



# Journal of Religion & Film

---

Volume 10  
Issue 1 April 2006

Article 14

---

10-18-2016

## Munich

Jason Flato  
*University of Denver, jflato@du.edu*

---

### Recommended Citation

Flato, Jason (2016) "Munich," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10/iss1/14>

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF  
**Nebraska**  
Omaha

---

# Munich

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Munich* (2005).

Steven Spielberg's latest film *Munich* begins with the kidnapping and murder of eleven athletes and coaches from the Israeli Olympic team by a group of Palestinians in 1972. Spielberg interlaces archival video from the live coverage of the crisis into the movie, culminating in anchorman Jim McKay's disconsolate observation, "They're all gone." This sequence establishes the recruitment of Avner (Eric Bana), a Mossad agent and former bodyguard for Prime Minister Golda Meir, to a covert assassination team that crisscrosses Europe over the span of several years. Avner leads a squad of four, including the hesitant Carl (Ciaran Hines), the callous Steve (Daniel Craig), and the befuddled Robert (Mathieu Kassovitz). This allows Spielberg to explore a variety of responses to the moral issues tied to revenge.

Echoing the language we heard from the White House post-9/11, Meir ominously declares that the killing of the Israeli athletes "changes everything," and throughout *Munich* there are resonances between the past and present-day. *Munich* has produced no small amount of criticism, whether painted as a tale of moral righteousness, moral equivalence or moral depravity, a meditation on the nature of belief, a lesson on the endless cycle of violence, an espionage thriller, or a film about the connection between the nation, violence and the citizen, *Munich* is quite provocative.

Ultimately, Avner solicits - at great financial expense - the help of the enigmatic Louis (Mathieu Amalric), who in turn supplies the team with intelligence concerning their targets, in addition to safe houses throughout Europe where they can stay while plotting their next killing. The presence of Louis, and his even more enigmatic boss "Papa" (Michael Lonsdale) hint at a full-blown conspiracy. We have no idea who these people are, if they are complicit with Mossad, if their desires are motivated by politics or if they just profit from the desire for revenge. We are confronted with this when Avner and his team, conceivably by mistake (perhaps not), end up being lodged in a safe house with a group of Palestinian guards. Avner and his team avoid conflict by posing as European leftists, but it gives Spielberg the opportunity to stage his version of a confrontation between the "Israeli" and the "Palestinian" viewpoint. This, like many things throughout Munich, such as the enigmatic Papa, is left unresolved. Avner and Ali, a Palestinian, talk through the night. "You don't know what it is not to have a home," Ali says to Avner, to which Avner responds by asking him if he really misses his father's olive trees. This mirrors Avner's own ambiguous relationship to Israel. Halfway through the movie, he moves his pregnant wife to New York and in the final shot of the movie, with the twin towers in the background, Avner invites his Mossad contact (Geoffrey Rush) to "break bread with him." The Mossad contact refuses and we are left with the same ambiguity between home and exile, violence and morality.

However, midway through the film, matters begin to go awry for Avner and his team. Avner doesn't know what or who to believe any more, and he has lost the ability to distinguish right from wrong, necessary from needless action. Plagued by guilt and paranoia, Avner avenges the murder of team member Carl and faces the departure of his bomb-maker Robert who, also plagued with guilt, tells Avner, "We are Jews, and we are supposed to be righteous." The tension between the law and violence, home and diaspora, guilt and redemption, nation and disenchantment, and revenge and righteousness, for example, are potently at work throughout Munich.

At pains to convey the shadowy dimensions of retribution, Munich is ripe for philosophical and religious reflection. One of many possible themes worthy of reflection that can be drawn out of *Munich* is the status of religion and morality in relation to the law. Early on, Golda Meir tells Avner that violence is necessary to uphold the law. However, overtime Avner and his crew begin to operate in a state of exception where it is not clear whether a law is being violated or upheld. For one example, religion enters this discourse when the team's bomb-maker invokes his status as a Jew to morally oppose their actions. Throughout the film, Avner begins to question his motivations; is he motivated by revenge, the defense of his nation or a higher moral law? *Munich* is an ambiguous movie, but Spielberg is at pains to suggest that violence begets violence and that peaceful resolution is always the moral option. However, the other more Hobbesian question also needs to be asked:

Is our society one whose nature is disposed to war? It is here where a religious discourse can enter into the conversation, for one can imagine knights of faith, who walk among us, as militants ready to suspend the ethical for the necessity of taking ruthless action, a scenario *Munich* continually revisits.