

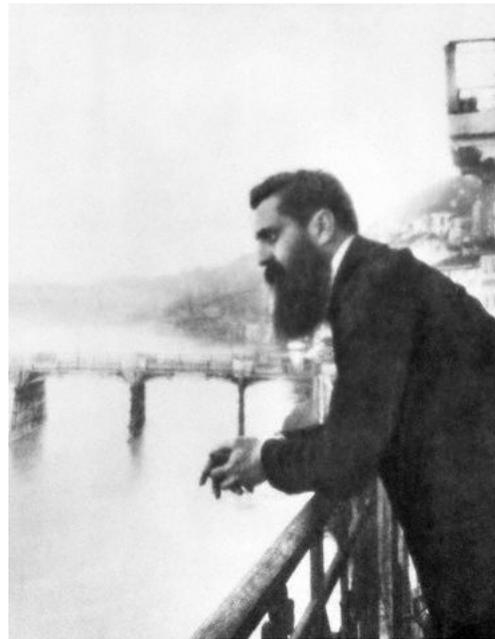
EPIPHANY ON VACATION

In *Epiphany On Vacation* Effi & Amir go back to their presumed national womb, room 117 at the Three Kings Hotel in Basel. It is the room where Theodor Herzl, the visionary of the Jewish state, was staying during the first Zionist congress. The room is still named after him (Herzl Zimmer) and as it is proudly stated in the hotel's publication: "In the Herzl Room you take in a breath of world history. This room is where Theodor Herzl laid the foundation for the State of Israel in 1897.

Over one hundred years later, this simple yet stylish Junior Room will still have an inspiring effect on you". It is on the balcony of this room that his picture by E.M. Lilien was taken, a photo that became iconic in the history of Zionism and is immediately associated with Herzl's famous diary quote: In Basel I have founded the Jewish state.

Like a womb, the room is a closed, padded space, isolated from the world around it. The outside is hinted by the presence of windows (whose curtains are drawn) the occasional sounds coming through the earphone of the main character. It's a one-way communication: the outside sends in light and sound, the inside does not respond. During the first 20 minutes of the film (out of its 24) we are in a huis clos, in a room that is not only a container but a protagonist in itself.

We meet the film's main character as she first enters the room. She arrives light-weight; only a small hand-bag indicating a presumed overnight stay. Soon enough we reveal the few objects in her suitcase: a small gun, a toilette bag, two passports, an injection. She is equipped with a single earphone. It is clearly an allegoric figure, a woman in her thirties, of a military-chic, steadfast and practical in her movements, her expressions don't reveal her emotions. Young, dynamic and on a supposed security mission, she can be regarded as a personification of the Israeli state.



Theodor Herzl, Basel 1897

And so our character finds herself in the setting where she was conceived. It doesn't seem like she's aware of that, but some kind of a ghostly presence still lingers there and it is not indifferent to her. Returning to one's womb is not a simple thing. How can a reality accept its own presumed (utopian) pre-realized image? Does the disillusion throw into question the very vision? What happens when a concretized fantasy confronts its fantasmatic origin? Can the source and its output occupy the same space and still retain their meaning?



Epiphany On Vacation, still from video

These questions are enhanced throughout the film as relationship of desire is woven between the two protagonists (room and woman). The room reacts to her presence, seduced and seducing and the soundtrack- almost solely her earphone track- also reflects the back and forth movement between fusion and integrity. As the film extensively uses thrillers'

cinematic devices we experience this movement as dangerous, threatening: when the ghostly presence (a hovering steady-cam shot) is approaching the woman from behind, a distortion sound is replacing conventional high-pitched piano chords.

The seductive gains yet more meaning through another narrational thread, that of the apple. The film opens with a quote, in white on a black background: "An apple must be put on a table so that it will not fall. Earth is floating in mid-air." It is a quote from Herzl diaries, and in his writing he explains this statement "Similarly, I may be able to found and stabilize the Jewish State without any firm support." A savant viewer will make the connection with the utopian Zionist idea of a miraculous Jewish state. But the half-quote is already valuable in itself, it functions as a basic assumption, a law of physics stating what is possible and what is not and this basic assumption is reinforced by the film's first actual image: a close up of a bright green apple, put on a table, and it does not fall. Which proves, in some kind of a non-common-sense that earth indeed floats in mid air. The camera leaves the apple and travels to the objects around it: the back of a chair, the heavy curtain. It travels up on the table-lamp shade and then back down, scanning a flower in a vase, a non personal welcome note and back to the apple. While

the camera lingers on the apple a quick hand enters the frame. It throws the room key on the table and grabs the apple out of the frame. We hear the sound of biting into the apple. But chewing doesn't follow. Instead, we see the film's main character for the first time, holding the whole apple in her mouth, while she unpacks her bag. A ringing phone shakes her from what appears to have been a negligent state of mind: she fixes the earphone in her ear, takes carefully the apple out of her mouth and puts it back into place.

The apple hasn't been eaten but it is not untouched: the marks of teeth she has bitten into its flesh are clearly visible. Is the apple poisonous? Is it eyes-opening? Is it forbidden? Will she the agent pay for her carelessness? Will she know now the good from the bad? It is important to notice that the apple as a forbidden fruit is a European symbol. It is not typical fruit of the desertic biblical region. The agent brings her own fruit with her a fruit she's allowed to eat - an orange. And it is also the European-middle eastern tension that is inherited to the state of Israel that the film calls for (evokes). It is first hinted by the two passports that the agent carries - an Israeli and a European and becomes more evident when she puts the blue contact lenses, in an assimilation attempt, but interrupted by a phone call she forgets the second lens and so she remains with one blue eye and one brown eye, a split personality.

At a pick moment in the film the apple drops down from the table. Immediately comes to mind the first quote reassuring that an apple wouldn't fall if put on a table... but if it does, then the second part of the quote is put into question - will earth still float in mid air? the analogy can be stretch further to the unquoted part about the secret energy that can bring about the realization of the Jewish state. The woman rushes to see what could have possibly drop the apple to the floor, only to discover it is still there. Was this a hallucination? a revelation? perhaps a prophecy? a wishful thinking?



The dropping apple is a turning point in the film. It is followed by a sequence where we witness our character's integrity disintegrating, she enters what seems like a paranoia attack, stopped by the sound of door knocking. The messenger. A postcard has arrived and this is where the apple is here

again. On the postcard a reproduction of Magritte's picture "the son of man" where an apple supposedly covers a man's face. The Magritte picture shows a hovering apple, one that is not put on the table in order not to fall, the title "son of man" makes a clear reference to Jesus (as does the name of the hotel "the three kings") and reflects on the apple as representation of sin, lost of innocence and of a punishment. The apple stands between us and the man. It prevents us from seeing, it hinders the revelation. Another reading, more respectful to Magritte's own position is about our desire to see what's behind the visible, and about the visible as always hiding.

And the famous balcony? During the first 20 minutes we are only hinted as of its existence. At the background of the film's opening shot we hear the steward presenting the room to the guest and he mentions that "the famous balcony is just over there", the room is decorated with a relief, a variation on the original photo, and another picture is a drawing



Epiphany On Vacation, still from video

depicting the river Rhine and the bridge that is seen at the background of Herzl's photo. But as the tension in the room grows we start to wonder more anxiously: will the woman eventually see it?

Towards the end of the movie she finally receives the long awaited announcement. A postcard with a very short message reading: 117.

The next moment a steady cam shot is hovering the room, but unlike our expectations, based on the experience of the previous "ghostly moments" it does not reach the woman. It scans the room but she is nowhere to be found. The shot continues to the balcony. A radical change in sound and color, the passage from inside to outside is sudden and violent. A birth? A rebirth? While on the balcony, the shot switches to a subjective point of view of Amir who is trying, together with Effi to reconstitute the famous photo, only to realize that it is no longer possible.

The title *Epiphany On Vacation* is ambiguous. It invites several interpretations. It may be that our character is called Epiphany (a name that might hint to the religious-miraculous quality attributed to the creation of the state of Israel), and her vacation might be seen

as ironic, perhaps as a cover-story for her mission, or rather an absence, a resignation? Another reading would propose that an *epiphany* takes place during a vacation, a revelation that might dawn on the character during her stay. Or again, maybe *epiphany* cannot take place, as it is away, has abandoned us and the agent altogether and went on vacation?

James Joyce shifted the term epiphany into the everyday realm for him it's the 'little errors and gestures - mere straws in the wind - by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal.' Epiphany in these instances is revelation, but ironical and possibly merciless.

