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Skyjacking: Cultural Memory and the Movies

After World War II civil aviation became a main target for international terrorism. During the late 1960s and the 70s many planes were hijacked by Palestinian terrorists; however at least two acts of skyjacking were supported or carried out by German left-wing terrorists of the Red Army Faction and the Revolutionary Cells. Both incidents were turned into docudramas or movies based on fact. This essay analyses several of these skyjacking movies along with two master narratives on skyjacking by the artists Eleanor Antin and Johan Grimonprez. I will show that any media coverage of terrorist attacks is not a secondary phenomenon but an integral part of the terrorist phenomenon itself. Furthermore I will argue that, while ‘Entebbe’ fills part of the collective memory of Jews, Israelis and Americans it has been replaced by ‘Mogadishu’ in Germany in order to distract the collective memory from the Nazi past and to shift attention to Arabic anti-Semitism. Finally, I will address air piracy from the perspective of cultural history and contrast a traditional hermeneutical approach with a phenomenological approach – involving concepts such as visuality, performativity and the meaning of physical presence. My aim is to show that our historical memory has, to a large extent, been shaped by films and images rather than rational explanations.

The years 1968-1977 should not only be labelled as a ‘red decade’ (as Gerd Koenen did) but also as a decade of air piracy. 412 cases of skyjacking world-wide were accounted for during this period, approximately half of all incidents of skyjacking before 1990.1 Since the tightening of security measures, and an international agreement to combat piracy which came into effect in 1969,2 effective antiterrorist measures gradually improved, despite their abject failure on 9/11. While many governments preferred to negotiate with terrorists until the mid-1970s, they subsequently changed their strategy towards military intervention – to the effect that terrorist assaults on civil aviation became less and less successful.

Without doubt the hijacking of an Air France plane on its way from Tel Aviv to Paris in June 1976 was one of the most spectacular incidents of air piracy. The plane briefly stopped in Libya and was then redirected to Entebbe near Uganda’s capital Kampala. On arrival the terrorists, among them two members of the German Revolutionary Cells, separated Jews from Gentiles; all Gentiles were set free while the Jewish hostages (no matter which citizenship) had to stay. The terrorists demanded the release of 53 ‘political’ prisoners, among them three members each of the German RAF, ‘Bewegung 2. Juni’, and
several members of the Palestinian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Al Fatah.³ In the night of 4 July the Airport building of Entebbe was stormed by a special unit of the Israeli Air force that had secretly flown to Entebbe. During the assault all terrorists were killed along with 20 Ugandan soldiers and Yonatan Netanyahu – a brother of the later Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu – who had headed the operation.⁴

While many socialist countries protested against the violation of international law committed by Israel, all Western European countries and the United States celebrated the operation as an example of successful military intervention against terrorism. Until the mid-1970s these governments had exchanged a number of terrorists, including members of Palestinian Black September Group who had killed several Israeli sportsmen during the Olympics in Munich in 1972.⁵ They now gradually turned to military intervention – a strategy that was enthusiastically approved both by western citizens and the entertainment industry: Several documentaries and semi-fictional movies on skyjacking were produced during the second half of the decade and were received widely and favourably in the United States, in Europe and in Israel.

**Entebbe in the Movies**

Immediately after the liberation of the Entebbe hostages several directors announced their intention to turn the event into a movie and three films were produced within the year: *Victory at Entebbe*, directed by Marvin J. Chomsky (who later became famous with *Roots* and *Holocaust*), starring Helmut Berger as German terrorist Wilfried Böse, Kirk Douglas and Liz Taylor as parents of a 16 year old hostage from Jerusalem, Anthony Hopkins as Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Burt Lancaster as Minister of Defence Shimon Peres. Liz Taylor had a very special reason to contribute to the movie. As a Jewish convert she had offered to go to Entebbe in exchange for the hostages, but her offer was turned down politely by all governments involved.⁶

*Victory at Entebbe* was premiered on 13 December 1976, followed by *Raid on Entebbe* on 9 January 1977. *Raid on Entebbe* was directed by action movie specialist Irvin Kershner, starring Horst Buchholz as Wilfried Böse, Charles Bronson as Israeli General Dan Shomron and Peter Finch as Prime Minister Rabin.⁷ Meanwhile, Israeli director Menahem Golan had started work on *Mivtsa Yonatan*