Jun-hyeok 박준혁
Lee Ju-hee 이주희
Kim Tae-hee 김태희
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Gim Ye-na 김예나
Seo Li-seul 서리슬
Kim Yoo-jin 김유진
Lee Han-saem 이한샘
Park Jeong-woo 박정우
Jang Hee-jeong 장희정
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Kim Sun-young 김선영
Lee Jae-ho 이재호
Park Sung-jun 박성준
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