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Tantura

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Tantura* (2022), directed by Alon Schwarz.

Keywords

Israel, Palestine, War Crimes

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Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



Tantara (2022), dir. Alon Schwarz

Few geopolitical relationships are as fraught as that between the Israelis and Palestinians. That the Israeli's 1948 "War of Independence" is semantically and existentially the Palestinian's *Nakba* (catastrophe) serves as an apt metaphor for the ongoing conflict. So, imagine what it must be like on the ground—especially if you are an Israeli student attempting to challenge the history that's been given to you in the classroom. Alon Schwarz's feature-length documentary *Tantara* chronicles the difficulties faced by Teddy Katz when his 2003 master's thesis on the abovementioned war's Battle of Tantara hit the Israeli newspapers such that, in the words of one historian, "all hell broke out." Many Israelis didn't want to hear, didn't believe—or perhaps didn't want to believe—what Katz claimed had happened to some 200 Arab men after the capture of their fishing village by Israeli soldiers.

Tantura enters us gently into the fray—with elderly kibbutzniks interviewed about their partial (and perhaps sometimes intentionally reworked) memories of those events. Only then are we introduced to Teddy Katz, fiery still, if also now infirm from a series of strokes. Katz reveals that he has 140 hours of audiotaped interviews, half with Arabs, half with Jews, recorded 20 years ago for his thesis, which prove that the male residents of Tantura were, indeed, lined up and shot. The cassettes are stored away in what he and his wife call their “Tantura room” (with a frayed “COEXIST” poster on its wall). When Schwarz asks if he can listen to the recordings, Katz says yes; but if Schwarz wants to make a movie, Katz warns, he better be careful—“because you’ll be hunted down like I was.”

Schwarz and his production team ably piece together Katz’s original audiotape recordings with archival materials from 1948’s Israeli-Arab War, including photographs, maps, and film footage, as well as interviews with former soldiers (those elderly kibbutzniks who now wheel about their grounds in golf carts), and contemporary Middle Eastern historians (some at fierce loggerheads regarding the veracity of Katz’s thesis’ claims). But the filmmakers’ reconstruction of events is as much about the *difficulty* of reconstructing, given the extent to which the historical conflict is mired in an ongoing ideological conflict. That so many in the film seem not to agree on the events is indisputably part of what Schwarz is exposing: Were the killings part of the battle or murders after the fact? Was it a massacre or a handful of killings by a few deranged soldiers? How do we find historical truth when it is so buried by contradictions, opposing sentiments, national mythmaking; by some eyes that are blind and others that see too fervently? How do our memories work to exhume or, even more, to repress what we don’t like or don’t want to believe, and reveal less about past occurrences than about ourselves?

How does a nation put itself on trial, and how does a lone figure like Katz, who was sued for defamation but not allowed to speak during his own hearing, get heard when he is almost impossibly “up against people from the military and the university,” as his wife says? Even more, how, after hearing about the orally documented events of Tantara—and the potential for a mass grave that is now conveniently part of a parking lot—are we intellectually to grapple with Ben Gurion’s demands back in 1948 for a certified narrative of the nation’s founding that was to include a reworking of the events of Tantara?

But *Tantara* is also cinema, and so is interesting for how it tries to make its material, which is largely audio, *visual*. Schwarz opts for images that sometimes give the film a surveillance-style texture: extreme close-ups of the volume level on the audio system; fingers on a headset; a map being pinned for relevant locations; a magnifying glass hovering over an old photograph; a slow track over Katz’s M.A. thesis. Sometimes these draw a tad too much attention to themselves—as does, too, the fact that, while half of Katz’s interviewees may have been Arab, the film gives them comparatively marginal speaking space (the same could be said of the male-gendered emphasis in the film). But *Tantara*’s merits far outweigh these criticisms. The T for Truth is often so much harder to find and confront than the F for Fake (or for Foundational Myth). And this makes *Tantara* a painful expedition—for all the right reasons.