

ART OR PROPAGANDA? – Reflections on Gaza, theater and the big interview

The military phase of the Gaza war started on December 27, 2008, when Israel launched an attack on the Gaza Strip. It ended on 18 January, 2009, when Israel, and then its opponent, Hamas, each declared a unilateral cease-fire. Israel began a ground invasion on January 3 and withdrew on January 21. The numbers pointed to the disproportionate nature of the carnage: estimates of Palestinian dead ranged from 1,166 to 1,417 while the Israeli figure for their side was 13. Visual images of Palestinian children killed or maimed were carefully omitted by one side in what came to be called the *media wars*, while for the other, they were a staple. This paper argues that the state of Israel devoted unparalleled attention to the media during this crisis, yet it became increasingly evident that it was losing the propaganda war (*Economist*, 2009, 48). As the truth of this proposition became more and more evident outside of Israel's borders, the question had to be asked: why?

In order to understand this, a wider knowledge of the history as well as the politics and economics of the crisis is needed. For Israel, the history was strategic. After their last war in 2006 in southern Lebanon, Israelis commonly blamed the press for covering the carnage too closely (*Ibid.*). In much the same way, media coverage of Vietnam was blamed for the failure of the United States in that theater, so its military was determined to orchestrate what was euphemistically called the battle for hearts and minds during the first and second Gulf Wars. The Israeli government intended to do the same in the Gaza war. As the venerable British institution, *The Economist*, put it, Israel's tactics on the media front were as "cunning and punchy" as those of its fighting women and men in the air and on the ground (*Ibid.*). Israeli preparations for war were traditional, state-centric and top-down. By contrast, its opponents were most effective when they relied on non-traditional, non state-centric and bottom-up forms of media. In order to counter repressive government censorship across the whole range of Arab states, innovative use of various forms of media has become necessary (see, for example, Wheeler, 2009, particularly Table 22.3, 319).

The Propaganda Machine

Israel started preparation for war in November of 2008 when it blocked the access of foreign reporters to the Gaza Strip, an action which went largely unnoticed outside of the region (*Economist*, 2009, 48.). At the same time, Egypt made a decision to keep its borders with Gaza sealed. Mainstream US television networks “have largely abandoned the Middle East” (Pintak, 2009) – a view that was underscored by the fact that a few weeks before the start of the Gaza conflict, CBS News fired most of the staff at its Israel bureau. The information arm of Israel’s offensive involved far more than tight control of information to the press. The government developed its own form of branding, which it called *hasbara* – a Hebrew word meaning “explanation” – in reference to explanations rooted in a broader sense of image promotion (*Economist*, 2009, 48). The operation was carried forward with machine-like efficiency and a ruthless dedication to the task at hand. A vast array of what were called “on-message” spokespeople were readily available at all hours of the night and day to provide foreign reporters with information. But the tools of new media and of viral marketing were exploited as well. A web site was launched by the Israeli army, providing selective visual evidence of the effort to fight the war in a manner which would spare the innocent, thereby documenting what it chose to call the “humane action and operational success” of its forces (*Ibid.*). Another arm of the strategy involved outreach. Israel’s foreign ministry, assisted by scores of pro-Israel groups world-wide, enlisted thousands of volunteers who were supplied with constantly updated talking points “to nudge editors, journalists and commentators to see the news from Israel’s perspective” (*Ibid.*). During the war, Hamas’s launch of homemade Qassam rockets spread fear across the population centers in the south of Israel. Repeatedly, Hamas boasted that it would kill or abduct Israeli soldiers, thus reawakening memories of the start of the conflict in 2006.

For its part, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) relied on tried and tested fundamentals of psychological warfare, starting with an intensive “psy-ops” campaign. Aircraft dropped leaflets blaming Hamas for the violence, and giving contact information to people who wanted to turn in Palestinian fighters and secret arm caches. Palestinian radio shows were hijacked. Broadcasts on Islamic Jihad’s Voice of Jerusalem were constantly interrupted. New media such as text messaging and mobile phones were broken into as well. There were reports from some Gazans that phone messages were coming in to them from apparently sympathetic fellow Arabs who then turned out to want specific information about Hamas operatives in their area (*Ibid.*). Israel used

physical geography to its strategic advantage as well. Gaza is a coastal strip about 25 miles long and between four and eight miles wide and one of the most highly populated places on the planet. By destroying Gaza's electricity grid, its residents were literally kept in the dark. They were demoralized, and in many instances, because of the destruction of their homes, dislocated.

The first phase of Israel's media strategy could be counted a success on its own terms, with its citizens "remaining broadly enthusiastic about a war mostly portrayed in admiring terms" (*Ibid.*). This was not surprising. "Our media is systematically covering up the suffering in Gaza, and there's only one opinion present in the TV studios – the army's," reported a liberal columnist for *Haaretz*, Gordon Levy, to the German magazine, *Der Spiegel* (Pintak). The same sanitized view of war was presented by each of the mainstream, US-based television networks. The locale might have been Afghanistan or Iraq, or Lebanon for that matter. Statistics measuring the number of dead were quoted against wide-angle visuals of bombs exploding – and occasional fleeting images of bodies wrapped in burial shrouds (*Ibid.*). It has been observed that in times of war, mainstream media has a tendency to tailor their coverage so that it conforms to the preconceived ideological notions of their target national or larger regional audiences (el-Nawawy and Powers, 2008, 14). This proposition held with mainstream media coverage in the United States. The process may not have been a deliberate decision on the part of people who work for large-scale media organizations, but it was the end-result that was important. And the result was that many of these same powerful media organizations were able to seamlessly transfer a Cold War mentality to militant Islam. The concept of a "Clash of Civilizations" between Islam and other civilizations offered a simple and straightforward framework of "us *versus* them" (see Seib, 2004, 71-86). Hence the support in the United States for Israel's position. On January 3, 2009, the U.S. government blocked the U.N. Security Council from issuing a statement calling for a stop to the military action. The U.S. government took this course of action on the grounds that Hamas would not stop attacking Israel. But this was not all. On January 9 the U.S. House of Representatives voted for a bill which declared "unwavering support" for Israel by a margin of 390 to 5 (*Economist*, 2009, 48). Parenthetically, it should be noted that the only mystery was how "the other side" found the five votes.

The Geopolitics of Network Coverage

On the other side of the chasm, Arab television was less monolithic, marked as it was by bitter geopolitical rivalries between Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. The former was accused of being pro-Hamas, and the latter of being pro-Fatah. Al Arabiya, owned by Saudi interests with close links to the Saudi royal family, chose to avoid more graphic footage than its Doha-headquartered competitor, and in general, took a more measured tone in its coverage. During the war, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia sought to prevent Hamas from scoring political points. Qatar, by contrast, actively headed a group of Gulf states that equated support for Hamas with support for the Palestinian people in general (Pintak, 2009). “Our coverage was closer to the people,” Al Jazeera’s news chief, Ahmed Sheikh, claimed, while his counterpart, Al Arabiya news chief Nabil Khatib, argued that, “We belong to two different schools of news television in the Arab world. There is the school that believes that news media should have an agenda and should work on that agenda for political and ideological reasons, which is Al Jazeera’s.” “We are in the school,” he continued, “that believes you need to guarantee knowledge with the flow of news without being biased and by being as much as possible balanced” (*Ibid.*). Early in the conflict, the leader of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, called Al Arabiya “Al Ibriya”, Arabic for *The Hebrew One*.

Al Jazeera was for the Gaza war what CNN was for the first Gulf War – which is to say the media organization that everyone else goes to for their images and commentary. At the time of the Gaza war, it was said that CNN reported the launch of a missile, but Al Jazeera reported on what happened after it landed.

Al Jazeera’s strength lies in the fact that it is trying to turn the world on its head. Too much of the news, it argues, is dominated by the northern half of the world (meaning, essentially, North America and western Europe). It is time that the “Global South”, as they call it, are allowed to speak in their own voice. Al Jazeera’s sister agency, Al Jazeera English, has created a market for itself in a way that makes its rivals look staid and old-school. As one journalist, Robert Kaplan, has written, “Outlets such as CNN and the BBC don’t cover foreign news so much as they cover the foreign extensions of Washington’s or London’s collective obsessions” (Kaplan, 2009, 56). Kaplan cited – with evident approval – Al Jazeera’s ability to *hustle*, giving the channel an

outlook, or a world-view, which he described as “breezy, pacifist-trending internationalism”. This brand of internationalism seemed to work on a subconscious level. The “subliminal message”, he wrote, “appears to be that compromise should be the order of the day” (*Ibid.*). And what compromise might this be? Kaplan further elaborated, arguing that “the politically weak, merely by being so, are automatically in the right” because Al Jazeera is, in its deepest instincts, pro-Palestinian. He explained it thus: “a certain moral equivalency is Al Jazeera’s lifeblood” – in other words, the “history of human suffering seemingly begins and ends with that of Palestinians under Israeli occupation and that of Iraqis under erstwhile American occupation” (*Ibid.*).

Finding Non-Traditional ways to explain the Dynamics of War

Television coverage alone has not been enough. Activists who tried to reach a politically engaged public turned to an older form of media: theater. Consider the case of Caryl Churchill. Churchill wrote a 10-minute play entitled *Seven Jewish Children – a play about Gaza* in 2009. The Royal Court Theatre in London produced it as a thirteen-run show. The Royal Court has a reputation for producing iconoclastic and anti-establishment pieces. Churchill, who was born in 1938 and had her first play produced in 1958, is widely acknowledged to be one of the major playwrights of her time. She is also a committed partisan. She is a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and a long-standing critic of the Israeli government. In order to support the cause, she insisted that the play be performed for free, with a collection to be taken up for Medical Aid for the Palestinians. The play was published online for free download and use – again with the proviso that any monies go to the Palestinians. The play was taut and compressed. It was structured into seven scenes, with unnamed characters instructing their children – in a number of contradictory ways – on how to respond to the violent events around them. No child actors were involved in the production – a point of emphasis, presumably, for the playwright. After it was published, another playwright, Robbie Gingras, an artist in residence at Makom, a Jewish Agency for Israel, wrote a play from the opposite point of view. Gingras’s play was entitled *The Eighth Child*, and was meant to serve as an additional chapter to Churchill’s work. Other playwrights, in turn, presented their own variations on Churchill’s theme.

Seven Jewish Children opens with the following lines:

Tell her it's a game
Tell her it's serious
But don't frighten her
Don't tell her they'll kill her
Tell her it's important to be quiet
Tell her she'll have cake if she's good
Tell her to curl up as if she's in bed
But not to sing
Tell her not to come out
Tell her not to come out even if she hears shouting
Don't frighten her
Tell her not to come out even if she hears nothing for a long time
Tell her we'll come and find her
Tell her we'll be here all the time.
Tell her something about the men
Tell her they're bad in the game.
Tell her it's a story
Tell her they'll go away
Tell her she can make them go if she stays still
By magic
But not to sing

The second segment is more explicit and political:

Tell her this is a photograph of her grandmother, her uncles and me
Tell her many uncles died
Don't tell her they were killed
Don't frighten her.
Tell her grandmother was clever
Don't tell her what they did

Tell her she was brave
Tell her she taught me how to make cakes
Don't tell her what they did
Tell her something
Tell her more when she's older.
Tell her there were people who hated Jews
Don't tell her
Tell her it's over now
Tell her there are still people who hate Jews
Tell her there are people who love Jews
Don't tell her to think Jews or not Jews
Tell her more when she's older
Tell her it was before she was born and she's not in danger.
Tell her we love her
Tell her dead or alive her family all love her
Tell her grandmother would be proud of her (Churchill, 2009).

Implicitly, the play moves through the formative experiences in contemporary Jewish history, starting with the Holocaust and moving to the foundation of the state of Israel to the set of wars which culminated in the Gaza conflict. Predictably, the reaction in Britain – and elsewhere – divided along left-right lines. The usual suspects produced their usual responses ranging from high praise (*The Guardian*: “What she captures, in remarkably condensed poetic form, is the transition that has overtaken Israel, to the point where security becomes a pretext for indiscriminate slaughter. Avoiding overt didacticism, her play becomes a heartfelt lamentation for the future generations who will themselves become victims of the attempted military suppression of Hamas” -- Michael Billington, 2009) to low condemnation (Writing in *The Spectator*, Melanie Phillips wrote: “... Britain's media and intelligentsia...are pumping out mind-twisting and ultimately genocidal Arab propaganda as unchallengeable truths. The Royal Court Theatre in

London is now adding fuel to that Jew-hatred by staging a ten-minute blood libel written by Caryl Churchill”. Her fury continued as she wrote that this “is an open vilification of the Jewish people, not merely repeatedly perpetuating incendiary lies about Israel but demonstrably and openly drawing upon an atavistic hatred of the Jews... In the Middle Ages ‘mystery plays’ which portrayed the Jews as the demonic killers of Christ helped fuel the murderous pogroms against the Jews of Europe. With this piece by Caryl Churchill, the Royal Court is staging a modern ‘mystery play’. It is a despicable act.” – Melanie Phillips, 2009).

Art or Journalism?

Is this art? Or journalism? Commentators have debated the question, but the fact remains that, as one theater critic put it, no other playwright “is regarded with such affection and respect by her peers”. It was noted that her ability “to constantly reinvent the (theatrical) form that most writers identify as her genius”. Thus:

In Churchill’s plays, there is a constant search for new kinds of language and theatrical structures: devices that can reveal the essence of a moment. As the playwright Wallace Smith said to me: “So many of us have great affection for theatre, but so often we find it rather dull. But when you see a play of Caryl’s – rich, inventive plays like *Fen*, or *The Skriker*, or *A Mouthful of Birds* – you realize how exciting it is to be a playwright ” (Ravenhill, 2008).

A work such as *Seven Jewish Children* is, like much of Churchill’s earlier efforts, an example of a form of art that is politically engaged but – and this is what makes it an enduring piece of art as opposed to the fashion of the moment – it operates on many different levels. It is not so much an attack on Israel as an attack on the use of *war as a strategic policy option*. Marius von Mayenburg, a German playwright, has praised Churchill’s ability to capture “the reality of political emotion” by placing that reality in her own distinct voice. “Many German playwrights who were of the same generation as Churchill became staid, didactic – but not Churchill. Again, according to Mayenburg, Churchill

“...has taken political theatre to a new level. Her plays ask the important questions. We produced (her play) *A Number in Berlin*, and it captured the audience’s anxiety about the dissolution of identity.”

Mayenburg added:

“With each new play, she discovers new genres and forms. She then discards them and moves on, opening up possibilities for other playwrights to explore. I think many people writing today don’t even realize they’ve been influenced by her. She’s changed the language of the theatre. And very few playwrights do that” (*Ibid.*).

There is another level of Churchill’s work which is more about private choices, however. These choices will shape the future in profound ways. But people do not seem to be aware of the long-term consequences of their present actions. *Seven Jewish Children* is about the effect of mixed messages passed from one generation to the next (Tell her there were people who hated Jews/ Don’t tell her).

As someone who has constantly pushed the boundaries of every medium she worked in, Churchill has moved effortlessly between old media (the stage) and new media (video productions). She partnered with the *Guardian* in order to present a YouTube production of the original Royal Court presentation of *Seven Jewish Children* to a wider audience. The experiment worked. When the play was presented in March of 2009 at the Theater J in Washington, DC, the theater’s artistic director, Ari Roth, explained that part of the play’s meaning lay in the fact that the atrocities of the war could not be blamed on the Israeli military alone, that Israeli society itself had to come to terms with the direction of events. But he said that the play had been chosen as a vehicle to explore the wider meaning of the conflict, rather than as a way to endorse the message of the play *per se*. “We’re gathering our Peace Café community – our interfaith forum of Muslims, Christians and Jews – to join regular theater-goers in hearing the play aloud, so that we can experience it and discuss it among ourselves, rather than merely reading about the controversy.” “The play,” he continued, “is both subtle and outspoken. It can be interpreted, we

imagine, in different ways. We come to it in the spirit of inquiry” (Theatre J Press Release, 15 March, 2009).

This spirit of inquiry was given a wider platform by the new media. *Seven Jewish Children* spread through viral marketing and grass roots campaigns to present what many saw as the other side, or more to the point, the human side, of the “official” version of events. YouTube videos of the same play were put on-line showing productions in Hebrew from inside Israel, while another video showed several actors presenting it to a meeting of AIPAC (the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee).

A thought-experiment: What if Caryl Churchill wrote a play entitled Frost/Osama?

Churchill’s actions prompt the following thought-experiment. What would happen if the playwright presented another work – a work designed to break the boundaries between entertainment and political engagement? Entitled *Frost/Osama*, it could work in the tradition of *Frost/Nixon* – a play by the British screenwriter and dramatist, Peter Morgan, which premiered in 2006. It was later adapted as a movie, directed by Ron Howard. *Frost/Nixon* was based on the reworking of a series of television interviews that former President Richard Nixon gave to the British television personality, David Frost, in 1977. Michael Sheen, who had played the stage version of the talk show host, played the same role in the film version, as did Frank Langella, who played both stage and film versions of the man who had climbed so high, only to be brought down by his own misdeeds.

Peter Morgan took a certain amount of poetic license with the script, inventing a scene in which Nixon, clearly drunk, phones Frost late at night. Frost had been trying, with little success, to pin the ex-politician down, but Nixon, ever the fox, had evaded the snares. Nixon tells Frost that the final interview will make – or break – the careers of each of them. The incident spurs a hitherto unfocused Frost to redouble his efforts to trap his wily opponent. Frost and his associates do an intensive amount of background research. The final interview culminates with Nixon allowing that he may have been in the wrong with regard to his role in the Watergate Scandal, thus sending

an implicit message out to the viewing audience that he accepted his own guilt. A hero to many, a villain to many more, Nixon emerged as a tragic figure, clearly ill at ease with his own public persona, but unwilling – and unable – to change what he has himself created. Nixon dies a forgotten man while Frost goes on to an illustrious career in television. And so ends the play/movie.

But the question is: how can you take the story forward? It is instructive to note that Frost went on to wealth and fame. He became Sir David Frost and was hired to host the program, *Frost Over the World*, for Al Jazeera English in 2006, where he continued to interview world leaders. But – and here an imaginative leap is required – what would happen if he was able to go to air with Osama bin Laden? Who would continue to dazzle and who would fade into history? How could this verbal sparring match become a metaphor for a war on terror that has become derailed? A playwright with Churchill's verbal dexterity and panache could bring a spirit of free thought and inquiry to a commercial audience which has been trained to read its politics in a one-dimensional way. That in itself would be no bad thing.

Conclusion

The Canadian-born economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, once observed that wars tend to be popular – at least at their outset. With 9 percent support ratings within Israel, this insight certainly held for the Gaza War. Whether the domestic support for the war in Israel itself would have held for a longer period is an open question. Certainly Israel's image took a battering around the world as a result of this conflict (see, for example, *Economist*, 2009, 48). On the one hand, Israel's strategists won over "hearts and minds" in their own territory with the sort of clever tactics which bore the heavy hand of the state. On the other hand, playwrights like Caryl Churchill relied not on government, but on a vibrant civil society, to reflect upon and discuss these matters in a spirit of open dialogue. Israel's military may have won in the short term, but the longer horizon belongs to Caryl Churchill and all that she represents.

Wayne Hunt is a Professor of Politics and Head of Department at Mount Allison

University in Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada. He has been a Visiting Fellow in the Centre for International Studies at the London School of Economics, a Visiting Scholar at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and a Senior Research Associate at St. Antony's College, Oxford University. He was the Principal Investigator in a joint Canada-Russia study of the use of media as a platform for civic engagement. The study was sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Gorbachev Foundation. He has published in the fields of comparative politics, communication studies, political leadership, public intellectuals, and the human impact of new or emergent technologies. He is presently at work on a manuscript dealing with the political debate surrounding the issue of "hacking the planet" through techniques of geoengineering.

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Bio

Wayne A. Hunt is a Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB, Canada. He has been a Visiting Fellow

at the Centre for International Studies at the London School of Economics, a Visiting Scholar at Harvard's Kennedy School and a Senior Research Associate at St. Antony's College, Oxford. His research interests are in the area of new technology and its impact. He was the head investigator for a joint Russian-Canadian research partnership examining the use of media as a platform for civic engagement. It was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Gorbachev Foundation.