
The Catastrophic Horizon: Contemporary Israeli Cinema's Critique of Neo-Liberal Israel

Yael Munk

Open University, Israel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Munk, Yael. "The Catastrophic Horizon: Contemporary Israeli Cinema's Critique of Neo-Liberal Israel." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21.2 (2019): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3571>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 65 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and CultureISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 21 Issue 2 (March 2019) Article 4**Yael Munk,****"The Catastrophic Horizon: Contemporary Israeli Cinema's Critique of Neo-Liberal Israel"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss2/4>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.2 (2019)**
Thematic Issue **Materiality and the Time of the Present in Israeli Culture**
Ed. Oded Nir and Ari Ofengenden

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss2/>>

Abstract: In her article, Munk analyzes the gradual decline in social solidarity of the once-socialist Israeli society has become discernible in arts and society alike. This process has been voiced in films that described the dangers of a segregated society in a graphic manner, pointing an accusing finger at what Israeli society has become. In these films, the prolonged Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories considered by some as the source of all evil, has been removed from the intellectual foreground in order to provide by a deeper look into the catastrophic outcomes of the social dead end Zionism has reached. The article analyzes four feature films from four different Israeli male generations – Uri Barabash's *The Salt of the Earth* (2006), Yaki Yosha's *Still Walking* (2010), and Tom Shoval's *Youth* (2013) and Jonathan Gurfinkel's *S#x Times* (2013) in order to define the post-ideological shift that Israeli cinema has chosen. Through their representation of gratuitous violence, the four films selected reveal the unspoken social and political dead end that contemporary Israeli society has reached.

Yael MUNK

The Catastrophic Horizon: Contemporary Israeli Cinema's Critique of Neo-Liberal Israel

"This city has a kind of sour smell, like if something's rotten here. Like one big argument. I think being alone is a type of landscape in this city. And I can't take it anymore". These are the last words uttered by Ricky, a young woman who left her husband and child in her native kibbutz with the intention to solve her existential misery in the big city. She wanders aimlessly at night in the city of Tel-Aviv, looking around the empty streets, desperately seeking for someone she could speak to. When she finally finds such a person at a bar, it is a chauvinistic Israeli Secret Service agent who uses her for his pleasure in casual sex and then urges her to leave his apartment. She obeys him but in a non-conventional way: she jumps from his window to her death.

This minor scene, taken from the late Assi Dayan's opus magnum, *Life According to Agfa* (1992), reveals the moral deterioration of Tel-Aviv, the Israeli city considered as symbol of the revival of the Jewish people in Israel. Set in a pub named Barbie (not after the doll but rather after the nickname given to Abarbanel, an Israeli psychiatric hospital) during its opening hours – from the evening to the morning after – *Life according to Agfa* is in fact an elegy to the city that could have become a dream-come-true, but had failed. Dayan's dystopian and decadent narrative, photographed in a documentary-like black and white depicting the last days of the first Intifada as the Oslo agreements were about to be signed, is the first and most significant warning-sign of the apocalyptic ending which threatens the State of Israel.

According to Dayan's vision, the privileged stratum of Israeli society is about to be confronted by Israel's underprivileged, a confrontation that will provoke a terrible carnage from which no one will survive. Dayan opens his film with the prophetic caption "In a year from now" – a caption that gives his apocalyptic visions an eternal validity. In it, Dayan takes the viewer for a tour in Israel's deteriorating condition, in which Palestinians, Arabs, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, women and an IDF unit on leave, all gather and confront each other until their very end. The film's final sequence, accompanied by Leonard Cohen's famous song *Who by Water* (based on the Jewish prayer *Unetanneh Tokef*, which is the prayer of Yom Kippur, the holiest atonement day), follows the complete destruction of the pub and all its inhabitants.

The last shot in the film is in color; now everything is different, as the high-angle color shots reveal the blue skies above the empty streets. The camera enters a room through a balcony and reveals the black and white photographs shot in the pub during the previous night, before the carnage took place. The spectator now hesitates as to the interpretation of the previous, black and white part of the narrative: was it only a nightmare and the color sequence represented the awakening? But then, where are all the people who have vanished from the city's space in the last color sequence? Furthermore, is the absence of people supposed to represent the possible outcome of the national dead end reality at the early 1990s, or is it a variation on the myth of Isaac's Binding, encompassing all generations and, in a way, hinting at the nation's suicidal potential?

In fact, these two last sequences not only summarize its creator's apocalyptic vision, but also open up a new chapter in Israeli cinema's master-narrative at the beginning of the new millennium; a chapter which is dominated by tales of victimhood and trauma (Duvdevani). But the critical mirror that Dayan raised was not followed by any other Israeli filmmaker in the 1990's. Whether because *Life according to Agfa* was ahead of its time, or because it set a high artistic standard that was difficult to follow, 1990's Israeli cinema returned to the portrayal of the personal sphere, and discovered that the world left behind did not exist anymore. 1990's cinematic Nihilism had turned by the new millennium into a prolonged elegy about what could have happened to the Israeli place, if only we would have dealt with the present in time (Munk, "Memory" 156).

Israeli Cinema's Critique of Neo-Liberalism

Indeed, Israeli cinema's new millennium opened with the echoes of trauma. Various kinds of trauma and post trauma were represented in film, ranging from the army to the Holocaust.¹ Furthermore, a feeling of insecurity had spread in the Israeli atmosphere, emphasizing a new trauma, the one of the perpetrator; the Jews, who had thought of themselves as eternal victims, and had realized only at the beginning of the new millennium that they had turned into perpetrators of the country's weakest

¹ See Yosef, Gertz and Hermoni, and Morag's *Waltzing with Bashir* for analyses of this trend.

subjects – both Palestinian citizens in the occupied territories, and the poor and most vulnerable Israeli citizens that the worsening economic situation had transformed into victims. Recurring national trauma such as wars were privatized, thus creating a new sense of personalization to national events. This depolitization and de-hegemonization of what was previously national influenced the individual, who in turn refused to experience the national traumas as the only relevant interpretation to his experiences.

The turn towards the individualization of traumata and the growing impact of subjectivity in cultural thought are the inevitable effects of a world tendency that is commonly referred to as "the end of ideologies", an idea that cannot be separated from the search for new forms of ethics. Italian Philosopher Rosi Braidotti proposes the notion of "nomadic subjectivities" to answer this new situation. According to her, in times of crisis, as the media celebrates the end of ideological existence, the question that ought to be asked is what happened to the human, to the moral dimension of men. In order to answer this question, one should understand the material conditions that constrain, influence and stimulate the content of culture and politics. Today, these constraints seem to be found in the compulsive consumerism of mass culture, where the emphasis falls on the quest for "personalized," custom-made specifications and commodities. This capitalist tendency that seeks to anchor the individual in materialism was already designated in Deleuze and Guattari's major work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. There they pointed out what they called "the paradox of capitalism," that is this social formation that constitutes itself on the basis of that which was the negative of all the others. Braidotti contends that this tendency achieves a disastrous dual effect: "It reasserts individualism as the unquestionable desirable standard, while it reduces it to brand names and to logos" (3-4).

Israeli cinema has known political phases, namely with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the 1980s, following the political turnover in 1977, which brought the Israeli right to power and raised a fear that Israel is facing another war, Israeli directors created a number of political films that either supported a dialogue between Israeli and Palestinians – the most well-known examples being Judd Ne'eman's *Fellow Travellers* (Magash Hakesef, 1983) and Uri Barbash's *Beyond the Walls* (MeAhor HaSoragim, 1984) – or maintained that the dialogue between the nations had reached a dead-end – as in Daniel Wachsmann's *Eastern Wind* (Hamsin, 1982) or Rafi Bukai's *Avanti Popolo* (1986). However, these films did not peer into Israeli society and ask questions about the different ways it has been represented. Nonetheless, it was exactly during this decade that Israeli society separated from its socialist values and began a rapidly growing process of privatization, increasing economic inequalities and generating more poverty. The results appeared gradually in Israeli society and were eventually described in Doron Tsabari and Amir Ben David's three-part documentary "The Silver Platter" (Magash HaKesef, 2015), which was expected to shake Israeli society to its foundations. Broadcasted at the end of 2015, the series revealed the way in which wealth is distributed in contemporary Israel, leaving the poor poorer and the rich – richer. The *Times of Israel's* correspondent Simona Weinglass provides an accurate description of it: "'The Silver Platter' provides a devastating indictment of an economic system they say has grown so concentrated and extractive that Israel could soon rival countries like Rwanda and Namibia in its levels of corruption." Nevertheless, although Tsabari and Ben David's documentary was planned to evoke a reaction similar to the civil protest of July 2011 (also known as "The Tent Protest"), it did not succeed in creating the social justice miracle to which the Tent Protest aspired.

This paper focuses on the dystopian visions that were engendered in Israeli feature films since the year 2000, as part of a general atmosphere of a socio-political dead end. Torn between remorse for the past and anxiety for the days to come, the new millennium Israeli cinema has begun his new role as a visionary in an unstable world, in which, as Rosi Braidotti contends, "politics can be described not merely as the government of the polis, but also in terms of the management of insecurity. The ongoing changes are currently packaged in modes of social representation which alternates between the euphoric and the apocalyptic" (3).

In today's neo-liberal Israel, it seems that the ability to subvert the neo-liberal apparatus has been lost, and the reflections of this loss can only be found in a few contemporary Israeli feature films; unfortunately, these films did not attract much public attention in real time, but I believe they will be considered as prophetic in the future. Here I wish to show the ways in which these films deal with Israeli society's violence, loneliness, loss of solidarity and general despair as being the main ingredients of an imminent catastrophe.

When did it Begin? The Terrible Influence of Neo-liberal Ideology

Zionism has dreamt of the normalization of the Jewish people, that is – to be a people like any other people; however, this very idea contradicted the Biblical notion of the Jews as the Chosen People. This

contradiction, that lies, unresolved, at the foundations of Zionist ideology, resulted in ambivalence towards self-determination, whose symptoms can be deciphered in Israeli culture to this very day. While the State of Israel had been founded as a socialist society, three decades later its government turned towards capitalism. It so happens that in the past decade, Israeli society was compelled to adopt the neo-liberal ideology that had begun to rule in the Western world. According to British journalist and writer George Monbiot, neo-liberalism is today's ruling ideology which seems to have conquered the world. In his book, *How did we Get into this Mass: Politics, Equality, Nature*, Monbiot refers to French economist Thomas Piketti's seminal work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, in which he has pointed at the fact that no government program could be sustained without an "apparatus of modification": the corporate press, spin doctors, lobbyists and think tanks. Monbiot elaborates on this argument and suggests that without this apparatus of modification,

[...] the necessary programs of austerity that several governments have imposed would be politically impossible. The destruction of the living world would be the occasion of a constant protest. This apparatus of justification or infrastructure of persuasion and the justifying narrative it generates allow the rich to seize much of our common wealth, to trample the rights of workers and treat the planet as their dustbin. Ideas, not armies or even banks, run the world. Ideas determine whether human curiosity work for society or against it. (Monbiot 3)

In the Israeli context, neo-liberalism suggests unique so-called solutions to the old and ever-relevant issue of victimhood. For instance, Israeli Sociologist Alon Gan published in 2014, a book entitled *From Victimhood to Sovereignty*, in which he enumerates four types of victimhood in Israeli society: The kibbutz children who were separated from their parents and forced to spend their childhood in the communal children houses; the oriental (Mizrahi) Jews; the Holocaust survivors; and the Palestinians in the occupied territories and inside Israel.² Gan suggests state-sovereignty as an alternative to victimhood and calls for developing a "sovereign road map" for cultivating a personal, social, and national identity through the prism of sovereignty rather than the prism of victimization. Gan's proposal seems to perfectly fit with neo-liberal ideology, as sovereignty or the total reliance on the State's "good intentions" (particularly in today's Israel) has proved to be very poor companions for the individual victim; devoid of solidarity, it proposes no solution to an individual who is doomed to fight alone in a growingly aggressive system.

Inspired by the critique of contemporary Israeli neo-liberal ideology, this article focuses on four Israeli feature films – all released at the beginning of the new millennium: Uri Barbash's *Salt of the Earth* (Melach HaAretz, 2006), Yaky Yosha's *Still Walking* (Od Ani Holech, 2010), Jonathan Gurfinkel's *S#x Acts* (Shesh Peamim, 2012) and Tom Shoal's *Youth* (HaNoar, 2013). These films are divided by a generation gap that is expressed through their cinematic language and historical references; whereas the first two films represent a generation of filmmakers that matured in the course of dramatic events such as Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the political turnover in 1977, the latter two were directed by a younger generation – Jonathan Gurfinkel was born in 1976 and Tom Shoal in 1981. The main difference between the two generations, however, lies in their vision of personal ethics and self-examination: while the older generation considers the military indoctrination as the source of all evil, though simultaneously lamenting the loss of the mythological friendship between warriors, the younger generation openly and graphically deals with expanding economic inequality and its perpetuation in various Israeli contexts. The common denominator between the four films is their elegiac attitude towards the mournful situation Israeli society has reached, which no one can be directly accused of, while it is widely spreading, leaving very few options for escape.

On the backdrop of these generational differences, all the films discussed in this article relate to the appearance of "New Violence." According to Israeli film scholar Neta Alexander, this new kind of violence is characterized by its turning inwards, facing the domestic sphere and thus transforming it and its surroundings into a battlefield. This "new violence" is in fact "a radical way to think about the interrelation between aesthetics and politics by invoking a bodily experience and turning the occupation and the militarization of Israeli society into a subtext rather than a text" (4). This change in representation also entails a change in the role of the spectator, who is no longer led to identify with the perpetrator (as was the case with the "Shooting and Crying" theme in Israeli feature films in previous decades), but rather is encouraged to identify with the victim, who has become the protagonist. This

² Gan's research was published by The Israeli Democracy Institute, which demonstrates an ongoing tendency to promote instant-solutions to deep-rooted social problems.

privileged, voyeuristic point of view enables the spectator to safely observe the process of becoming-victim as the result of neo-liberal politics.

The End of the Mythical Israeli Manhood: Uri Barbash's *Salt of the Earth*

Uri Barbash's *Salt of the Earth* (2006) returns to the filmmaker's preferred theme: military fraternity and solidarity, which is at the heart of some of Barbash's most famous films, such as *One of Us* (Ehad Mishelanu, 2009). But this theme takes a morbid turn in *Salt of the Earth*, as the protagonist, Nadav (actor Aki Avni), an Israeli crime reporter suffering from a gambling problem, gets into trouble with the Israeli Mafia in his attempt to revenge his girlfriend's miscarriage, following her encounter with mafia debt collectors. Nadav comes up with the idea of robbing the mobsters' casino, a solution that will also end all of his financial difficulties. During his military reserve service, he easily succeeds in convincing three of his closest friends from his days in an elite military combat unit to join him in his revenge mission. The difficulties deriving from the protagonist's gambling habits and financial problems, which are the cause for many cinematic tragedies – including *Still Walking* which will be discussed in the next chapter – echo throughout the narrative, emphasizing the growing importance of economic well-being in the eyes of Israelis at present times; an importance that is meticulously reflected in the styling of the four friends' interiors and cars, and their manifested understanding towards their friend's gambling debts. In their attempt to commit the perfect crime, the four brave Israeli reserve soldiers find themselves involved in numerous and dangerous challenges. Consequently, one of them is accidentally killed, bringing the three to a worst situation they could have ever expected: the need to get rid of their friend's corpse in the deserted landscaped of the occupied territories, while being at the risk of getting caught. The morally impossible situation is seemingly resolved by their immoral decision to bury him in an empty well, but as we learn from the film's ending, this dramatic event will inevitably lead to the termination of their friendship. The film's last sequence provides a visual representation of the disenchantment of the protagonists, as well as the viewers, with the ethos of Israeli military brotherhood.

Filmmaker Uri Barbash chose the thriller genre, which is rather uncommon to Israeli cinema, to realistically describe these four friends' journey into the Israeli heart of darkness, where ancient socialist values come into confrontation with new Israeli hard-core capitalism, in a manner which bridges between two ideologies: militarism and capitalism. What begins in an Israeli traditional form – military brotherhood and a mutual guarantee that goes beyond the military service – turns in a moment of crisis into a typical neo-liberal determination regarding cost effectiveness: the traumatic decision to abandon their friend in the middle of the desert. Thus, the two ideologies structure the action plot and simultaneously transform it into a narrative of remorse and sorrow.

Salt of the Earth ends on a tragic note: the three remaining friends, who represent the Israeli salt of the earth – if we were to judge according to their past and their devotion to the Israeli military ethos – are seen confessing their sin to the camera. However, this is not a Christian confession, after which they would be granted absolution, but rather an expression of their acknowledgment of the fact that their blind devotion to the country and its norms has led them to a post-traumatic state from which they may never recover. Furthermore, because these characters are portrayed as salt of the earth, Barbash seems to hint that Israeli society suffers from serious posttraumatic symptoms, resulting in the perversion of those values that have enabled them to become praiseworthy beforehand. In this sense, the film acts as a warning concerning the dangers deriving from the absolute nadir at which Israeli ethical values have reached. Moreover, *Salt of the Earth* reveals that the admired Israeli values of masculinity – power and courage – were but a stratagem aimed at hiding the truth, which is weakness and fear. In the film's final sequence, the post-traumatic sons of the nation are given a human dimension as they reveal their sentiments to the camera. Stripped of their military uniform, they confess the loss of their moral compass under the contradictory influences of over-effective capitalism, their commitment to their companions from the military being transformed into an addiction to the new capitalistic values of Israeli society. This is why the three confessions at the end of the narrative are more than individuals' recognition of their own post-trauma; these are in fact the recognitions of the tragic impact of neo-liberal Israel on an ancient world. The protagonists' realization arrives too late, as the mechanism of time it is unstoppable: those who were the salt of the earth have become Israel's new victims.

The Elegy of the Mature Israeli Hippy: *Still Walking*

Still Walking (Od Ani Holech, 2010), Yaky Yosha's latest feature, opens with a powerful image that later reappears throughout the narrative: its protagonist, Mikey, also known as "the gangster," is seen walking towards the sea at sunset, carrying the body of his dead son in his arms. This pieta-like image, set against the sunset, accumulates its symbolic significance as the narrative progresses, representing Isaac's binding which nowadays seems to have become the contemporary political master-narrative in which children are sacrificed on the altar of their arrogant fathers. This message, shedding light on this symbolic sacrifice, may be considered as the distinguishing mark of Yaky Yosha, a political filmmaker who holds a respected place in the Israeli cinema pantheon.

Yosha's debut film, *Shalom, Prayer of the Road* (Shalom, Tfilat HaDerech, 1972; Yosha was 21 years old), a semi-autobiographical narrative in which he documented his life, is considered to be premonitory of the Yom Kippur War. Inspired by Swiss-French director Jean-Luc Godard and his counter-cinema,³ Yosha's film dared to speak aloud all that was considered not politically correct at the time – critique on Zionism and the Israeli military obsession, and the uncovering of dangers that were to arise due to the then-recent occupation of the Palestinian territories following the Six-Day War. Different circumstances caused the film to be released only after the Yom Kippur war, a fact that enhanced its prophetic qualities with regards to the forthcoming national catastrophe (Shnitzer 147). The film was scarcely distributed and screened in real time, and thus received its national and international recognition only in retrospect, after Yosha had directed a few other feature films – namely *Rocking Horse* (SusEtz, 1976), based on Yoram Kaniuk's novel by the same name, and the scandalous *The Vulture* (HaAyit, 1981), depicting the military bereavement industry in Israel. Yosha's next two feature films were directed in Israel – *Dead End Street* (Kvish Lelo Motsa, 1982) and *Sunstroke* (Makat Shemesh, 1984) – but their ambivalent reception among Israelis led him to the decision to leave Israel and to try to succeed in Hollywood. He returned to Israel more than a decade later, in the mid-nineties, and found a country that has radically changed.

Yosha's *Still Walking* is based on a novel Yosha wrote and published in 2008. The novel, titled *As I Walk* is a very personal account on the moral and physical degradation of the Israeli male who once believed that the whole world was waiting at his feet. The film's narrative follows his disappointment and his realization that he was wrong, accompanied by voice-over reading a letter addressed to Mikey's deceased child, which, at times, is intertwined with the Palestinian child he accidentally killed in one of his secret operations. The protagonist, Mickey, is a middle-aged man married to an alcoholic wife who used to be an academic. He has experienced various misfortunes, among them the loss of his best friend in a military operation, consequent to Mickey's pity towards a Palestinian boy who then wounded him and killed his best friend; his expulsion from the exclusive military unit he belonged to; his decision to join the Israeli Secret Service, from which he was also expelled. These events lead him to a casino run by a few of his friends from the army – a line of work that can be easily interpreted as a metaphorical image for contemporary Israeli insecurity (this is also suggested by Yosha in an earlier interview with Rapoport, "Mivtza Kasino"); evidently, Mickey represents the defeated Israeli male (Morag, "HaGever"). Furthermore, by filling the film's narrative with numerous Israeli flags and recurring images of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu preaching apocalyptic scenarios on open television sets to which no one listens, the military and the State slowly converge into one same theme, that of the obliteration of the Israeli state.

One of the film's first scenes shows Mickey in a gambling café, where he is concentrated at what he knows best: losing money. The game ends with an argument, a bullet is shot and Mickey is wounded. He wakes up at the hospital, as his wife and his mistress visit him one after the other. Through the recurring flashbacks, often presented using cinematic superimpositions, the viewer understands that Mickey is post traumatic, and is still affected by the military incident in which he lost his friend. The protagonist's stream of consciousness reveals the total defeat of the once glorified Israeli warrior. In fact, Mickey's story is the story of the entire Israeli nation, who once dreamt of being a model society but lost its way due to various earthly temptations namely big money and beautiful women, just like a typical Hollywood gangster.

³ Film Theoretician Peter Wollen argues that Jean-Luc Godard created a new spectatorial position that destroys the visual pleasure by undermining the conventions of traditional narrative cinema (identification, transparency, single diegesis and closure) which make this cinema enjoyable. Though Wollen associates visual pleasure with traditional Hollywood cinema, he points at the binary opposition between "pleasure" and "unpleasure," which co-exist in Godard's intellectual and analytical cinema as the way of creating new forms of visual pleasure. □

The film continues to follow Mickey in Israel's underworld, where gangsters mix with military figures, guns are often brandished, and life seems like a luxury no one can really afford. When Mickey runs away from his catatonic home and his adolescent daughter who refuses to speak with him, he goes to his Christian mistress who lives with her autistic daughter; but most of time he is seen alone, wandering at night between bars and brothels, waiting for some salvation.

Yosha was of course aware of the pessimistic message of his film, and this was his exact intention. In an interview with Avner Faingulernt, he said: "You can reach a vast amount of people through cinema. I adopted the words of Picasso [...] art is not just aesthetics, art is a weapon. I said to myself: If art is a weapon, then film is Napalm" (49). In other words, Yosha expected his film to awake the Israeli public opinion, but in vain. By showing Mickey's degradation, Yosha mourns the Israeli dream of normalization, a dream that has been realized via a military initiation of death and sacrifice. It is therefore no coincidence that the renowned Israeli film critic Uri Klein described *Still Walking* as one of the darkest Israeli films ever produced in Israel.

S#x Times or the Faces of New Violence

Following the national moral account expressed at the beginning of the new millennium in films such as *The Salt of the Earth* and *Still Walking*, a decade later Israeli cinema began a new and different analysis of Israeli reality, manifesting greater compliance at the face of its moral deterioration. This new ethical position opened up a new cinematic trend in Israeli cinema's confrontation with its catastrophic horizon: an acknowledgment of the all-consuming capitalism that destroys the very basis of any normative society. The films discussed in this chapter share very little with previous directions in Israeli cinema, as they all critically and specifically refer to the false abundance that the neo-liberalism ideology had brought on Israeli society. Emphasizing the social and economic gap between various populations, this cinema proposes no solutions, but contended itself at putting a mirror to the face of changing Israeli society. A very good example for this tendency would be the much-acclaimed film *S#x Acts* (Shesh Peamim, Jonathan Gurfinkel, 2012), which at first glance seems to be dealing with the ever-current issue of sexual consent amongst teenagers.

Set in a socio-economically divided neighborhood in Herzelia, *S#x Times* tells the story of the sixteen-year-old Gili Shulman (actress Sivan Levy) who has just moved to a new high school in one of Herzelia's affluent suburbs. Seeking social approval, vulnerable Gili will perform six sexual acts throughout the film's narrative, each one advancing her degradation. Whereas in the eyes of her school friends she seems to be "calling for it", Gili is in fact looking for acceptance in a society that will never accept her. As film critic Ella Taylor justly summarized for the National Public Radio:

Far from being cynical, *S#x Acts* raises an alarm while demonizing no one. Manipulative Omri is pretty hard to like, but it's not hard to understand the pull he exerts on Gili. Each of the other boys has his own appeal, plus his own insecurities and doubts about what he's doing. A chubby boy takes his turn with Gili, then shows her kindness, which she rewards with the same cavalier rejection she's suffered at the hands of his friends.

Gili lives at the other side of town, in a poorer neighborhood. And even though Gili is rejected by her schoolmates, everything in their neighborhood fascinates her: their villas, their cars and their economic ease. In vain, she tries to attract the boys' affection: the more the narrative evolves, the more the viewer understands that Gili has no chance in becoming part of the gang; not only because of her unattended adolescence with tired, hard-working parents, but also because there is no place for girls like Gili in a divided society in which money has replaced all human emotion. Thus, *S#x Times* becomes an allegory which demythologize social mobility in contemporary neo-liberal and polarized Israel. Film scholar Neta Alexander stresses the relations between the location of the violence depicted in the film, and its political role:

When we encounter [the abusive rich kids] on the beach, at the school, or in their living room, they tend to display normative behavior, but once the story moves into various closed spaces – such as public restrooms or a villa's basement – they all become sexual predators, repeatedly molesting (and eventually raping) the film's female protagonist (11).

Thus, continues Alexander, the film represents the New Violence, which is characterized by the conversion of "[...] on-going violence in the public sphere into sexual aggressiveness that always takes place in the shadow of the private sphere (13).

Alexander also emphasizes the fact that the rich teenagers are all of Ashkenazi origin, whereas the protagonist's physical traits ascribe her to the Mizrahi Jewry. Finally, *S#x Times* is all the more interesting because of the way it dares to position its crucial political critique at the foreground, even at

the expense of its reception by viewers from the same upper-class it criticizes. Thus, for instance, none of the protagonists are round characters; rather, they perform their role in the growing social discrepancy in Israeli society. This is the reason we fail to feel empathy for any of the characters that abuse and degrade Gili.

Youth: The Younger Generation's Dead End

Tom Shoval's debut film *Youth* (HaNoar 2013) focuses on Israeli teens as well, and offers an extraordinarily realistic document about the absence of social justice in Israel, and its dreadful consequences. Film critic Jonathan Hoffman very justly describes this film as "[... A] tragedy, a comedy, a horror film and a warning" (Hoffman), and as such it can be considered the most representative example of the "social critique trend" invading the Israeli screen. *Youth* tells the story of two brothers' coming of age in a satellite town outside Tel-Aviv: the older has just enlisted to the mandatory military service, which enables him to carry a rifle, and the younger is still in high school. After their father is fired from his job, the family finds itself with no survival means, and the narrative focuses on the brothers' futile attempts at saving their middle-class family from bankruptcy.

Under the influence of the American films they watch constantly, the two brothers come up with a radical plan to kidnap a rich young girl from the younger brother's high school and demand ransom. But even though they succeed in their kidnapping plan and lead the girl to a desolated basement, and although the girl seems to cooperate with her kidnapers and the brothers find her family's phone number, things don't work out the way they had expected, due to unforeseen circumstances: the kidnapping takes place on Sabbath and it just so happens that the girl's family keeps the Sabbath, meaning that they will not pick up the phone until Saturday night, and therefore are not aware of the kidnapers' demand. This ironic and absurd situation marks the first in a downward spiral from which the two brothers will hardly free themselves. Finally, as they return home after liberating their hostage with no ransom, they learn that their father has committed suicide.

In an interview to *The Times of Israel*, Shoval related to the influence of American cinema on his film, and to the narrative's autobiographical dimension:

I think life is a struggle. *Youth* has the fantasy world of what you want – the world of the cinema – then there is the gravity of life. In the basement you have kidnapping and American genre movie. Upstairs is the Israeli family drama [...]. We endure universal conflicts and specific conflicts. There's a misconception in the United States, a bit, about Israel and its economy. Certainly it is a success, but there is disparity there and some poverty. Showing the middle class in Israel was very important. Most of the films you see are about the conflict only. But there are other heroes. I come from a middleclass family; I have lived this tension (Hoffman).

True to its creators' intentions, *Youth* tells a tragedy that could have taken place anywhere else in the Western neo-liberal world: the tragedy of the unattended populations in a growing capitalist society. The film also shows how an individual's moment of hesitation entails a catastrophe whose repercussions are to be found on the personal level, amongst others. In the film's final scene, the neighbors gather in a state of shock outside the apartment building in which the brothers live, revealing the fragility of the Israeli middle-class, whose existence relies only on their ability to work and feed their families; the moment they fail to do, they realize that have been abandoned by their country. By doing so, Tom Shoval's realistic style opposes the viewer's expectations for a *deus ex machina* solution, and reveals, similarly to other films discussed here, that Israeli cinema has withdrawn from its escapist stance; rather, it confronts the viewer with the coarse face of Israeli reality.

The latest News: *Beyond the Mountains and Hills* (Eran Kolirin, 2016)

As this article is being written, a new feature film has been released: Eran Kolirin's *Beyond the Mountains and Hills* (Me'ever Laharim Velagvaot, 2016). Like a few other films discussed in the article, its story revolves around a middle-class Israeli family from the peripheral town of Modi'in, trapped in a typically impossible Israeli situation. After experiencing many familial challenges that could have potentially turned into major crises, the family decides to celebrate its reunion by attending a concert of the all-Israeli singer Shlomo Artzi. They stand in the middle of the crowd as the singer performs the song that has made him a national icon: "Suddenly a man wakes up, and feels he is a nation, and begins to walk." These words nostalgically refer to an Israeli time of innocence, when a national future was still an optimistic option. On the background of the films' narratives discussed here, these words seem more

ironical than ever: though threatened by an imminent catastrophe which would be the direct outcome of the political and moral digressions the State of Israel has chosen, the Israeli people still stand on their feet but they cannot walk any longer; all they can do is remember the time when they could.

Radical Conclusions for a Critical Cinema

In contemporary Israel, history is no longer a matter to rely upon or to learn from, but rather an episode in the past that may never be repeated. The refusal to learn from the past is expressed and manifested by these films' arrogant male characters, who were once the fighters and the nation's heroes. However, their encounter with predatory capitalism, neo-liberal ideology and social injustice has driven them off of their moral path and confronted them with a growing fear of being deprived of any possible future. It is on this background a different horizon appears: having lost all solidarity, the state of Israel seems to be facing a catastrophe.

It is often contended that at times of violence, fear and despair, cinema becomes a forum in which political ideologies and conflicts are played out. This is certainly true when discussing contemporary Israeli cinema, which seems to demonstrate this tendency by representing a post-apocalyptic vision that reflects not only certain tendencies in today's western culture, but also a quotidian Israeli experience in which the present norms have changed so radically that any mention of the recent past seems like faraway nostalgia. As Barbara Gurr states at the introduction of her book *Race, Gender and Sexuality*, "As speculative fiction [...], post-apocalyptic narratives ask us to consider what it means to be truly human, particularly in the context of survival horror and genocide, by testing not only our physical survival skills but also our values, our morals, and our believes" (1). Accordingly, the ever-threatened Israeli culture has become more and more invested in speculative fictions about a darkening future; as could be seen in all the film texts analyzed in this article, the recurring failure of Israeli males is the most accurate example for this cultural sensation of loss and disorientation.

This paper has attempted to target the socio-political aspect that four Israeli films, which were realized at a same historical moment, have in common: the sense of imminent danger and the loss control in one's national life. These four films express the same sensation of what Freud calls *Unheimlich* – a feeling of un-homeliness and uncanny-ness – as the country in which they take place has radically changed. This sense of fear and alienation reflects what Israeli government refuses to acknowledge: the end of social solidarity as designed in the first Zionist manifestos. These antagonisms seem to have invaded personal cinema, addressing the individual's destiny as a possible version of the collective destiny.

Driven by a sense of imminent danger, the films discussed here can be viewed as a result of the growing fears in a country that has lost its moral compass. Indeed, there was a time in which a post-Zionist discourse had dared to question the very assumptions underlying Zionism, its ideas and its perspective, and reached towards post-colonial theories (Silberstein), thus creating for a short while an illusion that the damages done from 1948 onward could be reversible; but today's Israeli intellectuals seem to avoid constructive solutions, feeling that there are none, and their day-to-day effort is invested in survival.

According to Rosi Braidotti, this mode of survival, which characterizes Israeli society, facilitates through the discovery of subjectivity, not as an egocentric value but rather as a discovery of ethics (8). Nonetheless, Israeli cinema refuses to aim its attention at any possible solution. Instead, it prefers to look into the ever-growing wound of a defeated society that fails to achieve its dreams. This may be the reason that Israeli cinema's critique of neo-liberal ideology did not appear until the beginning of the new millennium. The moral discourse offered by the four films discussed in this article is not intended to drive anyone to action, because no action can be taken. Accordingly, none of these films proposes a clear narrative closure; life goes on, and the crimes that have been committed, accompanied by guilt, will follow us wherever we go.⁴ In this sense, Assi Dayan's vision of a complete annihilation, after which the entire Israeli project could start anew, has never been more relevant.

Works Cited

Alexander, Neta. "A Body in Every Cellar." *Jewish Film & New Media*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 4-24.

⁴ In *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell and Thompson relate to the "ambiguity of Neorealist films" as "[...] a product of narration that refuses to yield an omniscient knowledge of events [...] Neorealism's tendency toward a slice-of-life plot construction gave many films of the movement an open-ended quality quite opposed to the narrative closure of the Hollywood cinema" (486).

- Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film art: An introduction*. McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Polity Press, 2006.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- Duvdevani, Shmulik. "Guf rishon, matzlema" (first person, camera). Keter Publishing, 2010.
- Faingulernt, Avner. "'HaAniyim Meshalmin Al Hakol...' – Re'ayon Im Yaky Yosha" ("The Poor Pay for Everything..." - An Interview with Yaky Yosha). *Makhbarot Kolnoa Darom*, vol. 8, 2010, pp. 37-58.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock, Penguin Books, 2003.
- Gan, Alon. "Korbanutam – Emunatam: MeSiach Korboni LeSiah Riboni" (From Victimhood to Sovereignty: An Analysis of the Victimization Discourse in Israel). The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2014.
- Gertz, Nurith and Gal Hermoni. "History of Violence: From the Trauma of Expulsion to the Holocaust in Israeli Cinema." *Deeper Than Oblivion: Trauma and Memory in Israeli Cinema*, edited by Raz Yosef and Boaz Hagin, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 223-261.
- Gurr, Barbara. "Introduction: After the World Ends, Again." *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film*, edited by Barbara Gurr, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 1-14.
- Hoffman, Jordan. "The Kids are not All Right in the New Israeli Film 'Youth'." *The Times of Israel*, 25 Mar. 2014, www.timesofisrael.com/the-kids-are-not-all-right-in-new-israeli-film-youth/. Accessed 19 Dec. 2018.
- Klein, Uri. "Sirto HaHadash Shel Yaky Yosha hu Kina Al Medina She Einena Kayemet Od" (Yosha's New Film is an Elegy to a Country that no Longer Exists). *Haaretz*, 30 Dec. 2010, www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/1.1237787. Accessed 19 Dec. 2018.
- Monbiot, George. *How Did We Get into This Mess? Politics' Equality, Nature*. Verso, 2017.
- Morag, Raya. "HaGever HaMuvas: Kolnoa, Trauma, Milhama" (Defeated Male: Cinema, Trauma, War). Koebner Series and Resling Publishing House, 2011.
- . *Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator's Trauma and Cinema*. I.B. Tauris, 2013.
- Munk, Yael. Golim BeGvulam: HaKolnoa HaIsraeli BeMifneh HaElef" (Exiled in their Borders: Israeli Cinema at the Turn of the Century). The Open UP, 2012.
- . "Memory of a Death Foretold: Fathers and Sons in Assi Dayan's 'Trilogy'." *Deeper Than Oblivion: Trauma and Memory in Israeli Cinema*, edited by Raz Yosef and Boaz Hagin, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 147-166.
- Rapoport, Meiron. "Mivtza Kasino: Re'ayon Im Yaky Yosha" (Operation Casino: An Interview with Yaky Yosha). *Haaretz*, 11 Mar. 2008, www.haaretz.co.il/1.1311355. Accessed 19 Dec. 2018.
- Shnitzer, Meir. "HaKolnoa HaIsraeli: Kol Haudvot, Kol HaAlilot, Kol HaBama'im" (Israeli Cinema: All the Facts, all the Narratives, all the Directors). Tel-Aviv, Zmora Bitan Publishers, 1994.
- Silberstein, Laurence J. *The Postzionism Debates: Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture*. Routledge, 1999.
- Taylor, Ella. "Among Israeli Teens, Complicated Questions of Consent." *NRP*, 5 Dec. 2013, www.npr.org/2013/12/05/248380397/among-israeli-teens-complicated-questions-of-consent. Accessed 19 Dec. 2018.
- Weinglass, Simona. "Cronyism, not terrorism, is the biggest threat to Israel, hit TV series says." *The Times of Israel*, 28 Oct. 2015, www.timesofisrael.com/cronyism-not-terrorism-is-the-biggest-threat-to-israel-hit-tv-series-says/. Accessed 19 Dec. 2018.
- Wollen, Peter. "Godard and Counter-Cinema." *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, edited by Bill Nichols, U of California P, 1985, pp. 79-91.
- Yosef, Raz. *The Politics of Loss and Trauma in Contemporary Israeli Cinema*. Routledge, 2011.

Author's profile: Dr. Yael Munk is a senior lecturer in Film at the Open University, Israel. She has published two books in Hebrew at the Open University Press: *Exiled in their Borders: Israeli Cinema between two Intifadahs* (2012) as well as *Looking Back: A Revised History of Israeli Cinema 1948-1990* (2014). In addition, she has published a number of articles in English, French and German. Munk's research is concerned with Israeli and Palestinian cinemas, Holocaust studies, colonialism criticism and postcolonial theory, women documentary and gender studies in general. E-mail: <munkyael@gmail.com>