An interview with Amos Gitaï on *House*

‘A peaceful little object’

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When the Lebanese playwright Wajdi Mouawad invited Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitaï to stage his documentary trilogy *House* (1980, 1998, 2005) at the Théâtre national de la Colline in 2023, geopolitical animosities made way for artistic solidarities. In this article and interview, I explore how Gitaï’s play critiques the violent logics of home and homelands, exploring how a commandeered house in West Jerusalem plays host to the multidirectional memory of violent Jewish and Palestinian erasure. Stones become metonyms of the Israel–Palestine conflict: as they are quarried, chiselled, split, cemented, and erected, they testify to the construction of homes that also become tools of destruction, expulsion, and mutual ontological violence (Kotef, 2020). Drawing on an interview I conducted with him in July 2023, and his Collège de France lectures from 2018 to 2019, I read his archaeological journey into the remains of this Arab-Jewish house as a call to hospitality, which muddies the subject positions of host and hostage that impede a sense of belonging ‘chez soi’ (Derrida, 1997).

Keywords: architecture, multidirectional memory, Israel, Palestine, settler colonialism, postcolonial, hospitality, Derrida, Said

Lorsque le dramaturge libanais Wajdi Mouawad invite le cinéaste israélien Amos Gitaï à monter sa trilogie documentaire *House* (1980, 1998, 2005) au Théâtre national de la Colline en 2023, les hostilités géopolitiques cèdent la place aux solidarités artistiques. Gitaï a souvent fait la critique des épistémologies violentes d’une patrie souveraine, et dans cet article, je m’interroge sur la façon dont il a recours à une maison réquisitionnée à Jérusalem-Ouest pour mettre en avant la mémoire multidirectionnelle des histoires effacées des Juifs et des Palestiniens. Les pierres deviennent métonymiques du conflit israélo-palestinien : à mesure qu’elles sont extraites, ciselées, fendues, cimentées et érigées, elles témoignent de la construction d’habitations qui deviennent également des outils de destruction, d’expulsion et de violence ontologique mutuelle (Kotef, 2020). Puisant d’un entretien effectué avec lui en juillet 2023, et grâce à ses leçons au Collège de France en 2018-2019, je soutiens que son voyage archéologique dans les vestiges de cette maison arabo-juive resonne comme un appel à l’hospitalité, qui embrouille les postures de l’hôte et de l’otage qui rendent inaccessible un « chez soi » (Derrida, 1997).

Mots clefs : architecture, mémoire multidirectionelle, Israël, Palestine, colonialisme de peuplement, postcolonial, hospitalité, Derrida, Said

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> Seul peut-être celui qui endure l'expérience
> de la privation de la maison peut-il offrir l'hospitalité.[1]

There's an unexpected conceit that runs through Amos Gitaï's lectures at the Collège de France, during his tenure from 2018 to 2019 as *Chaire annuelle [de] Création artistique*. As a prodigious, polemic filmmaker from the mixed city of Haifa, whose work poignantly tackles hospitality and hostility in the Middle East, Gitaï is also an architect by training and often cites the construction of Chartres Cathedral as a metaphor for his artistic process. For Gitaï, Chartres is a space in constant dialogue with its outsides. He exalts how, rather than bulldozing the trees around the site, or levelling its craggy topography, the original stonemasons integrated an inhospitable environment via 'une procédure d'adaptation et de dialogue continu avec ce qui existe et qui ne vient pas des architectes. Qui vient d'ailleurs'.[2] The Cathedral beckons alterity, extending a welcome to the land that diverges from the usual logics of domination, erasure, or extraction we might associate with it as an icon of French cultural imperialism. In Gitaï's idiom, Chartres exemplifies architectural hospitality *before* it is muddied by the question of native soil: stonemasons privileging external topographical, social, and human realities over and above any plan. Like his cinema, this was building by instinct, by tolerance:

> A Chartres, je peux supposer que les bâtisseurs de la cathédrale ont vu qu'il y avait de très beaux arbres sur le site et qu'ils ont décidé de ne pas les couper. Il y avait aussi des petites collines. Ils ne les ont pas rasées, ils ont modifié l'orientation du bâtiment. Et cela donne au positionnement de ce bâtiment dans le paysage, dans le contexte, toute sa grâce.[3]

Across several lectures, Chartres reappears as a leitmotif for Gitaï's ambition to portray the incendiary landscape of Israel and Palestine through openness, by not erasing awkward, or uneven, territorial contexts. Here, his poetics resist the logic of elimination that Patrick Wolfe has come to associate with the settler colonialism of Gitaï's native Israel, which 'seeks

1 Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalité: Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997), p. 56.

2 Amos Gitaï, *La Caméra est une sorte de fétiche* (Paris: Collège de France/Fayard, 2019), p. 32.

3 Gitaï, *La Caméra est une sorte de fétiche*, p. 32. See also Amos Gitaï, 'Ouvertures' in *Amos Gitaï et l'enjeu des archives*, ed. by Jean-Michel Frodon (Saint Tropez: Editions Sébastian Moreu, 2021), pp. 21–33: 'La cathédrale éta[n]t construite sans croquis préliminaire, et en s'adaptant aux conditions locales, topographiques, et humaines'. Gitaï, 'Ouvertures', p. 30.

access to territory at all costs'.[4] In Gitaï's Chartres, masons did not conquer the land ('raser' or 'couper'); they adapted, modulated, and orientated the building *towards* it in an act of what Jacques Derrida deemed the precursors of hospitality: attention (an active tending, or leaning towards the other) and 'accueil', or a receptivity, a 'oui à l'autre'.[5]

But Gitaï's analogy is not an anodyne one, especially if we recall Jean Genet's mordant critique of Chartres Cathedral in his 1977 essay on how France built a national identity with foreigners it alienates, then forgets.[6] Genet reminds us that

> les constructeurs de cathédrales étaient des étrangers venus des chantiers de Burgos, de Cologne, de Bruges: maîtres d'œuvre, imagiers, tailleurs de pierre, fondeurs du verre des vitraux, alchimistes des émaux… – Nous allons tout à l'heure nous planter devant *l'Arbre de Jessé* – ces étrangers considérables auront donc construit une église qui sera française.[7]

Chartres is the property of an imperial nation – a 'joyau national; pis, culturel', which exerts a putative supremacy over the migrant workers who built it.[8] But just as Gitaï does with the stonemasons, so Genet's enumerations seek to valorize the manual labourers and the heterogeneity of their craft, culture, religion, ethnicity, in order to undermine the confection of a national sovereignty that is then retrospectively indigenized.[9] Genet uses Chartres to shatter any illusions of national aggrandizement or genealogical claims to homelands. He unpicks how labourers are first exploited for their manual skills (stained glass); then detached from the land on which they build (as foreign migrants); and ultimately alienated as guests of a now sovereign French host, who reappropriates the stained glass to depict the genealogical tree of Christ (*l'Arbre de Jessé*) and thus entrench a line of descent *post factum*.

For Genet and Gitaï – two passionate critics of exclusionary nationalisms and the imperial discourses that produce displaced, oppressed, and exploited

4 Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8.4 (2006), 387–409 (p. 390).

5 Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 2009), p. 51.

6 Jean Genet, 'La Cathédrale de Chartres' in *L'Ennemi déclaré*, ed. Albert Dichy (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 191–97 (p. 192).

7 Genet, p. 191.

8 Genet, p. 192.

9 Mairéad Hanrahan notes that the use of the future anterior here is key in constructing a genealogical tree retrospectively. Mairéad Hanrahan, 'Genet and the Cultural Imperialism of Chartres Cathedral', in *Violent Histories*, ed. by David Gascoigne (Cambridge: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 97–110 (p. 104).

peoples – Chartres becomes more than a metaphor, it becomes a metonym: a single building (a part), which represents the tension of how a homeland (a whole) is made through the expropriation and substitution of those that build it.[10] The Cathedral may signify an openness towards the land for Gitaï, but it also carries the possibility for xenophobia, or what Derrida calls 'la xénotransplantation', where the desire to welcome is overwhelmed by the need to exert mastery over one's home (in this case, one's homeland), to the extent that 'je commence à tenir pour étranger indésirable, et virtuellement pour un ennemi, quiconque empiète sur […] mon pouvoir d'hospitalité, sur ma souveraineté d'hôte'.[11] If Chartres is a jewel in France's cultural crown to be visited and admired, then its hegemony depends on protecting a claim to hospitality that violently estranges and exploits.

It is through this oblique lens of distorted hospitality in the creation of a sovereign homeland that I approach Amos Gitaï's latest play, *House* (2023). Gitaï was invited by the Lebanese-Canadian director of the Théâtre national de la Colline, Wajdi Mouawad, to stage his documentary trilogy about a German-built, Palestinian-owned house in West Jerusalem, commandeered by the nascent state of Israel after the 1948 War of Independence, filmed over a twenty-five-year period. From its inception, the play dares to imagine a hospitality that transcends geopolitical animosities, as Mouawad and Gitaï come together in artistic solidarity against the violent logics of home and homeland that seek to divide them nationally. When Mouawad asks why Gitaï chose theatre, not cinema, to turn his trilogy into a tetralogy, a compound work composed of four distinct elements, he credits Mouawad's stage as the embodied 'lieu de rencontre' that makes possible transversal relations beyond the political.[12]

In what follows, I offer an analysis of how Gitaï imbues architectural details with geopolitical significance in *House* (2023), concentrating on his endotic attention to stones and stonemasons as metonyms for

10 As I write, two exhibitions on Palestine are being shown at the Institut du monde arabe in Paris: *Ce que la Palestine apporte au monde* (May-November 2023), a vibrant showcase of Palestinian creative practice that recasts a global symbol of oppression into a source of inspiration; and *Les valises de Jean Genet*, Genet's late archive of poetic and political texts supporting Palestinian resistance to forced displacement and occupation, curated by Lebanese-French Jewish director of the Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine, Albert Dichy. It is no coincidence that I bring Genet to bear on Gitaï here, since despite artistic and political differences, both contest the erasure of Palestinian memory, celebrating its vitality, lyricism, and potential for radical resistance.

11 Derrida, *De l'hospitalité*, p. 53.

12 'Créer et résister: Dialogue entre Amos Gitaï and Wajdi Mouawad, en partenariat avec mk2 Institut', 21 March 2023, 10.41–11.37.

the Israel-Palestine conflict.[13] As sandstone is quarried, chiselled, split, cemented, and erected over a non-stop play lasting two hours and twenty minutes, we bear witness to the construction of a home that becomes a site of violence, akin to the homes that Hagar Kotef calls 'tools of destruction and expulsion'.[14] Gitaï's attention to masonry at Chartres transports us from the *polis*, or the construction of an imperial homeland, to the *oikos*, or the domestic sphere of a residential home where the entangled pain of Jewish and Palestinian persecution, statelessness, elimination, and erasure, is dramatized.[15] I go on to develop some of these ideas in conversation with Amos Gitaï, where I was welcomed to his home on the Canal Saint Martin in Paris on 19 July 2023 to discuss the inseparability of contested homelands and the possibility of a postcolonial future.

House is an example of verbatim theatre, attentive to the oral histories of the inhabitants, builders, and neighbours of a house originally located in the German colony of West Jerusalem, adjacent to the upmarket Talbieh district where Edward Said lived. Owned by the wealthy Palestinian Dajani family, it was abandoned in 1948 during the Deir Yassin Massacre when Zionist militia expelled Palestinians from the villages around Jerusalem in what became the founding of modern Israel, or al-Nakba, The Catastrophe, for Palestinians. As antisemitism mounted across Europe, the Zionist quest to 'return the Jewish nation to its mother soil' catalyzed the expulsion of 750,000 indigenous Palestinians, and about 40,000 from Jerusalem.[16] Thomas Abowd explains that the 'budding state relied heavily on the use of Arab-owned homes throughout the country to settle and shelter' nearly 200,000 Jewish immigrants from across the diaspora, who were then 'absorbed' into pre-existing properties later transferred to Jewish ownership 'through circuitous and varied legal means', notably the 1949 Absentee Property Act.[17] As *House* listens to anecdotes from inhabitants immigrating from the Jewish diaspora (the Toboul family from Algeria,[18] or the Cesaris

13 Endotic is used by Georges Perec to refer to a microscopic attention to the ordinary and the everyday, a downwards gaze that refused the imperializing tendencies of a fascination with the 'exotic'. See Georges Perec, *L'Infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1973). See also Eyal Weizman's *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2017) for further contextualization in Israel and Palestine.

14 Hagar Kotef, *The Colonizing Self: Or, Home and Homelessness in Israel/Palestine* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 3.

15 See Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Knopff, 1999), p. 112 for a discussion of the joint history of persecution.

16 Martin Buber, *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 480.

17 Thomas Abowd, 'Edward Said's Home, Martin Buber's Mailbox: The "Terrible Silences" of Israeli Colonial Jerusalem', *Social Text*, 37.3 (2019), 73–92 (p. 75).

18 See Benjamin Stora, *Les trois exils: Juifs d'Algérie* (Paris: Stock, 2006).

from Turkey and then Sweden); Haïm Barkai, a wealthy Jewish economist renovating the house with Palestinian Arab stonemasons from the refugee camps around Hebron/al-Khalil;[19] or the neighbour Michel Kishka from Brussels who split the common kitchen to create a form of detachment, so we hear Gitaï's intricate collage of multidirectional memory. If Israel's founding is marked by the dual devastation of the Shoah and the Nakba, Gitaï joins Said in refusing to equate 'mass extinction' with 'mass dispossession'.[20]

Gitaï disavows any such dialectical framing by drawing us into the entangled web of ontological violence behind the Zionist project to annex Palestinian homes. As Hagar Kotef analyses in *The Colonizing Self*, the violence of constructing a home on the ruins of another, or of living inside someone else's home, constitutes Jewish settler identities just as it erases Palestinian subjects.[21] The transversal domination of settler colonialism, which seeks to establish a permanent homeland by way of displacement, is viscerally felt through the percussive refrain of two stonemasons hammering at blocks of sandstone throughout the production, their syncopated rhythms forming a pulsating chorus of violence that drowns out any prospect of peace (or quiet).[22] The workers pound, chisel, fracture the stone with such arduous gesture that the audience learns a visual idiom of structural damage implied in the act of homemaking through negation, in building Jewish settler communities not just through superficial, aesthetic transformations, but through a palimpsestic process of layering discursive, symbolic, and architectural veils over Palestinian pasts.[23] Gitaï's attention to materiality in his *mise-en-scène* only compounds the psychological burden of these inverse poetics of construction as destruction: the stage is a building site criss-crossed by scaffolding; quarries in the West Bank from

19 See Rebekah Vince, 'The (Im)possibility of Jewish-Palestinian identity in Hubert Haddad's *Palestine*', *Francosphères*, 7.1 (2018), 103–20 (pp. 114–18), which offers a concise history of the contested nomenclature of a site that has joint Islamic and Jewish importance.

20 Michael Rothberg notes how Edward Said 'repeatedly refused "morally to equate mass extermination with mass dispossession"'. Michael Rothberg, 'From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory', *Criticism*, 53.4 (2011), 523–48 (p. 540). See Edward Said, 'Bases for Coexistence', in *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (New York: Vintage, 2001), pp. 205–09 (p. 208).

21 See Hagar Kotef's introduction, which maps how destruction and demolition are constitutive to Israeli settler identity, as well as her citation of Idan Landau, who discusses the ubiquity of bulldozers in the Zionist building project. Kotef, p. 12. See Idan Landau, 'House Demolitions: The Enduring Background Noise of Zionism', *Lo lamut tipesh* [Don't die dumb], <https://idanlandau.com/2013/06/10/house-demolishions-zionism-background-noise/> [accessed 18 September 2023]; Kotef's translation.

22 See Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonial Theory: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

23 Abowd, 'Edward Said's Home', p. 76.

the first *House* (1980) documentary emerge on screen; sledgehammers are a focal point; actors stand contiguous, separated physically by space, but also by the myopic form of their own monologues.

But while the gestural language of reparation looms large, there is no catharsis here. One stonecutter, Id, tells us that repair is profoundly divisive for Palestinian refugees drafted in from Bethlehem, Gaza, Rafiah, Khan Younis to undertake remodelling of Israeli properties:

> Id: For new [buildings], it's simple: you lay foundations and build a wall. For old, you take it down, check every stone, remove the bad and replace them. Find where it's in bad condition and repair it. If stones are split or the wall is warped, you demolish it. There's no point repairing it, it'd collapse in 10 years.[24]

Thomas Abowd's article on Said's commandeered home in Talbieh is instructive here. He remarks that following dozens of ethnographic interviews, Jewish settlers systematically vaunted the alterations they were making to their properties, 'to make these "new-old" abodes appear as unified, seamless, and undivided as possible' as part of a colonial logic of Palestinian erasure and negation.[25] Yet, Gitaï disavows the spectral absence of indigenous Palestinian histories. Like Said's imaginative geography, which calls for us to read colonial landscapes by 'searching for little remnants and traces', *House* frames settlement as an archaeological practice of excavation, of painstakingly digging up one history, only to repurpose it to narrate the future of the conqueror.[26] Id's temporality feels insidious: the erosion of the stones attests to their longevity, their stake in the battle for an ancestral homeland, which chafes against the transience of a rebuild that may not last a decade. But Gitaï directs us to the indentured layers of violence that accrue on both sides of the conflict, balancing out one genealogical claim by using the trope of archaeology to research the humanity of those who have occupied this multicultural land for millennia. One Jewish archaeologist from his film *House in Jerusalem* tells us (albeit arrogantly, warns Gitaï) that material history, 'rocks, walls, buildings, pottery work' is about 'excavating humanity', and indeed in one 'layer from the end of the Iron Age, we find various idols, animal figurines. The shapes are very simple, even primitive. At that time, the people of Israel lived in Jerusalem, in the kingdom of Judea'.[27] While settler

24 Amos Gitaï, *House*, (1980), transcript, p. 10.
25 Abowd, 'Edward Said's Home', p. 81.
26 Edward Said, 'Palestine: Memory, Invention, and Space', Keynote Address, *Landscape Perspectives on Palestine*, Bir Zeit University, 12 November 1998.
27 Amos Gitaï, *House in Jerusalem* (1998), transcript, p. 7.

colonial theory tells us that the primary motivation for the elimination of indigenous people is access to territory, *House* invites us to delve into the sociocultural practices of human ancestors who are all guests on the land, all hosted by its geology, its matter, its spaces of dwelling. Yet note the archaeologist's language of origin: 'primitive'; 'simple', 'from the end of', 'at that time'. The spatiality of excavation is always politicized by the linear time of beginnings and the question of who belonged on the land. Gitaï's archaeological trope may invite us to read the strata of home like a palimpsest, seeking to uncover its expunged pasts, but it also holds the possibility for a dangerous, and totalizing, attachment to nativism.

Zionism has been dubbed a 'massive housing project',[28] which in its most extreme form advocated for a struggle against Palestinian Arab workers to create 'a self-sufficient proto-national Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine)'.[29] But Gitaï's *House* is not an example of what Gershon Shafir called a 'conquest of labor' or 'Hebrew labor';[30] it is about an attempt to conquer belonging itself. For two diasporic peoples who share the etymological coincidence that in both Hebrew and Arabic, the words *ba'it/beit* mean home, house, and household (affect and architecture, belonging and territory),[31] the need to belong is acutely bound to a *topos*, then its inhabitation, its domestication, and finally its transformation into a refuge that will be jealously guarded by a now sovereign host. Via its own multilingualism, folding Hebrew, Arabic, French, English, Yiddish, Armenian, and Turkish into one another throughout the play in a gesture towards linguistic hospitality, *House* poetically dramatizes the stakes of withdrawing hospitality as a means of guaranteeing that sense of belonging. We see this lyrically expressed by the Palestinian owner's son:

> Dr Raji Dajani: What is the significance of the house actually? [...] Somebody made the analogy of the whole situation of the Palestinian-Israeli question as like a house which was taken over by the Israelis and the Israelis open a small crack in the window and tell you: 'let's talk and settle the problem'. But the Palestinians say, 'if you want to settle the problem, open up the door, we come into the house, we sit in the house and then we discuss the

28 See, for example, Yael Allweil, *Homeland: Zionism as Housing Regime, 1860–2011* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 5.

29 Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', p. 390.

30 Gershon Shafir, *Land, Labor, and the Origins of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict, 1882–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 81. 'Hebrew labor' refers to 'Jewish industries [who] were actively discouraged from employing non-Jewish labour, even though Arabs worked for lower wages and, in many cases, more efficiently'. Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism', p. 390.

31 Kotef, *The Colonizing Self*, p. 2.

> problem'. Palestine being a house that all of a sudden the owners change and the new owners discussing with the old owners how to settle the problem, but keeping the old owners out.[32]

The metonymic relation between house and homeland, the *oikos* and the *polis*, returns here. But, unlike in Chartres Cathedral where the estrangement of the stonemason allows the nation state to exert its power of hospitality, and thus its sovereignty, in the settler context of Israel, there can be no invitation to the indigenous owner who threatens the belonging, the 'chez soi' of the new occupier. A crack in the window is not an open door; there is no threshold to be crossed in this analogy. Moreover, the homonym 'settle' holds all of the affective charge of the impossibility of resolution, because settling the problem simply reiterates the settlement that causes it. Instead, there is suspicion towards the Palestinian *hôte* – that ambiguous host-guest, or perhaps a *hostis*, guest and enemy – who threatens to turn the host into their hostage. Yet, as Emmanuel Lévinas explains, hospitality is about being at home in oneself: *l'être soi chez soi*. A self can only exist when it recognizes and welcomes alterity. Accordingly, the home that guarantees our structures of attachment, belonging, familiarity, and kinship can only exist when we receive the other in a gesture of unconditional hospitality that must carry the risk of invasion, threat, or violence.[33] Settler colonialism is not based on such secure forms of attachment, and as *House* reveals, such a basic need to protect one's right to hospitality – one's feeling of being at home – also compels the annexation, withdrawal, and closure of a home. Raji Dajani's metaphor thus captures the political impasse of Israel and Palestine so well because it universalizes how hostility develops from this desire to remain 'maître chez moi', whatever the cost. As Derrida explains, 'partout où le "chez soi" est violé, partout où ce viol en tout cas *est ressenti comme tel*, on peut prévoir une réaction privatisante, voire familialiste, voire, en élargissant le cercle, ethnocentrique et nationaliste'.[34]

Fittingly, *House* circles us back to Chartres Cathedral in its critique of the colonial regimes from which exclusionary nationalisms emerge. Both in the imperial context of France, and the settler colonial context of Israel, Gitaï's analogies stage the risks of home(land)-making through an act of violence towards those that forever remain a constitutive part of them. But if *House*

32 Gitaï, *House in Jerusalem* (1998), transcript, p. 4.

33 See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infinité: Essai sur l'exteriorité* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 233–35, and Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1997), p. 46.

34 Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité: Volume I. Séminaire (1995-1996)* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), p. 53.

moves us so profoundly, it is perhaps because of its ambivalence towards these subject positions of host, enemy, foreigner, hostage, outsider, or even the ephemeral, contingent notion of a 'chez soi'. Such notions of ontological mastery are thwarted by a political scenario that distrusts the very welcome, the very dialogue, on which all hospitality is founded. Instead, we leave the play with the deafening cacophony of three Sisyphean stonemasons, all hammering at quarries in a thwarted attempt at homemaking.

Interview

It is in the spirit of hospitality that Amos Gitaï welcomed me to his Paris home in July 2023 – a polyphonic house filled with colleagues speaking Hebrew, French, English; a wall of books, well-thumbed exhibition catalogues; and a pair of oversized fluorescent sunglasses staring at me from across the table. Objects invite us to travel and to welcome horizons of difference here, just as they do in Gitaï's work more generally. An interview is an invitation to respond, a framing that pays tribute to Anne Fourmentelle's dialogue with Derrida in *Of Hospitality*. Gitaï's responses below attest to his sustained commitment to imagining non-hierarchical forms of welcome between inseparable Jewish and Palestinian homelands.

Joanne Brueton (JB): Thank you so much for hosting me to talk about your latest play, *House* (2023), at La Colline. I'm interested to hear more about the conceptual motivation behind the play and how it intersects with a critical tradition that considers how settler colonialism creates homes as tools of destruction. As I discuss in the introduction, Edward Said critiques the Zionist fetishization of having 'home' even if it means making others homeless, while Hagar Kotef theorizes the violence of a Jewish Israeli selfhood that emerges out of the dispossession of Palestinian homes.[35] *House* dramatizes these philosophical constellations with searing clarity, and I wondered if you could talk more about the symbolism of materiality, excavation, construction, and destruction in the play.

Amos Gitaï (AG): This is a subject that has interested me for such a long time, and I knew that the only way to avoid clichés and demagogy, or

35 Edward Said, 'Interview with Ari Shavit', *Ha'aretz*, 18 August 2000, republished in *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. by Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 443–58 (p. 458); Kotef, *The Colonizing Self*, p. 2.

propagandistic texts, is to stay close to microcosms, and to make the play very concrete so that nobody can escape the argument.

Since the original film in 1980, I have been engaged in political talks. Faisal Husseini who was the head of the Palestinian Archive, which unfortunately like many other things has closed, asked me to give him an original copy of the film. The Husseinis are a very big family who are renowned for being the most political; for example, Yasser Arafat is Husseini, Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, who was a military leader in the 1948 war, is Husseini, even the Mufti (Hadj Amin al-Husseini) is Husseini. After I was filming, we discussed the work at length. However, while I was filming, I wasn't ready to share the final work, as Israel and the West Bank are such intoxicating places that you have to be very discreet. Once it is done, you can put it on the public stage: getting reproached by some and congratulated by others. But while working on a piece like *House* (1980), you have to maintain the utmost discretion.

What you say about archaeology relates to an anecdote I often recount. In 1979, I had reached a dead end. I had three fantastic years of stimulation at Berkeley – I had studied philosophy of science, Marxist economy of the Third World – and from this very learned, intellectual experience, I returned to the hotbed of the Middle East. I didn't want to be an academic because I thought that academia, like architecture, is stuck in a kind of strait jacket. I didn't feel it was in my character to partake in the petty discussions of academic wars. Being a student at Berkeley was great, but the associated publications were meaningless. I didn't want all of that.

Architecture was similar. I felt that architecture was being forced towards aesthetic preoccupations – architects considering themselves painters, or sculptors – rather than its essential function, which is to give shelter.[36] Respectable shelter. We are no longer in a phase of good public housing in London, Paris, or other big cities. When I finished my PhD, I was offered to design a settlement in a place called Tekoa (in the West Bank), which reveals one of the main mistakes Palestinians made because they kept the original Biblical names for places, so that settlers know where they are geographically and physically. So, I was told to design the settlement of Tekoa and when I refused, I realized that sometimes the best decision for a young architect is *not* to do architecture.

36 I am reminded of Genet's critique in 'Le Cathédrale de Chartres' about how a repressive politics of immigration in France in the late 1970s went hand in hand with a government campaign to valorize manual labour, while differentiating it from higher forms of work. Excoriating Lionel Stoléru's 1977 campaign for the 'droit à la différence', Genet critiques how 'le tailleur des pierres […] cessant d'être carrier, il est sculpteur'. Genet, p. 192.

Basically, I started to look for a microcosmos. The editorial process allowed me to assemble Palestinian narratives alongside Israeli ones, and the original film takes into consideration the class structure of Israeli society: the Sephardic Jews, the economist, the arrogant student of Milton Friedman's theories of subsidies.[37] It may not be written in a textbook, but you have to have some luck: I was lucky to find this house, a peaceful little object, which encompassed all of these people.

JB: In my introduction, I touch on the analogy between architecture and cinema in the Collège de France lectures. But what about in the theatre: why is architecture such a productive medium for storytelling?
AG: I used to tell my professors in Berkeley, which they didn't take as a compliment, that architecture offered a very good general education: aesthetics, technology, economy; it is a great medium for thinking metaphorically also.

JB: Yet the play is irrigated by the tangible, the material too. I was struck by its closing scene, which screens a clip from the 1980 documentary, *House*, where Palestinian stonemasons are toiling in a quarry in the mountains. Their Sisyphean effort offers a fitting cadence to the play. Can you speak about the importance of gestural poetics in the play?
AG: I asked the two actors who play the Palestinian stonemasons, Minas and Attalah, to work for three months as stonemasons in the villages in the Galilee. I even asked them to send me videos to prove they were doing it. I felt it was vital to establish a relation of trust between the actors, the characters they were playing, and the overarching dramaturgical vision, without excessive hierarchy. Even when I did a film like *Kippur*,[38] I wanted the actors to carry heavy people, because of the importance of body language, and I wanted them to run. When they hit the stone, it is not an actor you are seeing, but an artisan who knows what they are doing; the way they move the stone, the way they place it, the way they cut it through.

37 Milton Freidman was a neoliberal economist who advocated for free trade, deregulation, and a reduction in state aid. He received an honorary doctorate from Hebrew University in 1977, where he championed flexible exchange rates, free corporation, privatization, and the removal of state subsidies to lobby for greater freedom of Israeli citizens. See Amir Paz-Fuchs, Ronen Mandelkern, and Itzhak Galnoor (eds), *The Privatization of Israel: The Withdrawal of State Responsibility* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

38 Amos Gitaï, *Kippur* (2000). The film recalls Gitaï's traumatic memories of the Yom Kippour war which broke out between Israel and the Arab coalition in Syria and Egypt in 1973. Gitaï's co-pilot was decapitated when a Syrian missile hit their helicopter, and he credits the war in turning him away from architecture towards the civic potential of cinema.

Even as a statement of disagreement with what is being said. Or when they hit the stones slightly too strongly, so we cannot hear the others, this was all intentional. You can do it when the actor integrates his craft.

We rehearsed three times. The first time was in Tel Aviv, sitting together in my home. This took seven or eight months. One of the actors had never even put her feet on a big stage; she had already worked with me on the previous film, *Laila in Haifa*.[39] She never did theatre. You really have to observe and see the hidden talent. She incarnates very different characters in the play: the very arrogant Israeli archaeologist; then the eighty-year-old Palestinian feminist.

JB: Incarnating such potentially conflictual roles creates inseparability between Israeli and Palestinian narratives, as though the dramaturgical process imagines new forms of agency and dialogue that are thwarted on a political stage. In a collection of essays from 2019, *Amos Gitaï et les enjeux des archives*, you mention the importance of multilingualism and multiculturalism when filming.[40] *House* is richly polyphonic, with seven languages intersecting through speech and music. What role does translation play in your creative practice; does it help or hinder it?
AG: It is not only a question of understanding, but also our sonar experience. We have to be used to the fact that there is not supremacy of one language; we have to get used to listening to the beauty of Arabic, Yiddish, English, French, not to create a hierarchy, or say that everything has to be delivered in American English. If this had been a commercial piece in New York, we would never have been able to keep such diversity. Here, in Paris at La Colline, the actors are encouraged to speak in indigenous languages, in beautiful Arabic, Hebrew, Yiddish, English, French.

JB: That multilingual diversity seems to create dialogue, even if the form of verbatim theatre is structured through a series of monologues. Although these foreign tongues could be a source of division, or further alienation, the emergence of actors on stage, side by side, speaks to the power of theatre for creating new modes of hospitality.
AG: There is always the human aspect in theatre. My actors often said, 'you know you managed to connect me to my Palestinian origin' or Menashe [Noy], said 'I always denied my Iraqi, Jewish origin, the whole Orient, and

39 Amos Gitaï, dir., *Laila in Haifa* (2020).
40 Gitaï, *Amos Gitaï et l'enjeu des archives*, p. 23.

now I feel very comfortable with it'.[41] That is the key to imagining peace out of the ferocious conflict. If, someday, we can make space for everybody. It is not that one side needs to deny their own identity, on the contrary; it is enriching it, but not in a power relationship, not overriding the other one, not destroying the other one. I think I was very encouraged about my secret peace project when I saw the Parisian reception of the play. In the audience, there were Palestinian militants, people from Arab countries like Syria sitting next to Iranians, who all accepted the rule of the game: you should accept the narrative of the other and you should integrate it, because that is the only way.

JB: The audience itself reflects the ethical spine of *House*, then, and its ways of bearing witness to the other as a mode of self-understanding. To what extent does this extend to the politics of class in the play? Your minimalist attention to parts rather than wholes lends a non-totalitarian optic to this play, and I wonder if there is also an interest in showing the parts, or strata, of Israeli and Palestinian societies that are often obscured by the hierarchy of grand political narratives.

AG: The stonecutter is poetic. The mason tender is too, which is what makes him affective. In the work I undertook with the actors, they kept pushing for a development of the discourse. Yet, I wanted to pull back as there is something tender and fragile in the work.

JB: Could you speak about your motivation for projecting Bertolt Brecht's 1935 poem 'Questions from a Worker Who Reads', which explores the invisibility and erudition of the exploited worker, onto a screen in the middle of the play?[42]

AG: My mother took me to see the Berliner ensemble, when it was still East Berlin. Brecht understood quite early on the political importance of distantiation. You should be inside an event but also have a perspective and never be drawn into ethnocentric reading. This is always an enormously

41 For further discussion of the designation of 'Arab Jews' or 'Oriental Jews', see Ella Shohat who explores how 'the idea of "the Arab-Jew" […] provides a post-partition figure through which to critique segregationist narratives while also opening up imaginative potentialities'. Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings of Ella Shohat* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p. 4.

42 Bertolt Brecht, 'Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters' (1935), in *Die Gedichte von Bertolt Brecht in einem Band*, ed. bu Suhrkamp Verlag with Elisabeth Hauptmann (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), p. 656; 'Questions From a Worker Who Reads', in Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, trans. by M. Hamburger, ed. by John Willett and Ralph Mannheim, with Eric Fried (London and New York, Methuen, 1987), pp. 252–53.

challenging exercise, but then your body signals a political posture that says, 'I am not hostile to you'.

JB: Your use of Brecht seems to transform the hostility associated with alienation into a kind of autonomy from which hospitality becomes possible. The same is true in your homage to Albert Camus in the short 2018 film, *A Letter to a Friend in Gaza*,[43] which explores what relation can be forged out of political hostilities.
AG: Recently, I went to see Catherine Camus and now I'm doing something similar by adapting Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* into a short film.

JB: To conclude with the English title of the play, *House*, we see a separation between the territorial units of organization, architecture, shelter, and the domestic zones of kinship, familiarity, and belonging. Your geological attention to sandstone and quarries also resists the metaphors of roots and rootedness that have justified competing Arab nationalisms and Zionist ultranationalism. I wonder if you could talk about what kind of hospitality *House* makes possible?
AG: It does several things at the same time. We achieve a sense of intimacy. Once we step back a bit, and install this house in its context, we escape the sensational intimacies of other feature films. I want to situate this house in its complex context, because the very opposite of alienation would be the intimacy, domesticity, of a house as many homes.

JB: *House* as a Freudian 'unheimlich' perhaps, which is at once homely (familiar) and unhomely (strange), forever navigating the tightrope that divides and unites house from home.
AG: Absolutely.

43 Amos Gitaï, *A Letter to a Friend in Gaza* (2018).