

Subjectivity, Institutions and Language in Contemporary Israeli Film

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Volume 21 Issue 2 (March 2019) Article 7**Ari Ofengenden,****"Subjectivity, Institutions and Language in Contemporary Israeli Film"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss2/7>>

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Abstract: In his article "Subjectivity, Institutions and Language in Contemporary Israeli Film" Ari Ofengenden analyzes the transnational characteristics of contemporary Israeli films (from 2000 until today). He claims that a new regime of globally networked production and distribution of Israeli film has articulated a specific kind of subjectivity presented in these films. In this article, he will concentrate on two characteristics of this subjectivity: the relations of protagonist with social institutions and use of language. Relations with social institutions starts with the highly prevalent representations of a sensitive and individualist protagonist who suffers under collective and coercive institutions like the army, religious courts, or the kibbutz. The fact that this individual does not really belong to his or her place is signaled by their multilingual use of language. Using western-European languages simultaneously present a certain kind of semi-European subjectivity. Global production, however, has meant the decline of subjectivities that would like to transform rather than strengthen existing institutions, as well as demise of the playful, expanding Hebrew of the 1970's.

Ari OFENGENDEN

Subjectivity, Institutions and Language in Contemporary Israeli Film

Israeli films have gone through dramatic transformations since the 1970s. As background to these changes it is best that we briefly take stock of the motivations of production, the thematic and the stylistic form of 1970s films as well as their intended audience. In the 1970s roughly, two kinds of films were produced, both answering to mostly local needs and motivations. The first kind of film, dubbed New Sensibility, was the Israeli response to world art cinema. Though New Sensibility has received various interpretations, it is best to see these films as having two distinct influences, a global style and more local political developments (For general introduction and contextualization of New Sensibility see Schweizer; Ne'eman). Globally the thirty years of prosperity after world war two, the welfare state, and a strong national economy supported non-commercial development of films. Indeed, this time marks the high point of art film, the time of Goddard, Renoir, Fellini, Pasolini, Bergman, Kurasawa, and Forman. Cinema itself suddenly won new worldwide prestige and visibility as an art form. Locally there was an exhaustion of Zionist and socialist ideology and a withdrawal to private individualistic concerns. These two trends often came together in New Sensibility films. In many of his films like *Peeping Toms*, *Big Eyes* as well as *Ha-Tarnegol*, Uri Zohar was inspired by the style of East European art films while dealing with private concerns of sexual desire in defiance of collective state ideology. Other illustrations include many of Assi Dayan's films, for example the early *Feast for the Eyes* (1975) that critiqued the state's official ideology by dealing with the existential themes of death and suicide. With variations this was typical of films of New Sensibility. They simultaneously portrayed and encouraged the cultural development of a private self, creatively adopting and participating in international modernist styles like Italian neorealism and French New Wave. These films dealt with individual concerns using the themes of sexuality and death. Sexuality was represented with an explicit or implicit reference to its articulation in psychoanalysis, while finitude and death were conceptualized mainly through existentialism.

This combination of international modernism in style and a heightened sense of subjectivity, and freedom from collectivism, appealed to sophisticated urban elites who wanted to see themselves and Israeli society portrayed in similar ways to European art films. At their best these films expressed a new kind of Israeliness that proved a highly creative adaptation of high art films to Israeli setting. Indeed, the films of the period largely form the canon of Israeli films. Most of those films, however, outside of a few outliers, have proved a commercial failure. Local elite urban audiences were a small minority in Israel, Israel itself having a miniscule film market.

The other type of films produced in the 1970s, were *Bourekas* films - popular comic melodramas often involving ethnic conflict between Mizrahi Jews and Ashkenazi Jews. While New Sensibility was animated by a release from collectivist demand through representations of a heightened sense of distinctly European subjectivity, Bourekas films were a way expressing the subject position of being Mizrahi in Israel. Their plots often involved a Mizrahi Man who with cunning and street smarts outwits arrogant and cold-hearted Ashkenazis. These films both compensate for and overcome ethnic-based class difference. Ashkenazi filmmakers who produced and directed them offered a compensatory fantasy, a kind of retribution for Mizrahi filmgoers. This retribution however was usually attenuated by the way ethnic conflict is overcome at the film's end. The Mizrahi Man often marries the rich Ashkenazi daughter and a new post ethnic-class-conflict harmony predominates. As the refrain of one song, in the most popular Bourekas film of all time, *Kazablan*, goes "We are all Jews." New Sensibility and Bourekas work in complementary fashion as Israel started transitioning to a post-ideological world. The new middle class wanted to free themselves from national commitments, enjoy west European style individualism and consumerism, and extricate itself from commitment to social justice toward Mizrahi and other marginal groups. At the same time the Mizrahi themselves received a symbolic compensation in the form of belonging equally, as Jews, to the Jewish state while their marginalization and exploitation remained largely unaltered. What both Bourekas and New Sensibility films have in common is that they answer specifically local Israeli needs. New Sensibility answers the creative desire of filmmakers for being part of ground breaking international European style while at the same time articulating a new kind of individualism. Bourekas films work as a compensation to a particular Israeli reality of Ashkenazi dominance.

The 1980's and 1990's have tried in complex ways to continue this double model of Art Films and Bourekas films but both those styles experienced rapid decline. Art house films often shed their artistic experimentation and turned to more critically dealing with social and political issues. Bourekas films experienced a decline in the 1980's, mainly due to the rise of television and video on the one hand and the withdrawal of state support on the other (See Rami Kimchi, *Shtetel in Israel*). From today's

perspective the 1980's and early 1990's look like a transitional period for both Israeli society and Israeli filmmaking.

The 1990's inaugurate the beginning of processes that proved crucial for the way in which films are done since the 2000's. The processes that have taken place in film in Israel have much to do with film's reaction to the rise of television on the one hand and to the transnationalization of production and consumption on the other. Television has transitioned from having one state channel as late as 1992, to having cable television with as much as fifty channels a few years later. It is precisely this growth of commercial television that has profoundly changed the way that films are produced in Israel. Israeli audiences, who have become saturated with media offering, cannot be the source of recovering the cost of film production, let alone generate profits. In the early 2000's filmmakers eventually converged on a new model of production and distribution that relies on international audiences. In this respect the early 2000's represent a breakthrough for Israeli films. Films like *Late Marriage* (2001), *Broken Wings* (2002), *Nina's Tragedies* (2003), *Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi* (2003), *Campfire* (2004), *Turn left at the End of the World* (2004), and *Sweet Mud* (2006) won both critical acclaim and success abroad. These transnationally produced and consumed films possess markedly different characteristics in content and form than either Bourekas or New Sensibility.

Several scholars have commented on the way transnational films are called to perform exotic otherness for western audiences, However I believe that many of their most important characteristics have been missed (For basic approaches see Ďurovičová and Newman; Ezra and Rowden). One characteristic that is often missed is the prevalence of coming of age narratives. Film like *Broken Wings*, *Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi*, *Turn left at the End of the World* and *Sweet Mud* all revolve around an almost identical situation, with subjectivity represented in the same kind. They involve a protagonist who has lost patriarchal protection and authority and who is pitted against a hostile environment. These coming of age narratives have a sensitive protagonist at their center. This protagonist experiences a major loss (usually loss of a protecting father, or sense of place) but then ultimately overcomes the difficulties that arise. The episodes revolve around first experiences of sexuality, conflict with authority, as well as the formation of values and personal identity.

For western audiences coming of age stories are an ideal vehicle for getting a grasp on the 'foreignness' of the place. Foreignness of place is exemplified through the major life episodes that are supposed to create identity and character. Other prevalent type of contemporary Israeli films deals explicitly with presenting the uniqueness of Israel as seen from a western liberal point of view. These films deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict or tense Palestinian/Israeli co-existence like *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), *Lemon Tree* (2008), *Lebanon* (2009), *Bethlehem* (2013) or *Dancing Arabs* (2014) or army experience like *Zero Motivation* (2014). Alternatively, films view the particularity of Israel not through the Arab-Israeli tension but through Jewish religious life. Films such as *Kadosh* (1999), *Hahesder* (2000) *Ushpizin* (2004) like *Fill the Void* (2012), *Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem* (2014), promise to transport us into the foreign experience of religious community or living under religious authority. As can be seen, many of these films articulate both orientations at the same time. Films like *Zero Motivation*, *Dancing Arabs*, *Turn Left at the End of the World*, *Bethlehem*, and *Sweet Mud* all articulate a coming of age story that takes place within a specific milieu that highlights a particularity of Israeli life such as the Army, Arab-Jewish relations, immigration, and communal life in the Kibbutz. What is often missed in treatments of transnational cinema is that though this cinema aims to bring the 'foreign' customs, situations and institutions it is often dismissive and negative in its portrayal of them. Audiences are usually called to identify with the main protagonist quest for love against collective institutions (Kibbutz, Army, Institutional Judaism) that are deemed wholly repressive of the individual.

The films align themselves with their western and westernized middle-class audience's conceptions of individual rights and freedoms and against any type of group institution. They present a seeming paradox, staging foreign otherness in order to negate it. In their unreserved critique of all Israeli social institutions, these films indeed are not typically Israeli in their orientation. They are not Israeli in the sense that most Israelis like most people everywhere have a complex both positive and negative sets of beliefs regarding such institutions and the culture that they partake in. Indeed, most Israelis watching these films in contrast to western audiences have a rich experience in one or more these institutions. Israelis especially working-class Israelis often hold the IDF, Kibbutzim or the religious institutions in high esteem seeing them as protecting the state, ensuring justice or productivity, equality and doing God's will and ensuring the continuation of the Jewish people. That is, they see these institutions as enabling certain forms of life and existences and certain public goods as well as sometimes detrimental to individuals. Israeli films from the 2000's thus draw a distorted picture in which culture and institutions as seen as strictly oppressive and coercive.

One-sided representation of local social institutions makes sense only if films are being made with the 'gaze of the western other' in mind. Indeed, these films produce and bring to life the exoticism associated with an army base, a religious court, a faraway settlement or an ultra-orthodox community. Regular everyday urban Israeli existence is rarely represented. From the global logic of international audience, it makes little sense to produce an Israeli film like Uri Zohar's *Big Eyes* (1974) or *Three Days and a Child* (1967), films that relate essentially romantic or sexual concerns in a nondescript secular Tel-Aviv or Jerusalem. Settings in contemporary films are to appeal in their exoticism to western audiences' desire to see a uniquely "Israeli" film, that is to be transported into another kind of world, other than their metropolitan existence. These worlds are then judged and negated by one criterion alone, their coercive effects on the romantic desire of the individual. The romantic desire of the individual serves as an exemplification and affective point of identification with individualism in general (Interestingly and in contrast to many Hollywood films, Israeli films never represent a kind of ambitious possessive individualism. This is perhaps because Zionist ideology articulates subjects as collectively recuperating victims of anti-Semitism, and not as individually ambitious. In many ways an ambitious, possessive individualism in films is reserved to the western subject. For the concept and first ideological articulation of possessive individualism, see Crawford Brough Macpherson and Frank Cunningham, *The Political Theory*). It is this individualism that rejects and criticizes any form of collectivity.

The theme of arranged marriage figures prominently in Israeli films. *Fill the Void* for example tells the story of Shira Mendelman who is pressured by her orthodox family and community to marry her older sister's husband following the death of her sister. The trope of forced marriage makes its rather predictable use in critiquing orthodox society. *Late Marriage* tells of Zaza, a thirty-one-year-old man who is being pressured by his traditionalist Georgian Jewish parents to break up his relationship with a thirty-four-year-old divorcee, in order to marry her to someone more suitable in his parent's eyes. Even when group identity does not wholly suppress love and romance it tries to undermine it. *Campfire* for example tells the story of a widow who wants to join a new religious nationalist settlement in the West Bank. The same group recommends that she date and marry a spoilt and repulsive Jewish cantor. At the end she finds romantic interest in a bus driver who changes her perception regarding the said group, and then chooses to leave the group. In these films groups and collectives are subtly or bluntly associated with lack of fulfillment of the individual.

Many of the films, can be said to reaffirm an explicit kind of individualism. *Gett*, for example, relates the story of Vivaine Amsaalm who has been married for over twenty years with Elisha, and is trying to obtain a *Gett* (religiously sanctioned divorce) from her husband unwilling to grant her a divorce and who hopes to keep her married to him. The film articulates a powerful critique of the rabbinate and marriage laws in Israel, but it also presents Vivaine as a largely passive victim of this institution. Set in 1974, the film *Sweet Mud* relates the childhood story of Dvir who has turned thirteen and who lives with his mentally unstable mother Miri in a Kibbutz. At one-point, Miri invites her lover, a charming older Swiss man over to the Kibbutz, but the Kibbutz members ultimately turn against him. He is forced to leave, and Miri experiences a breakdown during a public ceremony. She publicly curses all the members of the Kibbutz and is then forcibly hospitalized. She ultimately commits suicide with the reluctant help of her son Dvir. Throughout the film the members of the Kibbutz are represented as morally corrupt, they engage in bestiality as well as frequent adultery. They violently reject the outsider and represses true love, driving Miri to her death. In films such as these community is represented as harsh and repressive. In these films the orthodox community, national religious groups, religious courts, the army as well as Kibbutzim are represented as wholly negative.

I do not argue that these groups are negative or positive in reality. Many traditional groups exhibit an authoritarian power structure, rigid stratification, and discriminatory practices against woman and others. My argument is that the negative representation of these institutions arises from the material production and consumption of these films and not from any truly critical engagement with them. These films are never nuanced, complex or even realistic in their treatment of these institutions and crucially they never articulate alternate political mobilizations aside from the romantic couple or a rebuilt nuclear family. Thus, they seem to say that any type of group belonging is negative and one's best course of action is to exit and leave. The spectator need never come to term with the social capital, enjoyment and benefits that these institutions bring to Israelis. As such these films never explain why people participate in them. Instead of being both critical of these institutions, showing how they engage people and revealing options for transformation, they merely have the protagonist exit them. A more nuanced and more thoughtful critical approach would have enabled these films to critique social institutions in Israel while at the same time to challenge the individualist and isolationist aspects of contemporary neo-liberal culture in the west. It is good to remind ourselves of how problematic the erosion of groups and institutions can be. A good example of a critique of the loss of social capital in the U.S is Robert D

Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*. Some of the processes that Putnam describes, for example the decline in political and community participation in political parties and unions due to the technological "individualizing" of leisure time via television and internet, are probably as relevant to Israel as they are to the U.S. In general it might be good to contrast foreign film's harsh critique of social institutions, with the literary, philosophical and sociological representations of the problems associated with the breakup and dissolution of social institutions.

Groups and institutions in Israeli films are presented as strangely ineffective in the formation of the person who is deemed aloof and wholly unaffected by them. Individuals in Israeli films are never presented as being influenced or socialized in any significant way by various groups. In movies such as *Bonjour Monsieur Shlomy*, *Broken Wings*, *Waltz with Bashir*, *Sweet Mud* the individual is always represented as a sensitive outsider, in many ways unformed by his or her society. In fact, these films evince a wholesale negativity about Israeli socialization itself, almost as if the only person worthy of identification is the one who is perceived to be unrealistically untouched by society. If a person seems to follow the ideals of society at the beginning of a film, they will be sure to turn to a more individualist path at the end of the film, *Campfire* and *Sweet Mud* are paradigmatic in this respect. Both films end by having the protagonist leave the group altogether. It is characteristic that there is no attempt at transforming institutions, at no point do protagonists aim to significantly change their groups, they just leave.

Using the theoretical terms suggested by political theorist Albert O. Hirschman, one can say protagonists in Israeli films partake in "exit," a classic strategy of unsatisfied actors in the market economy and not in exercising political "voice," a strategy of change and participation in political communities (Hirschman *Exit*). In these films characters are never represented as partaking in political action. There is no representation or valorization of engaged criticism, of the being of the group, and against the group at the same time, of an active will to participate and change (For the explication of engaged criticism rather than detachment and 'exit' see Walzer, *The Company*. The identification with the protagonist on the screen in a sense reaffirms and mirrors a depoliticized market, "exit" oriented subjectivity of the audience.

Israeli main stream films only seem to represent the Other (the orthodox yeshiva young man, the IDF soldier etc.). Ultimately, this Other is simply a negation of Israeli institutions themselves and is used to affirm the ideology of individualism. Ultimately these films engage in a kind of opaque affirmation of the established beliefs and the positive mirroring of the audience itself. The self-affirmation achieved through the presentation of something that is on the surface deemed foreign has the added advantage of not being too direct as to make audiences desire for self-affirmation directly acknowledged (In "Der Dichter und das Phantasieren," quite inaccurately translated as "Creative Writing and Day Dreaming," Freud comments on the way in which popular literature represents fantasies of individual financial gain and sexual conquest but at the same time needs to use the writer's technique in order to hide this very fulfillment of fantasy from the audience who might be turned off by it if it will be represented in too blunt a form (Freud 436-42). In several ways many of the more successful Israeli films reaffirm rather than challenge worldviews and dispositions of international professional audiences. Often the professional viewer's own dispositions are thus represented in heightened more courageous form. The two films mentioned above for example, *Campfire* and *Sweet Mud*, make "exit" much more 'heroic' than it usually is in contemporary society. "Exit" is represented as a heroic act of refusing and leaving a repressive and punishing collective, rather than the de facto banal default action, the audience's exit from a consumer or job market.

The default of "exit" over "voice" is predicated on a market oriented social habitus. Even a sophisticated realist film like *Gett* is quintessentially a film about "exit," about a heroic attempt to leave a repressive institution. The heroine is suffering in her marriage and is seeking a divorce from a religious court that is attuned to the husband, an example of "exit" per excellence. While we may certainly read the film as a feminist critique of religious patriarchy, we should also be aware, that here again, we have a model of a passive victimized subject who mainly wants out. One could have imagined a film about an active political subject who is trying to fight for instating civil marriage laws in a country that only recognizes orthodoxy. However, the preferred subject position in Israeli European co-productions is that of the politically unaware passive victim. Films in Israel have thus internalized the gaze of the metropolitan center that often prefers images depoliticized victimization rather than images of empowerment. We are ever more likely to see images for instance of poverty or gender discrimination in the Middle East or for that matter in Africa and India than images of various kinds of political organization.

Images of institutional victimization evoke a kind of paternalism among western viewers arousing compassion and reaffirming middle class, professional ideology. Images that represent political action

and empowerment might signal economic and political instability and thus are anxiety provoking. To use Homi Bhabha's terms, protagonists in Israeli films engage in mimicry. Protagonists aspire to western kind of individualism. Mainstream Israeli films express the European desire to have a reformed, recognizable other, a subject of difference, who is almost the same as the European (individualist liberal in this case) but not quite. This is in line with both internalized perspectives of artistic and knowledge elites in Israel itself. Israeli films indeed represent a protagonist who is almost the same as the European but are under the sway of non-liberal coercive institutions.

The Israeli protagonist is thus essentially a partial presence, under tutelage, partaking imperfectly in the representation of western authoritative discourse. In this way Israeli films today fulfill the contemporary transnational niche market of world cinema (See James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World*). Aside from Hong Kong, India and Egyptian popular cinema, most national cinemas and especially art films depend on export to western audiences. Israeli films thus exist in the same rubric that films like *A Separation* (Iran, 2011) *Goodbye Lenin* (Germany, 2003), *City of God* (Brazil, 2002), *Bad Education* (Spain, 2004), *The Lives of Others* (Germany, 2006), *No Man's Land* (Bosnia, 2001) do. All of these films mediate relatively unique and particular social and political problems associated with their respective countries; communism in East Germany, poverty in Brazil, repressive religious education in Spain etc. Though these films are usually about political situations they are then narrated through personal stories of depoliticized subjects. Protagonists are never part of political groups or even reveal political world-view of characters. Such films would certainly never show an even slightly sympathetic guardian of the Islamic revolution, a caring orthodox religious leader, a fighting feminist or a socialist or even a liberal party member. Depoliticization of film subjectivities is evident in almost all Israeli 'fiction' films regardless of their topic. Protagonists seldom engage in political action nor do they express or own up to ideologies or worldviews. This is deeply unrealistic since it is nearly impossible to live in Israel without a political world view.

One of the main strategies that are used to elude politics and the representation of political subjects is through the perspective of trauma or post trauma. A film like *Waltz with Bashir* for example deals with the massacre that took place in Sabra and Shatila in the war of Lebanon of 1982. The film represents the massacre mainly through the perspective of the post-traumatic stress disorder of the main protagonist due to his indirect involvement in the massacre, a condition that has recently come to be conceptualized under the term perpetrator trauma (See Raya Morag, "Perpetrator Trauma" 93-133). The film is built around interviews that aim to reconstruct what his friends from his army unit experienced in Lebanon. If motivations for participating in the war arise, they do so only non-politically, they are not even tied to a basic kind of national worldview. The main protagonist, army unit friend, Carmi Canaan tells him that he wanted to go to combat unit to prove that he was not a Wuss (*laphlaph*) and to get girls. The other characters do not express themselves as political subjects and almost never comment on political issues. While the film is an animated quasi documentary, there is no reference to Israel's biggest anti-war protest that came as a result of Sabra and Shatila. While the animation itself is motivated both by costs of producing a non-animated war film as well as by a kind contemporary aesthetic. Raz Yosef has commented that the film reveals the decline of national collective memory in Israel and analyzes it through the perspective of perpetrator trauma (311-26). While this analysis is certainly productive, it eludes the international rubric of world cinema that shapes representations of depoliticized, and traumatized and largely disempowered subjects.

The film *Lebanon* (2009) is likewise devoted to the first Lebanon war. The film describes the first day of fighting the war from the exclusive point of view of a team inside the tank. Like *Waltz with Bashir* the soldiers participate in violence unleashed on civilians as well as make mistakes that result in an Israeli soldier being killed. Like *Waltz with Bashir*, whose main motivation for reconstructing his experience has been the personal narrow interest in post-traumatic stress disorder of himself and his friends, *Lebanon's* protagonist's narrow perspective is dramatized and symbolized through the use of the periscope, a veritable metaphor for limited, decontextualized and personal vision. Both films stylistically mediate experience away from a broad and properly political understanding of the context of the war as well as representation of political subjects.

Perhaps one of the films that epitomizes the western gaze more than any other recent Israeli film is Eitan Fox's and *Walk on Water*. *Walk on Water* is the story of Eyal, an Israeli Mossad agent whose wife has recently committed suicide. As a result of her suicide the Mossad assigns him a 'soft task' of finding an aging Nazi war criminal and assassinating him. Eyal's task is to pose as a tour guide and befriend Pia and Axel, the former Nazi's adult grandchildren, who are on a visit to Israel. Axel is a warm-hearted, friendly and spiritual gay schoolteacher. Eyal takes him around Israel: they visit a Kibbutz and the Sea of Galilee, they bathe in the Dead Sea, shower and make a camp fire together and visit the old city in Jerusalem. Macho and emotionally suppressed, Eyal eventually opens up to Axel. At the same time,

however, he is also frustrated by the assignment that he sees as a waste of time. Axel eventually hooks up with a Palestinian lover. Eyal is angry to learn both that Axel is gay and that furthermore he sleeps with Palestinians. Axel has thus failed to 'become' a good Zionist heteronormative subject. Eyal is disappointed and distant and Axel flies back home to Germany. Eyal's boss insists that Eyal "finish the job" and kill the old Nazi. He too then flies to Germany for Axel's father birthday party. At the party, the aging, Nazi grandfather is suddenly introduced, flown in from South America. Eyal attempts to kill him, but he is unable to go through with it, he breaks down crying and hugging Axel and says, "I cannot kill anymore." Two years later we see Eyal married to Axel's sister Pia, a happy new father living on the Kibbutz. Like some of the other films discussed we have an individualist protagonist, almost like but not quite the western hero (a secret agent) who through a kind of process of a late coming of age, exists a coercive institution.

Walk on Water perhaps surpasses many of the other films discussed here, in exemplifying the gaze of the metropolitan other. The film explicitly articulates all the particularities and political issues that 'explain' Israel to the western audience. The main protagonist is the son of holocaust survivors who embodies the Zionist answer, through the masculine ideal of a Mossad agent. Though he is a tough Mossad agent that assassinates terrorists, he himself is a victimized subject. He is victimized as an extension of his survivor parents, through the inexplicable suicide of his wife, and through being traumatized by his own violence. Eyal goes through a therapeutic process with Axel: from being a tightly 'closed' and repressed agent, to being 'open' to the gay and German other and ultimately founding a new Israeli-German family. Under the benign influence of Axel who represents a new post-world war two Germany, our protagonist learns to become a more liberal subject. The film combines explaining Israel while at the same time 'curing' the Israeli subject. It entails moving him toward a liberal post-national and post socialist position. In many ways the film reveals more explicitly the protagonist's development in most of the films discussed. An exit from enclosed, 'total' institutions and groups that are represented as coercive and violent, toward a worldly and open individualism.

The segment of life chosen to be represented, the narrative trajectory in films, takes place between being a sensitive, victimized or somewhat alienated part of the group, though increasing suffering and hardship under it, until the final exist from the group. Choosing this particular segment and narrativizing it for foreign audiences eludes different lessons that might be learned if these films concentrated on other slices of the Israeli experience.

An interesting and rather rare contrast to *Walk on Water* in which 'exit' is viewed negatively is the film *Metallic Blues*. *Metallic Blues* is a film about two Israeli used car salesmen Shmuel and Siso who for a modest price buys a rare 1985 Lincoln Continental limousine. After reviewing a publication by the corporate German dealership, they believe that the car could net them as much as €50,000. They sail with the vehicle to Germany in order to sell it. During the trip Shmuel whose parents were Holocaust survivors, mentally deals with post-holocaust Germany. His companion Siso, a Mizrahi Jew of modest means, unlike his companion, does not know English and feels generally disempowered. The protagonists leave Israel and attempt to "make it" in the new Germany. Shmuel is at first enthusiastic about the new Germany but is then troubled more and more by the memory of the Holocaust. Shmuel and Siso fail to sell the car which is offered only €5,000 by the German dealership. Throughout the film the limousine gets progressively ruined, an obvious metonymy for characters sense of loss and inadequacy in the new Germany. At the end of the film Shmuel in his frustration starts ruining the limousine when a policeman pulls up. Haunted by the past he gets into a fight with him. Exhausted they ultimately stop fighting and Shmuel says "We go home now ok? Now...we have home now. It's not like it was before understand?" After explaining his post-holocaust condition the policemen lets him go. The film ends with a need for home and family after globalizing post-holocaust subjectivity has failed. The protagonists have left Israel, made an 'exit' to the liberal post-war Germany, but the process has been a failure and has only resulted only in a new heightened awareness of the very need of national home land. Using Gill Deleuze's terms one can say that the protagonists have been deterritorializing by going to Germany and then reterritorialized.

It is useful to compare Shmuel and Siso's trip to Germany with Eyal's. Both films are buddy trip films (like *Thelma and Louise*, *Lethal Weapon* etc.), both journeys are undertaken as a kind post-nationalist pilgrimage to the paradoxically Metropole 'heart of darkness'. Both have Germany signifying liberal post-nationalism, while at the same time the Holocaust marks the origins, the need for and the legitimacy of Zionism. While in *Walk on Water* new Germany acts as a therapeutic agent, in *Mettalic Blues* it is strangely retraumatizing. Both provide international audiences with an 'explanation' of the Israeli subject, though they differ in affective tone, they practically differ in genre. *Walk on Water* is almost a comedy, with a new successful German-Israeli marriage at the end, and a transition from violence of Mossad to the fruitfulness and productivity of the Kibbutz. While *Metallic Blues* affirms friendship, at the

end of the film the protagonists, have only losses to show for their German adventure. Though the outcomes are very different these films are similar in representing their protagonists as essentially victimized by their circumstances and lacking in true agency. On the surface Eyal seems to represent the epitome of agency, first being a Mossad *agent*, and then as tour guide, a person who *leads*, guides through Israel. More deeply, however, Eyal is mostly lead by the death of his wife, by his Mossad operators, and by Axel and Pia. It is he who undergoes change under the guidance of others. Ultimately it is Axel who "taught" him to leave the Mossad for something more productive and less violent.

In *Metallic Blues*, agency is frustrated near the very beginning, the minute our protagonists know that their car will not sell for the price they imagined, but more importantly Shmuel is beset by the victimization of the past – the Holocaust, though he himself is not a survivor. Siso is wholly incapacitated by his lack of ability to comprehend and communicate with his surroundings. Both films show that lack of agency and victimization leads to an affirmation of Zionist ideology. *Walk on Water* ends with the protagonist taking care of his new baby on a Kibbutz and talking about the season of "picking melons", while *Metallic Blues* with Shmuel's statement that "now we have a home." As was claimed above most contemporary export-oriented world cinema appeases the western gaze, it presents subjects who are victimized by particular non-western circumstances.

In many ways these films work in complimentary fashion to Hollywood blockbusters that make us identify with protagonists whose agency is larger-than-life. Contemporary world cinema often represents its protagonists in exotic and difficult circumstances and coercive institutions. Western metropolitan viewers including those in Israel who assume the same viewpoint, see the institutional critique and protagonists' ultimate 'exit' from these institutions as reaffirming their way of life and their sense of self. However, in contrast to many Iranian, Russian, Turkish and other art films *Walk on Water* and *Metallic Blues* partially reaffirm some of these same institutions. *Walk on Water* reaffirms the Kibbutz and a kind of open international leftist Zionism, while *Metallic Blues* reaffirms having a homeland for the Jewish people that is Zionism in general. Both films essentially reaffirm Zionism in general while negating and critiquing particular institutions. This mixed affirmation of Zionism as a whole while negating its religious, socialist, and military institutions is probably due to the liminal space that Israel occupies in the western imaginary both part and not part of the West.

These films present the institution of the state of Israel as both justified but paradoxically in need of explanation and active defense. At the same time however they fulfill the rubric of a critique of non-liberal institutions substantiated by all foreign films. Regardless of the specific complexities involved with the representation of nationalism, Israeli films are subject to a disciplinary matrix, they are scripted with the internalized gaze of those who decide on funding of European co-production as well as with western audiences in mind. European coproduction has provided critical funding for Israeli films. However, it has done this with the cost of the internalization of the European gaze that has placed very strong constraints on Israeli filmmaking on the level of form as well as content.

Perhaps a good way of approaching formal constraints is to start with script writing and use of language. One of the most striking features of contemporary Israeli films is the fact that most of them are multilingual. *Gett* and *Turn left at the End of the World* have significant portions in French, *Walk on Water* is in Hebrew English and German, *Live and Become* Amharic, Hebrew and French, *Late Marriage* Judaeo-Georgian and Hebrew, *The Human Resources Manager* Hebrew, English, Romanian. This multilingualism represents a move away from use of Israeli cinema in the service of Hebraist Zionism. Israel is a multilingual society comprised of many immigrants whose mother tongue is not Hebrew, as well as a large Arab-speaking minority. A multilingual screenplay is both more real but also probably indicates a self-assurance with the strength of Hebrew itself. Hebrew is no longer a language that needs to be 'pushed' in order to become a majority language. These films also represent increased contact with the rest of the world that comes with globalization, many of these films are set both in Israel and abroad. Multilingualism in these films and the use of foreign languages, especially European languages, also fulfills the "European element" requirement. This is a requirement that many agencies that fund international coproduction based in France and Germany make. Multilingualism involves greater freedom for Israeli filmmakers in the use of language in some respects however in other aspects use of language is more constrained, less playful and free, and represents the non-autonomy of the national subject in times of globalization. Internalization of Israeli films has placed strong constraints on the use of language. One of the ways in which the internalized international spectator effects and constrains language use in films is toward simplification and standardization of language in anticipation of translation and subtitling. Again contrasting today's films with some of the most popular films of the seventies reveals this well.

Perhaps a good place to start is the very title of these films. *Late Marriage*, *Broken Wings*, *Nina's Tragedies*, *Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi*, *Campfire*, *Turn left at the End of the World*, *Sweet Mud*, *Lebanon*,

The Human Resources Manager, *Lemon Tree*, *Dancing Arabs* are very simple titles with no difficult connotations. *Walk on Water* and *Bethlehem* have explicitly Christian connotations they are made for international western audience and highlight Israel as the land of birth of Christianity. The title of 1976's film *Givat Halfon Eina Ona* is more local layered and difficult to translate. It is both a filmic allusion to a previous 1954 Israeli war film called "Hill 24 does not answer" but exchanging Hill 24 with Halfon, a Mizrahi name that at the same time has the same root as words like to exchange (הליפיון) that is a business exchange. The rich rhyme "Eina Ona" is also lost in translation as well. In fact, I did not find an official translation of the title of the film to English. However more than the language of the title, the language of the film itself is very difficult to translate. Here are two exemplary utterances of one character, Sergio Constanza:

"ועכשיו גבירותי ורבותי, הרשו לי להציג לפניכם זמרת מהשורה הראשונה, כיסא 23, חחח... זמרת עם, רקדנית המדינה ואקרובטיק השטחים, סילביה המשתוללת!"
"אתה קיבלת מה קוראים בשפה מדיצינה 'זפטה שמש'... אתה צריך לעשות אמבטיה חול"

Here are some by Victor Hason:

"בור ועם הספר!"
"היד פתוח והפנקס רושמת."
"חן חן למתחנפן."
"אין צבא בעולם שיעצור אותי מלעשות פרצלציה מהפרצוף של הקונצרטינה הזו."

To provide a detailed analysis of these quotes goes well beyond the scope of this essay but perhaps a few words are in order. These witticisms have become so popular that for about thirty years they have been massively quoted in Israeli daily life. They involve rich general, cultural, and political references including knowledge of sayings from the bible, as well specific rituals and events and persons in Israel. They creatively transform idiomatic speech, army slang and Mizrahi or East European migrant sociolect. It is partially for this reason that they themselves have become popular idioms and sayings often quoted by people who are unaware of their original context. It is this kind of use of language that we are unlikely to see in Israeli films since the 2000's. This kind of intimate tying up of language to place and milieu that appeals to the real particularities of Israeli culture is unlikely to materialize. Screenwriters are unlikely to use this language, they are likely to think that the appeal of such use of language is too narrow, that its witticism work like an insider's joke. Language is an often overlooked in the formal analysis of films though it is one of the main ways in which narrative progress and characters are defined. Wit, irony, sarcasm, irreverently comic or surprising filmic dialogue is one of the reasons people watch films and remember them. Audiences often like to impersonate characters using memorable, vivid and idiomatic lines, such lines are rarely written when writers and filmmakers have internalized European audience for their films. Exoticization often entails loss of intimacy.

One can look at the highly inventive language of *Givat Halfon Eina Ona* as symbolizing how very different films of the 60's and 70's sought to represent Israeli experience from the way they do today. Like a metaphor for a new Israeli society a rich playful colloquial Hebrew is 'created' in the desert, were protagonists are doing their reserve army duty. The main protagonist for instance, Sergio Constanza, is a Romanian immigrant and conmen who has failed to report for reserve duty. The fact that Hebrew is his second or third language only makes him more linguistically inventive. Today's films by contrast are likely to use standardized language both when using Hebrew and for the other languages that they use. Aside from the pressure to use standardized language in anticipation of translation and subtitling, another major constraint on Israeli films can be articulated as the constraint of classical narrative cinema. Classical narrative cinema uses cinematography, editing and sound solely to advance narrative effects. These main effects are suspense regarding rival scenarios for the future (e.g. will the protagonist get a divorce), curiosity regarding gaps of the past (e.g. what happened in the Sabra and Shatila?) and surprise (e.g. sudden suicide of a soldier) (See Sternberg 115–22). These narrative effects are enhanced by securing a strong identification with a likeable main character, whose exploits we are to follow. Films like *Bethlehem*, *Gett*, or *Zero Motivation* take every measure to make us identify with the main characters whose motivation are clear both to themselves and to audience. These motivations are frustrated and repressed by the hostile social situation that the main protagonist finds herself/himself in. Contemporary Israeli film thus have simplified their main characters psychology and created an unambiguous motivation and plot line.

Perhaps this is the greatest difference between today's Israeli cinema and Israeli New Sensibility of the 1970's. Even popular cult classics like Uri Zohar's *Peeping Toms* had its protagonist wonder and be

frustrated by their own sexual desire. In retrospect the main character of *Peeping Toms*, Gutte seems even more tormented by his masculinity and what he feels like the relentless injection to materialize his sexual desire. When we watch them, we are not watching exclusively "good" characters (like the main characters of contemporary Israeli cinema) that are then victimized by circumstances. We are watching protagonists whom we feel an ambivalence toward, an ambivalence that has only increased though the time that has eclipsed from the time of the original film. Mainstream contemporary Israeli films by contrast are constrained in the way they present their main protagonists. Even a short sketch like overview of Israeli protagonists confirms this. A Palestinian boy who is pressured into working with the Mossad, a woman who cannot obtain a divorce, a female soldier sent to do meaningless work in an army base in the desert, a non-Jewish Ethiopian boy who manages to be included in those who make Aliya to Israel, a young boy growing up in the Kibbutz with a mentally ill mother, a soldier suffering from post-trauma, a young family whose father has died etc. These are protagonists who we are called to identify with unreservedly. We are never made to feel the kind of realistic mixture of feelings that characterized the best of New Sensibility or for that matter many of our real-life feelings toward real people. While contemporary Israeli films represent what can be seen as an explosion in diversity in form and content in many ways, they are successful precisely to the degree that they confirm to contemporary rubric of 'foreign' films.

Contemporary "foreign" films answer to a post-political or non-political subjectivity. Political subjectivity that is intent on a distance and mimicry at the same time. Distance because filmic subjects in 'foreign' films are those for whom professional audiences are asked to be compassionate towards. They are never their equal nor do they threaten the broad status quo. They are never politically or even economically empowered subjects. It would be very rare to see a successful hi-tech protagonist from Brazil or empowered activist from Africa. In demonstrating their affliction under their own corrosive and 'totalitarian' political institutions these protagonists reaffirm and mimic the non-political subjectivity of their intended audience. Though this kind of political subjectivity originates in the post-war West or more recently in the shift away from sovereign political control of the economy undertaken since the late seventies, it has become a world-wide phenomenon. The professional class in Israel of course shares many of the characteristics of this subjectivity and thus can enjoy and appreciate this kind of self-objectification or self-exoticization.

To summarize, this rubric or model has definite characteristics and at the same time is distinctly different from films of the 60's and 70's. This model reaffirms western post-political ideology by representing a depoliticized subject who is subject to the coercive influence of institutions like the IDF, the Rabbinate, Haredi communities, or the Kibbutz. This individual, presented as a victim of circumstances, often exits these institutions thus valorizing metropolitan conceptions of freedom. In terms of communication this most important institution of language, Israeli transnational films, often present audiences with a lively multilingualism escaping the ideological dictates of presenting narrative in Hebrew only. What has been lost though is a colloquial, creative and allusion rich Hebrew that is intimately related to place and experience and that can only appeal to Israeli audiences as well as protagonists who are morally complex and show agency.

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