

## Aesthetics of power: Time and body politics

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# Aesthetics of Power

## Time and Body Politics

Jan Nederveen Pieterse

In his book *The Monument*, Samir al-Khalil remarks on the similarities between Saddam Husain and Andy Warhol, and notes as a difference that the former lacks irony. This brings us to the theme of politics as art. Jean Genet's "fascism is theatre" may be extended to other polities. The significance of the aesthetic dimension and the theme of aesthetics and politics have been discussed in early Marxist studies on aesthetics, recent work on literature and theory, cultural studies, studies in anthropology and a handful of books on politics as ritual, theatre, myth. What these studies share is an interest in the sensuous and subliminal dimensions of politics and the awareness that politics operates across the entire semiotic register — of which writing is but a narrow section, speech a wider band, and aesthetics, particularly in popular culture, wider still. This is an impressionistic reflection on aesthetics and politics, image and ideology in relation to time and the body, taking its examples from, among other places, Israel.

### *POLITICS OF TIME*

The world we inhabit is structured by imperial time: the adoption by international treaty of the world time zones and GMT as the bench mark reflects the balance of power at the turn of the century; the clock of the British Empire became the world clock.

Time and power are close, and must be, for what is power but the attempt to control time, buy time, bide time. Power represents a "history of the present".<sup>1</sup> Reinventing history as a source of legitimation takes the form of inventing tradition.

In Europe in the late 19th century, the great wave of the "mass-production of traditions" was premised on the idea of, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, "the importance of 'irrational' elements in the maintenance of the social fabric and the social order".<sup>2</sup> Public education played an important role in this project, along with the invention of public ceremonies and the mass-production of public monuments, all in the name of the state and nation building.

The rearrangement of the past to endorse the present and of the present to match the past typically takes the form of kitsch, in the sense of 'ersatz culture'. As Reza Baraheni observes on the Shah's celebration of the 2,500th anniversary

1 Simon Barker, 'Images of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries as a History of the Present', in F. Barker et al, (eds), *Literature, Politics and Theory*, Methuen, London, 1986.

2 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-producing Traditions in Europe, 1870-1914', in Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p 268.

of the Iranian Empire in October 1971 at Persepolis:

Hundreds of royal guards and SAVAK agents have grown beards in order to resemble more closely the armies of all the dynasties of Iranian kings throughout history. The beards have been trimmed and shaped to size and pattern of beards in archaeological monuments and museum paintings.<sup>3</sup>

3 "The whole scene is a clumsy admixture of Ben-Hur, El Cid and *The Ten Commandments* — with only Charlton Heston lacking..."; Reza Baraheni, *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran*, Vintage Books, New York, 1977, p 101.

4 Robert Graham, *Iran: The Illusion of Power*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1979, p 61.

5 Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1989, p 3.

At times a regime goes so far as to claim time for itself. Following the 50th anniversary of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1976, the Parliament voted in a "new monarchy calendar" to replace the Islamic calendar.<sup>4</sup>

Nineteenth century nationalism, heir to the Romantics, was obsessed with the past, with myths of origin and continuity. Zionism is part of this stream. This may be part of the answer to the paradox noted by Ella Shohat:

The paradox of secular Zionism is that it ended a Diaspora, during which all Jews presumably had their hearts in the East — a feeling encapsulated in the almost daily repetition of the ritual phrase 'next year in Jerusalem' — only to found a state whose ideological and geopolitical orientation has been almost exclusively towards the West.<sup>5</sup>

The audience of Israel as stage and theatre is mainly located in the West: made up of the Diaspora, Christianity and 'Western civilisation'. How has this informed Israeli aesthetics? Let's consider the different kinds of time Israel inhabits.

Herzl's Zionism reflected the values of European evolutionism and Victorian anthropology with its evolutionary schema of primitivism-savagery-barbarism-civilisation. Herzl's statement that the Zionist settlement should be an "outpost of Western civilisation" refers to a location in space which also claims a place in time, that is, in the evolutionary hierarchy of Western ideas of progress. Hence for Israel the light came shining not in the East but in the West, its orientation was occidental, towards the towers of power and the pinnacles of progress located in the West.

This narrative has been echoed in the language of the experts of the Jonathan Institute and similar bodies when they defend Israel's actions to a Western public: out there are the lands of 'barbarism', the fallen civilisation of the Orient, and Israel is to stand with its back towards them, as a military garrison in an alien time/space, a conqueror in a land of predecessors not contemporaries.

The 1950s successor to Victorian evolutionism was American modernisation theory, a paradigm appropriate to settler colonialism in the mid-20th century, in the age of decolonisation, for it reinterprets colonialism as modernisation. Hence the dichotomy modernity/tradition has been another master narrative of Zionist state ideology: modern irrigation methods, military technology, democracy, attitudes, architecture, dress styles, *versus* traditional farming methods, feudalism, sheikdom, patriarchy, architecture, folk costume, along with other false dichotomies such as Western/urban versus traditional/rural.

For a long time Zionism managed without Zion. Zionist attitudes to Jerusalem were ambivalent — secular Zionism would rather identify with Tel Aviv the 'Hebrew City'. For decades Jerusalem was described as a 'wretched city', 'in decline', but also as an Arab city, a place difficult to identify by those who claimed the land to be empty, and thus kept out of Jewish geography text books.<sup>6</sup>

Secular Zionism, while cherishing the 'ruin value' of the 'land of milk and honey', kept religious metaphor at arm's length. Its time was progress, its destiny modernity. This changed in the wake of 1967 and the occupation when the project of Greater Israel took shape, and along with it the religious claim of Eretz Israel,

6 Yoram Bar-Gal, *The Good and the Bad: A Hundred Years of Zionist Images in Geography Textbooks*, Department of Geography, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1991, Ch 5.

the reorientation towards Jerusalem. Israel took up the politics of the 'eternal city', colonising Jerusalem in the process.<sup>7</sup> Henceforth Israel sought to combine a romantic modernist aesthetic with an aesthetic of Judaic neo-traditionalism.

The plan proposed in 1985 by the film producer Menachem Golan to found a project to "dwarf Disneyland" called *Bibleland* is entirely in this spirit:

We can create permanent sets with Bible scenes and Bible characters. The project is based on the Disneyland idea but it will be bigger and better. I see it as the biggest potential tourist attraction in our country. And of course it will provide fantastic business for Jerusalem and for the studios we are building at Neve Ilan.<sup>8</sup>

*But how original is this idea? As Avishai Margalit noted in 'The Kitsch of Israel', Bibleland of a kind has been Israel's scenario at least since Greater Israel surfaced on the horizon: the Jews of Israel have turned the whole country into a stage and its Jewish inhabitants into actors who address the diaspora, with Jerusalem and Masada among the most important decor pieces.<sup>9</sup>*

Thus Israel inhabited different times: the romantic time of 'next year in Jerusalem' and of Orientalism appropriated; the time of progress and modernity; the religious time of the Holy Land; the post-Holocaust time of 'Never Again!' Each involved different methods of negotiation and management, different sensibilities and aesthetics.

Archaeology has of course been an important instrument in the romantic and Holy Land projects — a matter of "digging for God and country."<sup>10</sup> Devices to

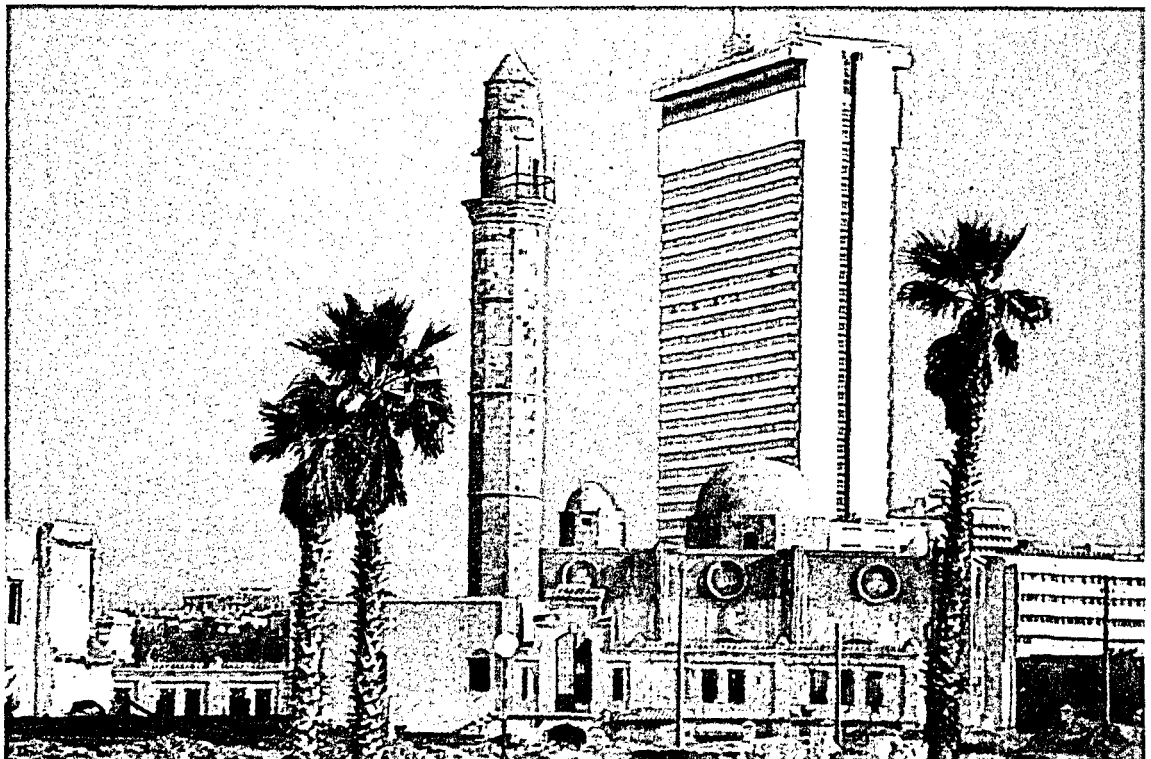
7 Anita Vitullo, 'Erasing Arab Jerusalem', *Middle East Report*, No 175, March-April 1992, pp 23-28.

8 'Building a Biblical Hollywood', *Jerusalem Post International*, 26 Oct 1985.

9 Avishai Margalit, 'The Kitsch of Israel', *The New York Review of Books*, 24 Nov 1988, pp 20-24.

10 Neil Asher Silberman, *Digging for God and Country: Exploration, Archaeology and the Secret Struggle for the Holy Land, 1799-1917*, Knopf, New York, 1982.

*Old and New in Tel Aviv, colour postcard.*



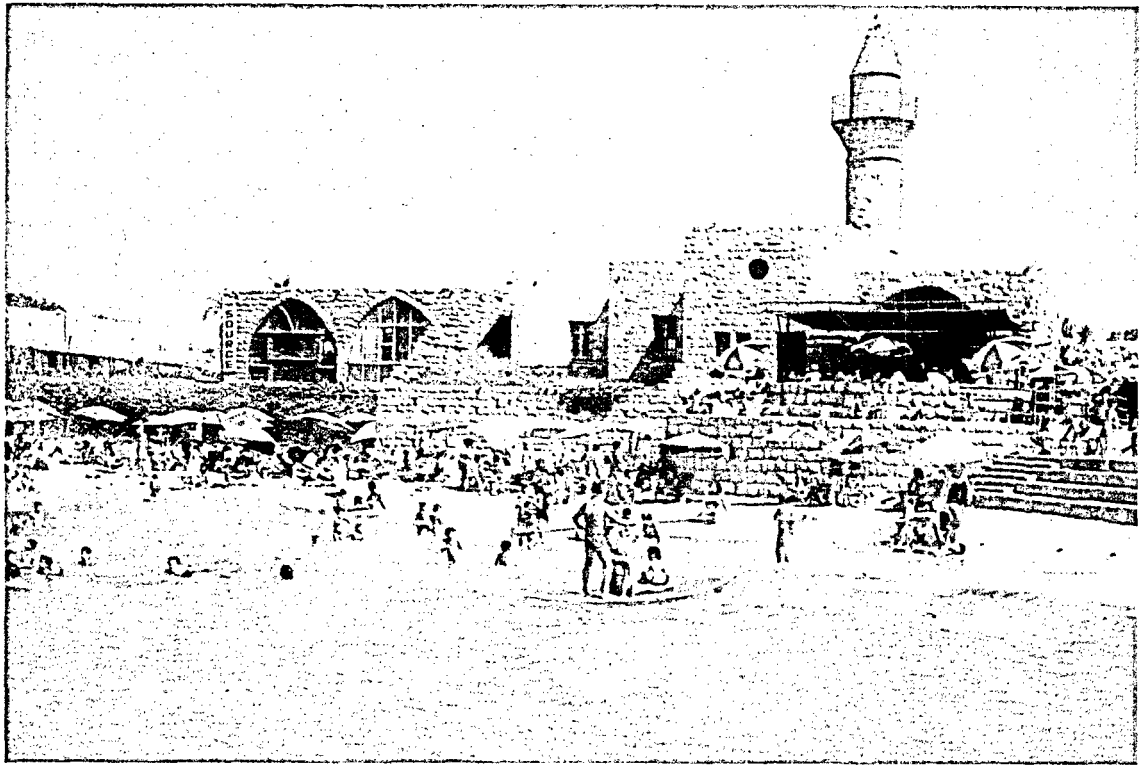
11 See Annelies Moors and Steven Wachlin, 'Postcards of Palestine: Interpreting Images', *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol 7, No 2, 1987, pp 61-77.

12 Jonathan D. Sarma, 'Comment', in Moshe Davis (ed), *With Eyes toward Zion: Themes and Sources in the Archives of the United States, Great Britain, Turkey and Israel*, Vol 2, Praeger, New York, 1986, p 347.

negotiate modern time and 'Never Again' time have been exhibitions, museums, postcards,<sup>11</sup> various techniques of framing and forms of architecture which turn life-worlds into spectacle, for instance, by re-converting the use of buildings — turning mosques into discos or restaurants. Museums mark time by containing it. By turning Arab villages into museums they are walled off from the present, alienated from contemporaneity, claimed for voyeurism, turned into object, surrendered to control — as Native Americans have noticed when their sacred Wampum belts ended up behind glass.

A scholar of religion noted that the Holy Land has functioned like a Rorschach test for religions: "Particular religious traditions infused the land with meaning in a manner that tells us much more about these various religious traditions than about the realities of the Holy Land itself."<sup>12</sup>

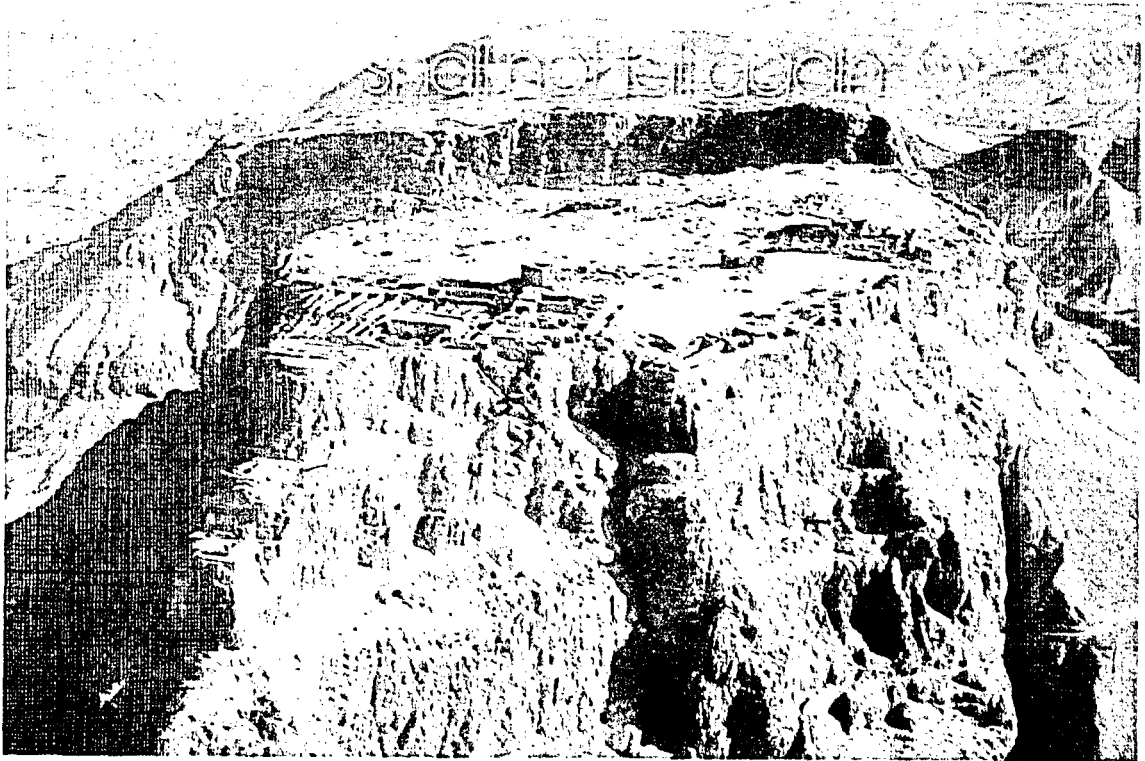
The project for the Jews to return to Palestine was also taken up by Protestant



Caesarea, the Bathing Beach (In the background is a mosque which has been turned into a beach restaurant), colour postcard.

13 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, 'The History of a Metaphor; Christian Zionism and the Politics of Apocalypse', *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religion*, No 75, juillet-septembre, 1991, pp 75-104.

Christians, from the 16th and 17th centuries onward, as a condition towards the fulfilment of Christian eschatology.<sup>13</sup> 'Christian Zionism' accompanied Jewish Zionism. The endorsement of the 'Holy Land project' by both religious Jewish and Christian circles produced a powerful aura of legitimation of Zionism, which was activated and mobilised in the aftermath of 1967. The Judaic aesthetic of Palestine as the Holy Land contributed to a revival of Christian Zionism, and attracted a wide circle of Evangelical and Christian Fundamentalist allies to the cause of Eretz Israel.



*Masada Shall Not Fall Again, colour postcard.*

For the Zionist project to succeed it had to present Israel as the future and Palestine as the past — redoing the great imperial narrative of the Western march of progress; but doing so whilst claiming the past as well — thus banishing Palestinians from the past, the Holy Land, as well as from the future, the forward march of progress, and erasing the time in between. A difficult claim to counter, also because the West inhabits several of the same time frames.

### **BODY POLITICS**

In the Diaspora the spectrum of Jewish identities narrowed, given the exclusions to which Jews, as an Other of Europe, were subjected. The figure of the gentle Jew was a survival strategy, as were the rabbi and for that matter Shylock — adaptations to guest and trading minority status. Along the lines of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'habitus', this fostered certain body types — typically the *schlemiel* or Woody Allen figure.

The Zionist project widened the repertoire of available Jewish identities to include those of the pioneer-settler, farmer, warrior. First, in the iconography of the young state, emerged the body type of David, the wiry Kibbutzim character, embodying the 'youth' of the Israeli state project.

After the 1967 war, along with the changed position of Israel in the region and on the world stage, the aesthetic changed to incorporate 'Jewish James Bonds'. Paul Breines, whose terminology I follow, relates this shift to changes in Jewish body politics and Jewish moral identities.<sup>14</sup> We encounter the new type, as

<sup>14</sup> Paul Breines, *Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry*, Basic Books, New York, 1990.

Breines notes, in Ariel Sharon's autobiography, *Warrior*, in films such as *Raid on Entebbe*, 1977, the sub-genre of the 'tough Jewish novel', and in the Mossad mythology. The strategic scenario of Israel as a regional nuclear power is being evoked through another body type, as the 'Samson option'.<sup>15</sup>

The Tough Jew represented an Israel whose philosophy was formulated in 1977 by Begin's 'Never Again!' But in fact it represents the habitus of domination. It sought to retain the legacy of Jewish morality and the gentle Jew *and* found a Greater Israel:

The trauma of Nazi mass murder made the Jewish yearning for toughness especially strong, while nearly two thousand years of self-definition according to an ethos of meekness and gentleness made toughness unacceptable. Unwilling to reject either fully, the Israeli and the post-Holocaust American Jew sought to have *both*. They want, in Israel, a moral *Machtstaat*, a conqueror state with a conscience; they want to subordinate others or to kill while themselves remaining chosen people, 'a light unto the nations'.<sup>16</sup>

The double identity of having your cake and also eating it comes across in the attitude among the Israeli military of 'Shoot and Cry' — we shoot sharp and *then* torment our conscience.

The Judaicizing aesthetic of Eretz Israel and the frontier aesthetic of Gush Emunim have a particular appeal among the Diaspora. According to Shuki Elchanan,

The American Jews get a big thrill from the guns. ... Reasonable people with a civilized repugnance for violence and blood, they come on tour from America, and they see the guns and they see the beards, and they take leave of their senses. The beards to remind them of saintly Yiddish weakness and the guns to reassure them of heroic Hebrew force.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the Yeshivas prosper on this duality. In a broad way this matches the aesthetics of revivalist, neo-traditionalist or militant religion the world over: the Hindu militancy of the BJP, the Sinhala chauvinism of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, Shia Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It is the aesthetic of holy war, of Crusades and jihad, of 'warrior monks' — the peculiar charismatic conjunction of the sacred and violence. But this aesthetic does not have so wide a constituency and authority. Underneath and appealing to a wider audience this evokes the aesthetics of the frontier — of frontier justice and the imperial soap opera of colonisers and natives. In Israel frontiers and borders are tightly interwoven with security questions and with the country's 'siege mentality', which in turn reflects its self-understanding as a 'Western outpost', and deeply entrenched in collective psychology and political imaginaries.

Statements of Israel's spokesmen, like Benjamin Netanyahu for the Likud Bloc government, reflect Israel's double identity in combining toughness with moral posturing. No matter how thin, and how thick the insincerity, the aura of morality and the claim to legality are a necessary figleaf.

The figleaf has not been big enough. Israel's actions in the Occupied Territories and in Third World arenas have ended up on the front pages — arms suppliers to Somoza, advisers to death squads in Guatemala and El Salvador, strategic allies of South Africa, trainers of presidential guards of Marcos, Mobutu, Mengistu, arms suppliers and advisers to the Medellín cartel, etc.<sup>18</sup> Of course all this is familiar, but this too deserves commemoration.

Also because these international linkages have been matched by aesthetic

15 Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option*, Random House, New York, 1991.

16 Breines, op cit, p 18.

17 Quoted in Breines, *ibid*, p 22.

18 See, eg, Pieterse, 'Exploiting West Bank Expertise: Israel's Role in the Third World', *Race & Class*, Vol 26, No 3, 1985, pp 9-30.

affinities. The Judaic semiotics of the Begin era matched the sensibilities of the American Pentacostalist evangelicals anticipating the Rapture and the Endtime. It matched the moral sensibilities of the American New Right, the new-found toughness of the neo-conservatives, the sensibility of Bernard Goetz who shot his black assailants in the New York subway, sensibilities which came to a head in the Reagan era.

The new Tough Jew emerged in the context of a transnational 1980s aesthetic of toughness. It has been an age of iron steeped in the rhetoric of iron — of Iron Fists, an Iron Lady and a crescendo of arms sales.

Both in Israel and the United States, the aesthetic of toughness was driven by a collective memory of loss and defeat. In the case of Israel, the memory of antisemitism summed up by the Holocaust; in the case of the Reaganite cultural hero, in the words of Sydney Blumenthal:

At the heart of his struggle was doubt and anxiety about his potency. The hero was almost always obsessed with the American defeat in Vietnam, and tried to erase the past and alter the present by subduing savages on the frontier...<sup>19</sup>

This was the hero in the 'rescue-mission' movies such as *Uncommon Valor*, *POW*, *Missing in Action* and *Delta Force* — the latter was produced by Menachem Golan on location in Israel. Clint Eastwood, Lee Marvin, Arnold Schwarzenegger figured in this aesthetic but the ultimate was Sylvester Stallone and *Rambo's* 'triumph of the will'. Rescuing captives from across the frontier was an act of 'regeneration through violence', a retrieval of honour by overcoming an interior weakness.

19 Sydney Blumenthal, 'Reaganism and the Neo-Kitsch Aesthetic', in S. Blumenthal and Thomas Byrne Edsall, (eds), *The Reagan Legacy*, Pantheon, New York, 1988, pp 251-294.

*Securing Peace on the Lebanese Border,*  
colour postcard from 'The Israeli Soldier Series'.





The real target of these frontier spectacles was the 'enemy within the gates' — in Israel, the Peace Movement along with the compassionate attitude of 'My Friend the Enemy'; in the United States, the anti-Vietnam War movement, whose offspring kept the US from full-scale intervention in Central America, and Pogo's lesson that 'We have met the enemy and he is us'.

In a broad way the posture of toughness parallels 'the resolute approach' of the Tories under Maggie Thatcher. The icon of the 'Iron Lady' referred to imperial Britannia for its avatar and its 'history of the present' revealed its royalist and reactionary lineages.<sup>20</sup> The resolute approach was likewise aimed at the 'enemy within' (the trade unions, Labour, the 'loony left' of the GLC and the militant tendency) more than at the 'enemy without' in the operetta war in the Falklands.

In the Reagan and Thatcher eras the aesthetic of toughness was aimed at exorcising the unruly sensibilities of the sixties, the counter-culture, black militancy, third worldism and the 'excess of democracy', and concerned with revindicating the virtues of the Fifties, of orderly hegemony, WASP supremacy and homely virtues — an aesthetic of 'Back to the Future'.

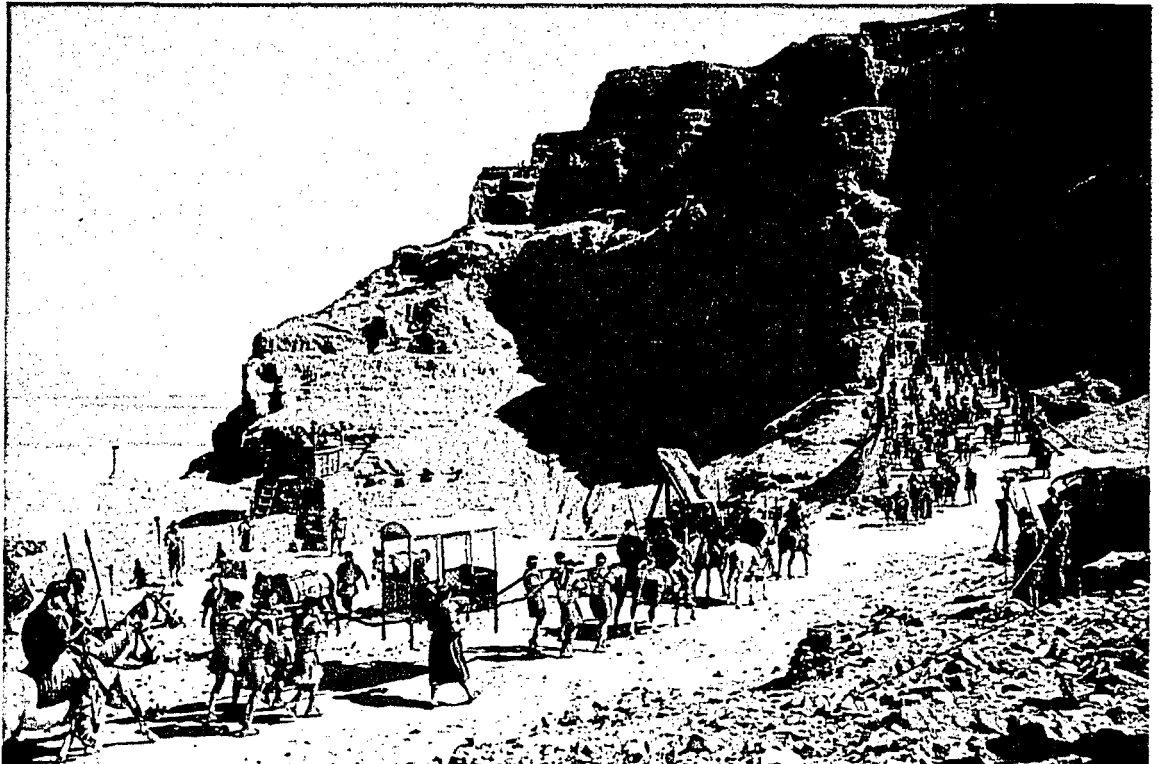
The Reaganite aesthetic has been termed neo-kitsch — an aesthetic of 'the beautiful is the familiar', suffused with nostalgia, in the American 'tradition of the new'. Kitsch as 'ersatz culture' or a form of popular culture is made possible by the availability of a mature cultural tradition.<sup>21</sup> Neo-kitsch takes its examples from kitsch itself, it parodies not high culture but folk culture; it is, according to Blumenthal,

...a video-age substitute for folk culture, yet familiar... The Reaganite aesthetic was a vast scavenger operation, drawing upon images of kitsch past and present. It was

20 Barker, 1977, op cit.

21 Clement Greenberg quoted in Blumenthal, p 263. See also, Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, Ch 3.

*Masada, Filming the Roman Ascent, colour postcard.*





*Steel...Man...Steel*, colour postcard from 'The Israeli Soldier Series'.

at the same time surreal and instantly accessible to the average viewer; the relentless drizzle of kitsch imagery was a kind of geriatric MTV.<sup>22</sup>

It resembled Camp — “an aesthetic sensibility”, according to Susan Sontag, “that views certain forms of banality as fantastical. It is serious, but purged of tragedy; out-of-date, but liberated from time; dandyism for the age of mass culture.”<sup>23</sup> It is self-conscious about the naive: “It’s good because it’s awful.” “Reaganism was an epoch-making union of kitsch and camp.”<sup>24</sup>

The eras of Reagan, Thatcher and Begin are not past, they have been prolonged (at any rate in Britain and Israel) in paler versions, less of the same, minus the grand-standing of the predecessors. In the New World Order the aesthetic of toughness has been updated and broadcast in the framework of the Gulf War:

22 Blumenthal, *op cit*, p 264.

23 Quoted in Blumenthal, *ibid*, pp 267-268.

24 Blumenthal, *ibid*, p 268.

replete with CNN imagery of shelling on the Baghdad skyline, stage management of a sanitized imagery of high-tech war featuring 'smart bombs' but omitting Iraqi soldiers buried alive by allied bulldozers.

In Israel, the aesthetic of modernity is being updated in the context of consumer aesthetics, featuring the commodity fetishism of posh shopping malls, imported goods, high-tech entrepreneurialism, and a new image for the outside world. In tourism campaigns aimed at Japan, the Middle East is renamed the "Eastern Mediterranean" or "Eastern Med", ideal for bird and flower watching, diving and shopping. One target group consists of "young women with large disposable incomes" who would be especially interested in Dead Sea body treatments such as salt wraps and mud massages. In Japan they are promoted by the largest owner of beauty salons — which are named "aesthetic salons" — arguing that Dead Sea water is "ideal for beauty treatments", advertised as "Salty Slim".<sup>25</sup> Hence the Japanese tourists are referred to as "aesthetic pilgrims": retaining the pilgrimage motif but reinterpreted in the context of globalised consumerism.

25 *Jerusalem Post International*,  
2 May 1992.

Margalit explains the high concentration of kitsch in Israel by the prominence of state ideology in a new nation concerned with promoting an image to the world, and a tourist country. What is being omitted here is the fact of occupation. The keynote of Israeli aesthetics since the Begin years has been Judaic kitsch — the Holy Land as the stage for Greater Israel. The ethics of 'Never Again' are a particularist ethics, which translate politically into national interest seeking international legitimacy. On a smaller canvas, its politics of unilateralism parallels the posture of the United States, which seeks to parade national interest as global destiny — most recently in the utterances of Francis Fukuyama.

In the case of Israel, the Holocaust memory is the central device to seek acceptance for a particularist ethics among the Jewish Diaspora and world opinion, as it echoes and perpetuates the status of privileged victimhood. Yad Vashem has been termed an icon of Israeli kitsch — not because the Holocaust memory isn't worth commemorating but because of the sentimental way in which it is commemorated.

This sentimentality, like a collective Vaseline, facilitates the smooth transfer of enemy images — the Jews presented Arabs as the 'new Gentiles', and once accepted by the Gentiles and absorbed into the imperial culture of the West, transferred the antisemitic profile onto Arabs. When the other merged with the self, others became the others. The interdependence of stereotypes and the role reversal of 'others' along with tides of history illustrates the intimacy of aesthetics and power.

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This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Conference on Palestine and Discourse, Amsterdam, April 1992.

I am indebted to Toine van Teeffelen for several references on Israel. I should like to thank Steven Wachlin for permission to use material from his collection of visual documentation. They are postcards from Israel, copyright by Palphot Ltd, Herzliá, except for two ('Steel Man Steel' and 'Securing Peace on the Lebanese Border'), which are from *The Israeli Soldier Series*, photography by Micha Bar-Am and Michael Tsarfatti respectively, copyright Rolnik-Keter Specialty Publishing, 1987, Tel Aviv.

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