

Gaza” in Short Film Narratives: A Semiotic Approach to “the Film: 'Closed Zone' by “Yoni Goodman” .

"غزة" في سرديات الأفلام القصيرة: مقارنة سيميائية للفيلم: "منطقة مغلقة"
لـ"يوني جودمان"

Abdelkader Fehim Chibani*

Mustapha Stambouli University – Mascara-Algeria

Abdelkader.fehimchibani@univ-mascara.dz

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Abstract

This semiotic analysis of the short film "Closed Zone" seeks to explore the underlying narrative programming of the characters within a discourse analysis framework. Additionally, it intends to facilitate various interpretive perspectives that viewers and readers might develop, acknowledging the complexities tackled by the film industry.

Keywords: Narration; short film; semiotics; Icons; Yoni Goodman.

المخلص

تهدف هذه المقاربة السيميائية للفيلم القصير "المنطقة المغلقة" إلى تقديم قراءة ضمن سياق تحليل الخطاب لكشف خلفية البرمجة السردية للعناصر الفاعلة في القصة. كما تهدف إلى فتح الباب أمام أي إطار تأويلي يمكن أن يعتمد القارئ-المشاهد، بالنظر إلى تعقيدات المسألة التي تتناولها الصناعة السينمائية. لقد أفضت المقاربة السيميائية ضمن منحها السردية إلى اكتشاف حساسية وضع الاقتصاد الخطابي في هذا الفيلم القصير المدجج بالآلة الأيقونية في التصوير والترميز.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سرديات؛ فيلم قصير؛ سيميائيات؛ أيقونات؛ يوني غودمان.

Article

Cette analyse sémiotique du court métrage "Closed Zone" vise à explorer la programmation narrative sous-jacente des personnages dans un cadre d'analyse du discours. De plus, elle cherche à faciliter diverses perspectives interprétatives que les spectateurs et les lecteurs pourraient développer, tout en reconnaissant les complexités abordées par l'industrie cinématographique

Mots-clés : Narration ; court métrage ; sémiotique ; icônes ; Yoni Goodman.

* Corresponding author Abdelkader Fehim Chibani, Email: Abdelkader.fehimchibani@univ-mascara.dz .

Introduction

"Closed Zone," an animated short film by the acclaimed Israeli director Yoni Goodman, illustrates the plight of Gaza Strip residents under a severe blockade. Goodman, recognized for his Oscar-nominated work "Waltz with Bashir," crafted this film for the advocacy group Gisha. Goodman symbolically brings these barriers closer by depicting them as a moving hand that chases the boy's dream of moving to the place he wants.

The film "Closed Zone" continues to provoke unprecedented media controversy, at a time when most readers have not agreed on a unified stance. But can this film satisfy any party? The conceptual symbolic metaphors employed in this film can strongly influence the interpretation mechanisms, at a time when the topic its subject appears to be a subject of a chronic conflict that extends historically and geographically.

It powerfully conveys the struggles of a young Gazan boy whose dreams of following a bird are thwarted by physical and symbolic barriers in just 80 seconds. The film's visual narrative blends realistic imagery, such as buildings and smoke, with symbolic animations like the boy and the bird, emphasizing themes of confinement and desire for freedom. Notably, the film is silent and omits written credits, reflecting Goodman's aim for neutrality and encouraging viewers to focus on its pragmatic symbolism, like the hand representing power and the bird representing freedom.

1 .Methodological Prologue :The Importance of Immanent Reading.

This study employs a semiotic analysis rooted in the immanence principle of narrative semiotic theory, primarily developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas and the Paris School. This approach seeks not to interpret the film "Closed Zone" but to open interpretive possibilities within the confines of narrative semiotic concepts. It guides the ideal reader to explore these concepts without overtly prescribing meanings, thus allowing for a deeper engagement with the film's semiotic tools and their application to both broad and specific contexts.

The concept of narrative function, traditionally linked to folklore, aligns with the efforts of semiotics to outline a universal narrative schema, focusing on typical relational dynamics within narratives. This exploration delves into the construction of a fundamental narrative structure through the lens of narrative programming. Such programming underlies the behavioral rules for actants—agents in a narrative—whose actions and perceptions are culturally conditioned.

The essence of narrative creation stems from the narrative program, which orchestrates the interactions of actants and the consolidation of narrative elements. This orchestration reflects a logical progression through various narrative stages—competence, performance, activation, and sanction—revealing the actants' motivations and actions within the defined realms of possibility.

Narrative semiotics have been concerned with elucidating the superficial regularity of discourse in light of forming the deep emotions of meaning. With its immanent inclination, it has regulated the general semantic data of texts, aiming to construct a comprehensive grammar for discourses. Consequently, it has invested in the analytical concepts of discourse to weave an integrative narrative grammar. Thus, the narrative theory of Algirdas Julien Greimas has been considered a partial theory of general semiotics, succeeding in delving into discourses starting from the universal rules of narration.

.2 Narrative Programming: State and Transformation

The event representation in narrative discourse generally requires adherence to the pre-and post-law, transitioning from one state to another where states and transformations represent a central stake in the semiotic definition of simple narrative discourse. Each previous state presupposes a subsequent state, and vice versa, with each transformation involving a subsequent state presupposing a previous state. Transformation might not lead directly to the next state, often happening inversely, as a transformation leads to a second state drawing attention to an earlier, different state.

Narrativity, which infuses discourse across various media such as advertising, cinema, theater, and painting, is fundamentally driven by discursive regularity. This regularity is articulated through logical semantic representations of transformations and states at the level of actants. According to Algirdas Julien Greimas, these narrative elements revolve around a central semantic proposition contrasting "action" and "being." This dichotomy dictates the interactions between actants and objects within the narrative, unfolding in either action or state utterances depending on the nature of the actant (Greimas, 1983, pp. 27-28).

State utterances delineate either a connective relationship ($A \cap O$) in cases of possession or a disjunctive relationship ($A \cup O$) in cases of deprivation, influenced by the relationship between the state actant and the value object (Henault, 1979, p51). In the film "Closed Zone," this narrative dynamic is exemplified as the narrative transitions from a state of connection to disconnection, illustrating the hero-actant's initial union and subsequent separation from freedom, the value object.

The Initial State → the Final State

$$(A \cup O) \rightarrow (A \cap O)$$

This agent, depicted as a moving hand in the film, actively manipulates the state of the hero-actant (Agent 2), ensuring the continuity of disjunction from the value object of freedom. This dynamic highlights the role of the action utterance in altering the connective or disjunctive state, showcasing the complex interplay between narrative elements in shaping the trajectory of the narrative.

The Act of Siege: $[A1 \rightarrow (A2 \cup O)]$

The action utterance, as a representation of an action producing the state, does not exceed the limits of the narrated or recounted action. It is not related to an action realized in actuality as much as it is associated with a narratively programmed action subject to the structural regularity of the action, as it points to a realized state and presupposes a previous state. Through this action, event tension finds its inception in the counter-narrative program that the hero follows, transforming from a negative role as a state agent to a positive role as both the action and state agent, aspiring through a transitive relationship to change his disjunctive state with the value object, resulting in a state of being connected to freedom.

Act of Liberation: : $[A2 \rightarrow (A2 \cap O)]$

Narrative units within the narrative program transform into guiding structural components that enumerate accomplished operations and assess their states. These components are independent of the formation of the narrative schema, yet they can clarify all their regularities and the regularities of any discursive form (Courtes, 1976, p 15). Narrative programming is the foundation of textual event planning.

3.Functional Communication and Actantial Interaction .

In the realm of mythology, Georges Dumézil distinguished between the functional and descriptive levels of defining the actant. Lucien Tesnière found in the simple linguistic utterance only a similar image to that of the presentation, where words can play different representational roles (action, actor, object, subject, predicate, etc.); roles organized

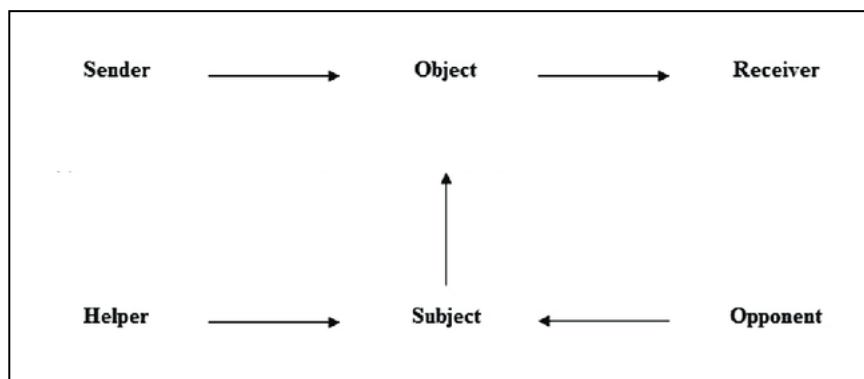
within the normative scope of the utterance (nominal sentence, verbal sentence, phrase, etc.) .

In folklore analysis, Vladimir Propp identified the actant primarily as a dramatic character, pivotal due to its assigned actions which attract similar interactants, thus forming the narrative's core. Each interactant's unique actions contribute to the tale's distinctiveness, while the overarching structure of these actants defines the genre. Étienne Souriau further developed this concept in the theatrical context, emphasizing the functionality of actants within narratives by distilling them into six key roles (Greimas, 1986, pp 172 - 176). This actantial framework clarifies the semiotic aspects of narrative characters, demonstrating how they fundamentally shape the narrative discourse.

The use of an automated inventory of actants abstracts the narrative content, as actants embody fundamental existential forms and their relationships, capturing the simple semantics of the discourse. These structures act as conduits between the immanent levels of narrative and their expression, marking the transition from deeper narrative layers to their surface manifestations. In "Closed Zone," the narrative structure is articulated through six defined actants, with the hand functioning as the receiver.

The subject (hero): The Gazan boy.

- 1(The object: Freedom.
- 2(The helper.? :
- 3(The opponent: The barriers.
- 4(The sender: The bird.
- 5(The receiver: The hand.



3.1 .The Subject and the Object:

The opposition between the subject and the object in narrative structures is not merely syntactic but is semantically charged with the notion of "desire" (Greimas, 1986, pp 176 - 177). This dynamic is evident in the "investigation function" of narratives, where each transformation is traced back to modify. In the narrative framework, the object serves as a pivotal link between the desire motivating the subject-object relationship and the communication between sender and receiver.

This linkage disrupts typical communication patterns, suggesting a necessary connection between the sender and receiver when the object is present. In "Closed Zone," the presence of the bird as the sender catalyzes the protagonist's quest for freedom, illustrating how the sender establishes the central value object within a narrative starting from deprivation. This sets off a narrative trajectory where the hero seeks to expand beyond his initial goals .

cations in the subject-object relationship. The basic narrative utterance is thus characterized by the directional relationship between the action's source (subject) and its target (object) (Hénault, 1983, pp 47-48). In "Closed Zone," this relationship is dramatized through the child's pursuit of freedom, symbolized by the bird, whose presence catalyzes the child's undirected quest and highlights the deprivation and desire driving the narrative.

3.2 .The Sender and the Receiver:

In the narrative framework, the object serves as a pivotal link between the desire motivating the subject-object relationship and the communication between sender and receiver. This linkage disrupts typical communication patterns, suggesting a necessary connection between the sender and receiver when the object is present. In "Closed Zone," the presence of the bird as the sender catalyzes the protagonist's quest for freedom, illustrating how the sender establishes the central value object within a narrative starting from deprivation. This sets off a narrative trajectory where the hero seeks to expand beyond his initial goals.

The pursuit action its subject (exit function) reveals a basic narrative program, where the hero transcends the bird's pursuit object to a desire to move toward new spaces.

3.3 .The Helper and the Opponent :

In narrative structures, helpers and opponents represent contrasting forces; helpers facilitate desire and communication, while opponents hinder them. These sets appear as circumstantial actants reflecting the simple opposition of the subject's will to act and its resistance, defined positively and negatively by the desire object (Greimas, 1986, p178) . This makes the proposition a conflict axis, where the bird transitions from the sender role to the temporary helper role, as clearly seen in shot 13. After despairing from the attempt to freely move and the inability to make land choices, the bird takes a tempting position, reviving the axis of desire to support its initial role at the narrative's start. The absence of the helper actant in this film is a crucial component in intensifying the narrative plot, predefining the narrative's end, resulting inversely in establishing the state of deprivation.

The film designer attempted to show some leniency in the opponent actant's program, focusing on the alerting role reflected in the connotative image in shot 15, with the hand directing a return, highlighting dialogue aspects on one side and aspects of childish stubbornness on the other. Initially, it seems an image of discussion, debate, and objection after the connotative emphasis on the necessity of returning.

Symbolically, the director reintroduces a satirical drama situation, preventing the hero from his desire to take his small boat to another shore, only to create a preventive tsunami option, transforming images of power into a display of contempt, clearly portrayed in the hero's fall depiction.

In narrative structures, helpers and opponents represent contrasting forces; helpers facilitate desire and communication, while opponents hinder them. In "Closed Zone," attempts by the hero to fulfill his desire through new paths are thwarted by the opponent (the hand), echoing Anne Ubersfeld's theatrical analysis which positions the value object as both a support and a field of conflict. This narrative conflict is subtly crafted around the boy, whose fascination with flying symbolizes his quest for freedom, showing how the value object emerges despite the underlying conflicts and the independent symbolic significance of the bird .

These dynamics underscore the structural potency of the actantial model as described by Greimas (1986, pp 185-186), revealing how actants' roles and interactions propel the narrative and shape its underlying conflicts.

The sender-receiver proposition is defined by knowledge-oriented axis, since the viewer of the film's opening scene realizes that the initial state, which leads to awareness of deprivation, is summarized by the role played by the bird sender. In "Closed Zone," the opening shot of the bird's free flight (shot 01) triggers the hero's investigative function, laying the groundwork for a narrative centered on the quest for freedom. This motif is expanded in shot (02), where the interaction between the will and knowledge axes prompts the hero's transformation from a passive to an active seeker of knowledge, eventually evolving into an obligation.

The narrative intricately weaves the interactions between the helper and the opponent along the "ability" axis. We can explore the emergence of new representatives for the roles of helper or opponent. After the hero becomes independent of the "sender" bird's directives, he suddenly notices the crossing where a hand appears bearing the Egyptian flag, seeming more flexible. This hand, despite its firm grip, appears pliable. In attempts oscillating between "ability" and "inability" (shots 19 and 20), this hand's grip tightens after being fixed by the first hand (this time more specifically, bearing the Israeli flag). Notably, in shot 21, the re-emergence of a hand, initially perceived as a helper, reveals its true role as an opponent. This subversion reinforces the ongoing separation between the hero and the value object of freedom, illustrating the complexity of actantial roles.

NP. : [A1 → [A2→ (A3 ∪ O)]

The first hand(A1); Egyptian Hand(A2); The heros(A3); Freedom(O).

Greimas believes that the narrative opens its event sequence with a syntactic series of negative functional pairs constituting an initial stage (concession). This series finds its counterpart at the final stage, resolving the initial state through a series of negative functional pairs (recovery). Between the initial and final stages, the narrative sequence is framed by establishing a "contract" from a "non-contract" state.

This relationship progresses through a series of tests based on a simple contract involving conflict and results for each test. The film aligns its narrative structure with Propp's actantial model across three testing phases: "qualifying," "decisive," and "glorifying".

These phases chronicle the hero's trials and transformations, mapping his presence and movements within the narrative to the broader themes of communication (sender-receiver), conflict (helper-opponent), and desire (subject-object) (Propp, 1970, p222). This structured approach highlights the deep interplay of narrative elements that define the hero's journey towards or away from freedom.

These principles formed the foundations of Greimas' new formulation of Propp's morphology. Based on this formulation, we can divide the narrative dimension in the film "Closed Zone" into three primary propositions: contractual, performative (tests), and disjunctive (departure and return):

A - Contractual Proposition :

Abstracting the obligatory relationship of (prohibition-breach) from the syntactic context allows understanding it in terms of the disjunctive relationship as an oppositional image of the functional pair (offer-acceptance). Prohibition is merely a negative transformation and negation of the offer, which, in turn, necessitates acceptance, making breach a negative transformation and negation of the latter.

If the "contract" is articulated positively as "offer" and "acceptance," the non-contract is articulated negatively as "prohibition" and "breach." These poles articulate through the functional pair (test-response) and the pair (examination-success). Where does the contract and non-contract arise? What are the functional articulations in this short film narrative?

The narrative of "Closed Zone" initiates a contractual act when the hero encounters the space where the bird moves (shot 02). This moment signifies the bird assuming the role of a motivating sender, offering an invitation that propels the hero towards acceptance and subsequent confrontation with a prohibitive barrier (shot 04) .

However, this prohibition is soon revealed as illusory, depicted through shots where hands lift the wall, exposing the real borders and challenging the initial deception (shots 04, 05, and 06). This sequence establishes a contract between the hero and the bird, while simultaneously forming a "non-contract" with the obstructive hand.

The concept of "non-contract" is further explored through the illusion of a simple wall that transitions into a more significant barrier, delineating state boundaries and introducing a "deception" function where the hero finds himself misled (shots 04 to 06). Shot 06 particularly underscores the thematic illusion, reflecting on the historical context of the Gaza Strip withdrawal.

B - Performative Proposition :

The film's narrative structure contrasts initial negative elements with a final positive transformation. Communication-wise, "tagging" and "recognition" counteract the initial "investigation" and "inquiry" phases. On the conflict axis, "exposure" and "transformation" challenge "deception" and "collusion," symbolizing the hero's evolving resilience, while "submission" directly opposes "collusion," depicting a retreat in the hero's strength. The narrative's performative elements focus on how barriers are recognized and redefined by the hero, especially after interventions by the hand reveal the true nature of the barriers, culminating in an acknowledgment of the siege's reality. Initially, the bird as the receiver aids the hero's engagement in "investigation" and "inquiry," facilitated by a narrative program involving a sea voyage (shots 12 to 16). However, this narrative strand fails to alter the blockade's oppressive reality, leaving the value object (freedom) elusive. This unattainable freedom impacts the hero's future actions, reflecting a potential end to the bird's motivating influence after such setbacks. This shift underscores a complex interplay of narrative functions and actantial roles that drive the film's story forward.

C-Separation Proposition :

This proposition relates to the hero's presence and absence within the narrative sequence, where "absence" is articulated into the functions of "departure" and "transition," and "presence" is articulated into the functions of "disguise" and "return," with the function of "movement" mediating both propositions within the narrative sequence (Greimas, 1986, p. 203.).

In "Closed Zone," the film's structure incorporates a mythical dimension common to fairy tales, beginning with the "departure" function. This sets the stage for the critical "movement" function, pivotal for the hero's narrative journey, and culminates in repeated attempts to enforce the "return" function, especially after reaching the narrative climax of an escalated blockade. This narrative trajectory from shots 07 to 26 illustrates the hero's struggle against forced separation. However, the director crafts an axis through which the hero's "will to move freely" is transformed into "the necessity to move." After intensified bombing, the quest for freedom shifts from mere voluntary desire to necessity .

Subtly, the film neutralizes the hero's involvement in the escalating conflict through the portrayal of bombings, which intensify the separation between the hero and his objective. The director underscores this separation with visual cues, such as the hero's facial expressions of annoyance (shot 22), signaling an emotional response to the ongoing conflict.

4 .Axis Logic and the Quest for Verification:

The film's narrative structure leverages the actantial model to coordinate functions within a non-temporal framework, enhancing the comprehension of narrative meaning as a unified whole. The narrative's dynamics are structured around four phases: activation, competence, performance, and sanction. These phases define the relationships between actants and track their evolution within the narrative context, distinguishing between action and being.

4.1 .Presumptive Axis: This axis establishes the hero's initial capability, reflecting his will and obligation to explore new possibilities and horizons.

4.2 .Verified Axis: This axis supports the realization of actions, focusing on "knowing the action" and enhancing the "capability of action." The hero's understanding of the true nature of the blockade, despite the removal of the misleading barrier (shot 06), leads to a deeper knowledge and adaptation of his capabilities.

4.3 .Realization Axis :At this stage, direction (non-direction) is absent, and competence continues, leaving the raw performance action to take place. The executing agent finds himself engaged in transforming states, relatively free from the superior authority of the sender agent. This liberation does not eliminate the emergence of a counter-agent (G. d'entrevernes, 1984, pp 34 - 36.) .

After the unsuccessful sea voyage depicted from shot 17 to 29, the narrative sees a shift in the sender's (the bird) actantial role, transitioning from a guide to a more passive state agent. This change allows the hero to independently navigate his decisions, particularly his efforts to approach the crossing. The bird's withdrawal from an active guiding role is marked by its transformation under the constraints imposed by the receiver, culminating in shot 28 where the hand that once opposed the hero now restricts the bird, symbolically caging it.

"Positive being" and "positive appearance" direct every utterance with the attribute of truth, while "negative being" and "negative appearance" direct it with the attribute of falsehood. Meanwhile, "negative being" and "positive appearance" direct it with the attribute of illusion, and if reversed, it directs with the attribute of secrecy.

These four states take their position within the film's structure, starting with the states of "appearance" and "being." In shot 02, the hero appears at the narrative's beginning with the appearance and being of a child enjoying freedom of movement, supported by shot 03, where the child chases the bird with the attribute of truth as if moving in an open space.

The narrative meticulously explores the sanction axis within the "being" and "appearance" proposition, examining the effects of verification. The portrayal of freedom in shot 03 contrasts with the "non-appearance" of freedom, as the hands manipulating the scene expose the void left by the removed barriers in shot 06.

This sets the stage for the hero's extended journey from shot 07 to 26, where he seeks to affirm his initial state of freedom, only to confront the harsh reality of its denial by the end of this sequence, resulting in a state of "non-being" defined by the re-established blockade .

The combination of "non-appearance" and "non-being" generates a state of falsehood. Although the agent remains tied to non-being, meaning the non-being of

freedom, he seeks to re-verify his appearance. In this contrast, the agent finds himself in a state of illusion .

The hero's quest for verification, from uncovering hidden truths to recognizing the pervasive deception during heightened conflict, leads to a crucial realization in shots 28 and 29. These shots confirm the collective illusion that the hero was embroiled in, ultimately questioning the true nature and role of the sender agent (the bird) .

The final image of the bird being caged by the same hands that manipulated earlier events prompts reflections on the bird's role and symbolism within the conflict. This narrative invites the audience to ponder the implications of the bird's fate and its position within the broader narrative conflicts, leaving these interpretive questions open for the viewer.

4 .CONCLUSION

The narrative-iconic imagery in the film "Closed Zone," which addresses the issue of the ongoing conflict over land in the Gaza Strip specifically, takes on a deep symbolic dimension. While it does not lack a clear ideological inclination about the reality of the blockade, this imagery advocates for the general right to freedom of movement and mobility. The film's narrative approach intentionally downplays the fundamental issues of occupation and resistance.

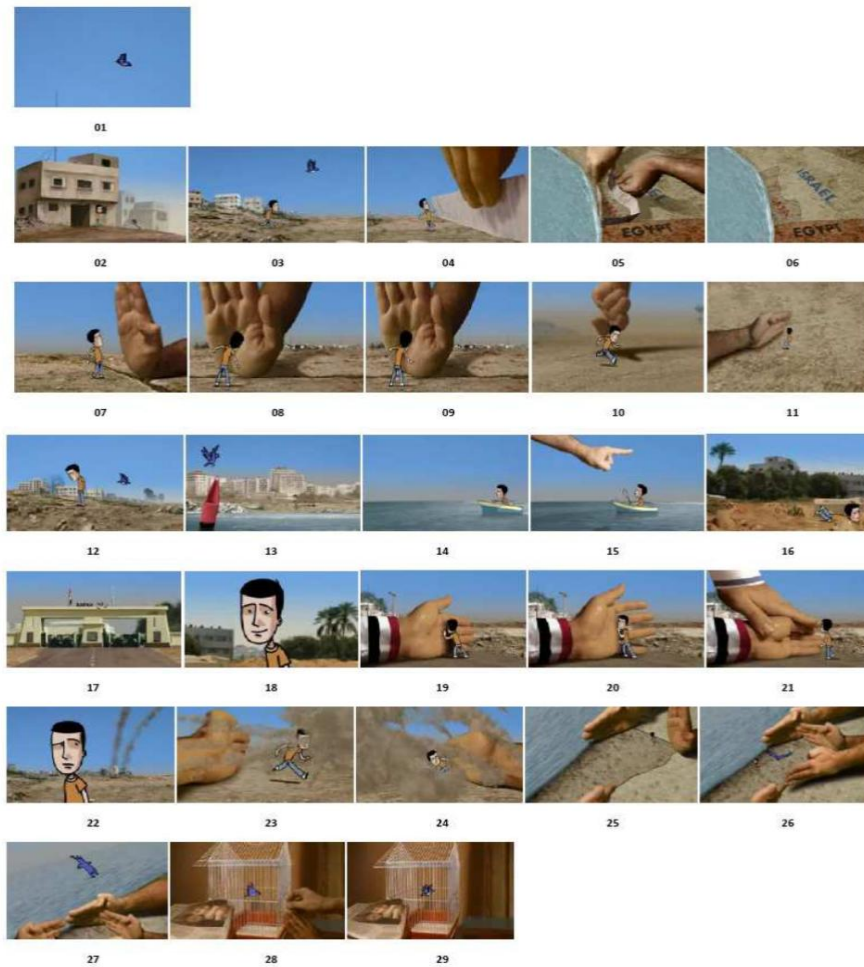
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Appendices:

Source: Goodman, 2013

Fig.1. Numbered Chronology of Shots in the Film 'Closed Zone'



Source: Internet websites: Goodman, Yoni (2013), 'Closed Zone, detailed web site :
<https://www.yonigoodman.co.il/closedzone.html>

consulted on 03/01/2025.