

Trauma, Apocalypse, and Ethics in Israeli Theater

Zahava Caspi

*Ben Gurion University of the Negev*

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



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural 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>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

## Recommended Citation

Caspi, Zahava. "Trauma, Apocalypse, and Ethics in Israeli Theater." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1870>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1870)

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

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto: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 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](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 14 Issue 1 (March 2012) Article 10**  
**Zahava Caspi,**  
**"Trauma, Apocalypse, and Ethics in Israeli Theater"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/10>>

---

**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (2012)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article "Trauma, Apocalypse, and Ethics in Israeli Theater" Zahava Caspi traces the traumatic experience as a point of departure in apocalyptic plays in Israeli literature. Caspi argues that in Israeli apocalyptic plays a critical gap opens up between the fictional narrative that ends with destruction and the theatrical apparatus that creates a sense of continuity. The theatrical text delivers a message to the audience inviting them to increase their engagement with and accountability for continuity not merely during the theatrical event, but more significantly, once the performance is over. The play's moral imperative to provide a "positive" ending to the apocalyptic narrative in the world outside the auditorium thus counters the effect of its ending on the stage. Caspi postulates that it is the active involvement with the play by its audience what makes theater a more ethical medium than any other.

## Zahava CASPI

### Trauma, Apocalypse, and Ethics in Israeli Theater

The apocalyptic mindset — as a worldview, theology, and/or poetics — and its universal, cross-cultural, and trans-historical presence is powerful and durable (see, e.g., Funkenstein). While it might have once seemed that within the Western world that has undergone an accelerated process of secularization since the end of the nineteenth century, this conceptual theological matrix would have disappeared and become irrelevant, it appears to be alive as powerfully today as ever. Some even argue that the arrival of modernity ought to be considered apocalyptic from the moment that Cartesian philosophy with its inherent doubt made its debut (see Altizer; Kermode). Thomas Altizer even argues that there is no central literary creation in the twentieth century which is not apocalyptic from Rilke through Kafka to Joyce and Beckett.

In the study at hand I attempt to trace the apocalyptic process on a continuum that extends from traumatic experience as a point of departure for apocalyptic literature to ethics as its intent and *telos*, focusing on the dramatic genre and its realization in theater. I argue that even if one can trace the constitution of apocalyptic literature to post-traumatic effects, revealing this literature to be clearly descended from past trauma, the purposes for which it is written are ethical and political (for an example of this, see, e.g., Abdelfattah; on ethics, trauma, and laughter, see Feuer; for a bibliography of Holocaust studies including work on Holocaust trauma, see Lisiak, Vasvári, Tötösy de Zepetnek). In its quest to prevent a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions, this literature can therefore be characterized as future oriented. Contemporary secular apocalyptic literature is by and large of the dystopian kind, but the absence of utopian scenarios does not necessarily indicate utter despair or utter relinquishing of any aspirations for a continued existence. On the contrary, such aspirations are deeply embedded in the dystopian vision in its images, the situations it describes, and especially in the relations that the text establishes with its addressees.

The concept of apocalypse stems from early Judeo-Christian theology. Most apocalyptic writings contain an eschatological element. Even today, the concept of apocalypse usually refers to notions about the end and yet definitions of the concept are far from unequivocal. The chief difficulty lies in the fact that the term "apocalypse" does not refer to one phenomenon, but is associated with several phenomena: a particular literary corpus (as a genre), a particular type of religious imagination (as a worldview), and a particular group in society (as a social entity) (see Cook 22). The history of apocalyptic thought appears ultimately to be a matter of interaction between the three (Kermode, "Apocalypse" 86). Although I focus on apocalypse only as a literary theatrical genre, confining my discussion in this way does not obviate the difficulties involved in defining the theme. Frank Kermode asserts that every classic literary narrative (event, climax, and denouement) is in fact modeled after the apocalyptic narrative. In this respect, he argues, there is no difference between literature as a whole and the apocalyptic genre, as a unique instantiation. The literature of apocalypse is based on the human psychological need for closure, a "sense of ending," the sense that life never provides us and which we therefore aspire to in our imaginary constructions and frameworks (see Kermode, *The Sense* 3-31). Despite my own reservations concerning such a decisive generalization about literature — because the narrative frames Kermode points to do not conform to modern and post-modern narrative phenomena — the difficulties presented above testify to a true catch in attempting to define the genre of apocalypse. I wish, therefore, to adopt the position of Stephen Cook who resists the tendency to seek an essentialist core in apocalyptic literature and to compile a list of requisite characteristics. According to Cook, the texts belonging to this literature should be treated as having a "sharing a family resemblance. A complex set of common features and differences interconnect family members, but they are not necessary, fixed features or any ultimate essence" (22). Therefore, definition of the genre cannot be based on one dominant element or theme that differentiates it from others, but on a cluster of features, some of which can also be identified in other genres as well (Collins 9).

Mas'ud Hamadan suggests that we view the choice of genre as a reflection a particular *Zeitgeist* and therefore as a "psycho-cultural portrait" of an era (42). Experiences which catalyze apocalyptic belief are oppression, despair, instability, disaster, general chaos, and the loss of collective identity —

all of which have become stronger in our age (Kermode, "Apocalypse" 5), especially after World War II and the Holocaust. These experiences are epitomized in the advent of nuclear power. The actual deployment of the atomic bomb by the United States in World War II translated the technical possibility of such a threat into a realistic scenario and proved that the danger was not only theoretical: "the bomb itself soon became the source and icon of a contemporary dystopian temper – its main argument, image and the cause of fear" (Klaic 88). Many people also experienced the terror attack against the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 as the "ghost shadow of apocalypse" (Cook 21). The growing presence of the apocalyptic genre and the increased attention to a variety of holocausts both in literature and in theater of the West, since the mid-twentieth century are a direct result of this reality and to my mind define the psycho-cultural portrait of our times. At the onset of the twenty-first century apocalyptic fears, hopes, and dreams of redemption are about everywhere.

While traditional apocalyptic texts tended to be positive – utopias, apocalypses of redemption which come in the wake of a period of destruction and ruin – modern secular literature, including Israeli literature of the past decades, creates dystopian texts that culminate with destruction. The literal meaning of the concept of "utopia," derived from the Greek, is "no-place" – a place that is nowhere, a signifier that has no signified in the real world but only as an object of desire. The concept of utopia appeared for the first time in Western literature in the early sixteenth century in the work of Thomas More and served since as the paradigm for similar imaginative works. Shelly Karin-Frank defines utopia as a blueprint of an ideal, egalitarian, and just society in the future, a society fundamentally different from that which exists in present conditions and that "realizes the utilitarian or moral good" (2; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). While utopia presents an ideal world governed by a positive set of values, dystopia (also called black utopia, negative utopia, or anti-utopia) – the opposite branch of the apocalyptic system – presents a grim hypothetical and imagined image of a future society and that is characterized generally by political tyranny, destruction, the hiding of god's face, etc. The term dystopia, coined in the nineteenth century by John Stewart Mill as an inversion of utopia, has a later provenance than its antecedent. The twentieth century has been marked, among other things, by a revival of black utopia (dystopias) on the one hand and by vehement assaults on utopias and utopianism on the other (Karin-Frank 7). Utopia and dystopia thus share a critical view of reality, but whereas utopia presents a vision of an alternative ideal to the present reality, dystopia only points to the inevitable unfolding of the present reality if this reality is to continue under present conditions.

Until the 1970s it was commonly held that apocalyptic ideas thrive against the background of grave crises in historical reality. Even today, most scholars agree that apocalypse is primarily a product of social and historical circumstances. However, new explanations have been added to traditional explanations introducing concepts from the fields of psychology, social criticism, political thought, cultural criticism, existentialist philosophy, and of course theology. I propose an additional explanation of the apocalyptic impulse, one that is contiguous with some of the above explanations or can even be inferred from them, but which has never been presented as an independent and distinct element within the array of meanings attached to the notion of apocalypse. An examination of the historical circumstances of the writing and production of apocalyptic dramas (all dystopian) in Israeli cultural production – as a case study – shows that the apocalyptic codes of Israeli theater function as visible symptoms of the trauma of the ontological and epistemological crisis that Israeli culture has undergone since the October 1973 War (Yom Kippur War) and so until the present day. Based on Israeli examples, I argue that apocalyptic texts are chiefly an outgrowth of the traumatic situation in which society finds itself and that they should be viewed as typical post-traumatic effects. The link between traumatic events on a mass scale and the rapid appearance of dystopian texts is not specific to Israel. Already in the post-traumatic era after World War I dystopian dramas began to appear in European theaters. Such dramas made a link between the vision of the imminent end of the world and weapons of mass destruction, which had been deployed for the first time in world history during that war. Thus, for example, in the second and third parts of Georg Kaiser's trilogy *Gas I* and *Gas II* (1918-20), the technology that had been created at first to benefit humankind becomes a source of repeated disasters, suffering, exploitation, and severe hardship. Following the atrocities of the Holocaust and the use of nuclear warfare in the World War II the dystopian imagination took off and more and more dramas that envisioned catastrophes were written. Some of these works, such as Friedrich

Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* (1962) placed scientists and the destructive power of their innovations at the center. Others, for example *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss (1964) — whose plot unfolds against the background of the French Revolution and its decadent aftermath — is an examination of the disasters expected to occur in the future through the prism of historical paradigms. A dystopian play from a later era, *End of the World* by Arthur Kopit (1984), is especially pessimistic and does not see any exit for humanity from the explosion that will bring the world to an end (see Klaic 84-100).

In Israeli theater, the apocalyptic genre, which occupies the fraught zone between disaster and redemption, is an acute post-traumatic reaction to the processes of disintegration of Israeli society's collective systems of identification since the October 1973 War, and that society's discarding of the original ideals upon which it was built. These dystopian plays were performed in Israeli theaters from the middle of the 1970s in two waves and that corresponded directly to traumatic events and circumstances Israeli society experienced. The first wave of plays began to appear a few years after the Yom Kippur War, but most were produced after the 1980s in the wake of two other wars, the first Lebanon War and the first Intifada. This phenomenon affirms Gad Kaynar's observation that in contemporary Israel "we are not dealing with ... Holocaust plays, but with plays about holocausts" (76) and explains the flourishing of apocalyptic plays in this era. In this context, I mention a few of the authors and works in Israeli theater of the 1980s: Shmuel HaSfari's *Tashmad* (1982), in which a group of extremist settlers barricades itself in an explosives shed in the middle of the West Bank (Samaria) on the eve of the fast of Tisha B'Av which commemorates the destruction of the ancient Jewish Temple; Moti Lerner's *Havlei Mashiach* (1987) (The Birthpangs of the Messiah), a play that ends when one of the characters bombs the Temple Mount mosques in Jerusalem thus inciting a total regional war; Yehoshua Sobol's *Syndrome Yerushalaim* (1988) (Jerusalem Syndrome), named after a psychiatric syndrome in which a person feels he/she is endowed with divine and Messianic powers and the ability to redeem the world. The play portrays the story of Jerusalem's destruction (70 A.D.) creating an analogy with the situation in the occupied territories under Israeli occupation today. In the mid-1990s, following the failure of the Oslo agreements, the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, and the second Intifada, a second wave of apocalyptic works appeared which continued into the 2000s. Among the playwrights of this wave one can note Hanoach Levin's *Murder: A Play in Three Acts and an Epilogue* (1997) which describes a circular tragic movement of violent outbreak followed by a violent reaction with violence reiterated in a hopeless and arbitrary cycle of endless attrition between the struggling adversaries; *Geshem Shahor* (Black Rain) by Shimon Bouzaglo (2007), which draws an analogy between the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the explosive times in which we live, an analogy which in the play leads to the recurrent use of nuclear weapons thus reproducing the past; *Hebron* by Tamir Greenberg (2007), in which children of both parties to the conflict (Israeli and Palestinian) are murdered, but the earth refuses to accept the dead for burial and spews them out. At the end of this play, the city of Hebron — as an emblem of the entire region — bursts into flames. In most of the second wave dramas despair takes on a postmodern dramatic structure and tone: the plays usually end with an "endless ending" in a hopeless circular motion that invalidates and renders senseless any linear notion of history and which therefore cannot lead to any type of redemption.

Trauma is a total event in which the subject experiences "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation" (Herman 33). One of its characteristics is belatedness: the victim of trauma cannot apprehend the traumatic event at the time of its occurrence nor can he/she represent that experience; the trauma therefore continues to pursue the victim over and over again and the wound fails to mend. The memory of the traumatic event returns into consciousness as a deferred action in wake of a second traumatic event. Thus, trauma is constituted through the interrelation of two events — the first event, which took place too early to be understood or to be given any meaning, and a second event, that activates the memory of the first event, which only then receives its full traumatic meaning (see Caruth 91-112). Dominick LaCapra's observation that Freud's concepts of trauma are relevant to societies no less, and perhaps more, than they are to the individual allows us to view the Yom Kippur War as the second event that reactivated the trauma of the Holocaust within Israeli collective consciousness and subsequently generated large scale apocalyptic visions and thus the memory of the Holocaust is a fundamental element in the constitution of contemporary Israeli — and altogether Jewish — identity. At the same time, it is apparent that Israeli society has not yet fully processed the trauma and it therefore continues to be trapped in the "repetition compulsion" of

involuntary post-traumatic behaviors, which do not permit its inherent social and political forces to focus sufficiently so that accountability may be exercised in respect to the existential problems on the national agenda.

I argue that underlying the apocalyptic Messianic attitudes prevailing in contemporary Israel, we find the construction of new theological "apocalyptic calendar/timeline" — a calendar/timeline reflecting the dialectical tension between the two poles of destruction and redemption which mark two pairs of constitutive contemporary historical events. On one end of the continuum are two events which have received a signal "redemptive" character: the establishment of the state and the Six Day War (in which the people "returned" to Judea and Samaria, the birthplace and cradle of the nation where the Patriarchs once dwelled) and two disastrous events — the Holocaust and on a different scale the Yom Kippur War, which, as mentioned above, reawakened the trauma which was subconsciously repressed during the years of state building. Iris Milner, following Geoffrey J. Hartman, argues that the notion of "second generation Holocaust survivors" is not a biological biographical concept, referring only to the direct descendants of the survivors, but a cultural concept whose application is much broader (19-35). According to this latter sense of the concept, it is possible to attribute post-traumatic symptoms which characterize this "second generation" to all those who were combatants or who experienced the Yom Kippur War as civilians. Not surprisingly, this war aroused profound anxieties among Israelis about the possibility of a second Holocaust.

The close nexus between the outcomes of the Six Day War (which appeared as proof of the advent of Messianic redemption) and the anxiety in the Yom Kippur War which caused the dialectical tension in Zionist discourse concerning Messianic attitudes to resurface. On the one hand, the relationship between the Holocaust and the State's establishment forged a traditional apocalyptic narrative "from destruction to redemption" or in characteristic Israeli terms "From Holocaust to Resurrection." On the other hand, the historical series of events which spanned the period between the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War, caused concern that it might be necessary to contend with a potential reversal of the historical trajectory. In other words, rather than a movement from destruction (Holocaust) to redemption (the establishment of Israel), the narrative that might tragically realize itself in the future might be one which leads from redemption to destruction. Ruth Ginsburg proposes the term "pre-trauma" (as a correlate of the term "post-trauma"), to describe the psychic state of those susceptible to future trauma, a trauma that has not yet occurred (see, e.g., Ginsburg). The apocalyptic dramas of the Yom Kippur War expose, in my opinion, this repressed level of the Israeli public's collective unconscious caught between a post-traumatic existence in wake the Holocaust and the pre-trauma intimating the possible occurrence of another Holocaust.

In Israeli literature the writer whose vision and personality represent the nexus between the past apocalypse (the Holocaust) and the warnings of a future apocalypse is Ka-Zetnick. In his last book *Tzofen Edma. Masa HaGarin shel Aushwitz* (The Code Edma: Nuclear Vision of Auschwitz), published in 1987, Ka-Zetnick retracted his views about the supposed singularity and trans-historical essence of the "other planet" which he himself had coined in relation to the Holocaust, first in his 1946 book *Salamandra* and later in his unforgettable testimony at the Eichmann trial, and came to the conclusion that "Auschwitz" in fact crouches in wait for every person. "Where ever man is — there is Auschwitz, for Satan did not create Auschwitz, but you and I did" (121) and therefore it is a historical phenomenon that could potentially recur. Considering the tension between the two polar positions delineated above, I claim that while the psychological explanation (the outgrowth of post- and pre-traumatic effects) is indeed the cause and the motivating force behind the flourishing of apocalyptic drama after the Yom Kippur War, their purpose or end is an ethical political one. This ethical impulse arises from the writers' sense that the public must be moved to action in order to put a halt to the trends which would lead to the envisioned catastrophe. The view that an Auschwitz-like apocalypse is not a singular and unique event and that humans are responsible for averting its re-occurrence forms the rational ethical basis of the dystopian dramas beginning in the late 1970s in Israeli literature and establishes the creators of contemporary apocalyptic as "prophets of admonishment" whose vocation is to warn the public against imminent dangers. Apocalyptic writing should therefore be seen first and foremost as the author's interpretive action in respect to present realities and in respect his/her own self, as a member of a certain collective (see Robinson xii).

Most scholars contend that the link between utopia (including dystopia) and ethics is an inevitable one, because the utopian end always assumes a morally critical force in respect to current actual realities and challenges its addressees to take action within the sphere of the familiar world. Karin-Frank defines black utopia (or dystopia) as the precise negative imprint of utopia, "a description of a society that is negative to the extreme ... that realizes terrible evil ... in the utilitarian and ethical sense" no less than utopia realizes the absolute good in both senses mentioned (Karin-Frank 29). However, despite the analogy Karin-Frank draws between utopia and black utopia, both from the utilitarian and ethical perspectives, in my view, and counter intuitively, utopia actually falls short of dystopia in terms of its ethical implications. Utopia presents a social and political ideal, which is patently unachievable in actual reality and therefore utopia cannot truly motivate audiences to take ethical action in order to attain the yearned-after model. By way of contrast, dystopia, which presents the world in its extreme despicability, may act as a catalyst for action that might preempt the realization of the dark vision it posits.

As early as the 1970s, David Ketterer described apocalypse as containing "a moment of juxtaposition" of worlds. The author of the apocalypse does indeed create other worlds, but these other worlds do not truly turn into an apocalyptic reality, but rather serve as catalysts for learning about our present world. The other worlds do indeed remain "other," but their juxtaposition with the world that is empirically defined as "real" creates a new "sensitivity" toward it (13). Dystopia offers a reflexive, critical view from the imagined future to the actual present at a high-level resolution and thus imposes on its addressees an acute encounter with the failures of the everyday reality in which they live. Moreover, because it presents a catastrophic outer point to which the current state of affairs leads, artists enlist the aesthetic of the terrible sublime in order to create a possible space of repair, which the addressees of the apocalyptic text are expected to realize in history. From the perspective of dystopia's ethical purpose — even if the dystopian trend presents a dark and uncompromising vision of humankind's moral and spiritual world, when this dark vision is presented retroactively — it includes a possibility of change and the potential for reform. Amos Funkenstein views this practical-relevant aspect of the form as "the distinctive mark of authentic apocalyptic writing" (74).

Most scholars of modern artistic apocalypse (in literature, cinema, and theater) tend to emphasize the non-trivial connection between the dystopian branch of the apocalyptic genre and its performances of redemption. Although it may be difficult to identify, this component is crucial to including dystopia within an ethical frame of thought. I also believe that this difficulty is the source of some scholars' critical and hostile attitude to the contemporary dystopian genre. Scholars as Martin Buber, Robert Alter, David Roskies, for example, have condemned its nihilistic character and opposed the vision of absolute destruction that it seemingly entails. One can generalize and say that they distinguish between "good" apocalypses, which are close in character to the prophetic genre, and contemporary apocalypses, which they define as "bad." The former, like the canonical texts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, are deemed ethical, for they always include the possibility of redemption from catastrophe as long as humans make the right choices in this world; the latter, on the other hand, predict imminent historical catastrophes after which no salvation is possible. Douglas Robinson, however, emphasizes that, even today, one rarely finds apocalypses that present a final and absolute prophecy of annihilation. Only one of the five "stations" of the hermeneutic circle, which he proposes as a means for classifying all types of literary apocalypse, fails to envision any kind of continuity, and therefore only this type can be said to be unethical (Robinson 373-75). The identification of the dystopian genre with the gospel of utter destruction or with utter lack of hope for life's continuity is therefore a false identification which miscomprehends the artist's intention and the vocation of the dystopian work of art, which is to catalyze a transformation of reality. The dismal condition that dystopian apocalypse describes is only apparently a final, pessimistic, and despairing condition. The more successful examples of the apocalyptic tradition embody the belief that the world as presented in the dystopian text is not the ultimate reality. Above all, apocalypse has faith that the human imagination holds the greatest resources for constituting a symbolic world in which ethical values may be preserved in face of any kind of political and social vulnerability and even in the face of death (see Collins 215). Therefore, every apocalypse contains a hopeful element even if it is articulated as an explicit rebuke (Collins 5).

"Ruin" and "salvation," "destruction" and "renewal" are concepts anchored in human thought as related to the dimension of time. A linear-causal apprehension of time, which contains an inherent sense of an "end," betrays a vision of history as both patterned and purposeful (Dan 15-16). Within such a conception of time, the two elements upon which the Judeo-Christian model of apocalypse depend — destruction and redemption — are consecutive events and destruction is conceived of as a necessary stage that will always precede redemption and anticipate the establishment of a new world order. The mythical conception of time presents a different, circular, apocalyptic model in which the world's destruction and renewal do not occur together at the end of time, but in an iterative process (see Eliade 49-73). At the same time, even within a mythical worldview these two events are regarded as separate and consecutive, although they may follow a circular pattern of recurrence. In this context I adopt Gershom Scholem's position, who emphasizes the simultaneous existence of elements of destruction and redemption in the Messianic apocalyptic vision. According to Scholem, in the traditional vision, catastrophe and utopia do not follow one upon the other, but rather "precisely by their uniqueness ... they bring to bear with full force the two sides of the messianic event" and therefore "the elements of dread and consolation [are] intertwined" (Scholem 8-10). A similar conception emerges from the discussion by Altizer of modern apocalyptic text. In his view, absolute negation is predicated on absolute validation, and such absolute affirmation is inseparable from absolute denial (345). These positions, which underscore the immanent link between destruction and redemption as intertwined dimensions, reinforce my claim that as a sub-genre of apocalypse, dystopia includes by necessity a redemptive or comforting aspect or at least a hope for life's continued existence, without which dystopia would lose its ethical force. Yet, although dystopia is a genre whose power lies in its authors' ethical and even political orientation, it is not by any means a didactic and mobilizing genre. Rather than a unified total redemptive narrative, dystopia displays what Walter Benjamin called "weak messianic power" (390) or in LaCapra's words "weak messianic values" (153), which is the most fitting articulation, to my mind, of the kind of redemption one finds in dystopias, and it is here that their critical, ethical and political force is revealed. Such a reading of these types of work will define them as apocalyptic in terms of genre, but as anti-apocalyptic in terms of intentionality and purpose (Robinson, "Literature" 364).

How then, are addressees able to experience a feeling of life's continuity, when paradigmatic ethical dystopias lack the element of "rebirth"? In a discussion of apocalyptic visions in contemporary Western cinema, Dan Jerome Shapiro addresses precisely this question. His views of contemporary dystopian films leads him to conclude that although the narrative structure of the films did indeed end with the destruction of the world, the semantic structure of the same films actually affirmed the apocalyptic promise of continuity, because the ethical "moral of the story" as conveyed in the cinematic texts, demanded what Shapiro calls "rejuvenation" (126-48) or in my words, "renewal." Other scholars have also touched upon this contradiction between the meaning, which creates a sense of continuity in the audience, and the narrative structure of the text, which leads to utter destruction. Thus, Richard Klein believes that the very contemplation of the end of life includes, and in fact demands, an ethical commitment to continuity, Robert Jay Lifton argues that we must expand our psychological and ethical imagination in order to prevent precisely that which we have begun to imagine, and Richard Poirier claims that if we believe in the vision proffered by apocalyptic texts, we will have the wisdom to demand that the emotions provoked by contemplating the 'end' will be reinvested in the preservation of humankind.

The ethical purpose of apocalyptic literature is indeed to shift the task of transforming current realities onto its addressees. John J. Collins characterizes the apocalyptic text as a "speech act" stressing in particular the action each utterance of the text invokes. According to Collins, the function of apocalyptic literature is to orient the audience's imaginative perception to certain condition, and thus to create the groundwork for a continuum which the text indirectly advocates (Collins 31-32). This intriguing perspective acquires an even greater validity when one considers theater's performative mode to which action is central. Theater not only grants presence to dramatic action on the stage, but as a type of speech act it demands action from its audiences. As such, it serves as a catalyst for ethical behavior. Since the dramatization of the ethical problem and the social activity of theatrical performance co-occur in the live presence of the spectators, the medium of theater arouses a particular ethical response which no other cultural practice can elicit from its addressees (see Ridout).



The space of theater, which binds the stage and the auditorium into one complex whole, allows theater spectators to experience the situation as an opportunity to encounter others, and invites the audience to take ethical responsibility, not only for their fragile lives, but also for that of the other.

Here, Immanuel Levinas's approach to the theatrical situation is relevant although it may seem paradoxical, because he often appears to be antagonistic toward the aesthetic in which theater is located. Levinas writes that art is in itself an obfuscating event, likening art to the fall of night, or to the invasion of shadow (see "Reality"). According to his view, aesthetics seduce audiences to abdicate responsibility for the world, because in the process of perceiving they enter a state of hypnotic inertia, while aesthetics offer comfort rather than present a challenge. He concludes that ethics must push aside aesthetics. One of Levinas's ethical arguments against art is his argument against art's closure which freezes time in images and thus makes external realities inert. This feature, so Levinas claims, locates artistic creation outside the real world enabling the abdication of responsibility toward events in the world. However, this is not an adequate description of theatrical practice in which the live audience fulfils a vital role in theatrical experience. One especially moving example, from Buzaglo's play *Geshem Shahor* — staged in 2007 — illustrates my point. In one of the play's scenes an elderly Japanese woman delivers testimony about the moment when she lost all that was dear to her, the moment when the nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. This segment appears in the play twice: first when a US-American librarian reads out testimonies to describe one way in which he combats amnesia and a second time directly in the words of victim. She begins to recount the events of the morning when the bomb fell, but the closer she arrives to the core of the story the more overwhelming the force of the trauma becomes. Embodied in overpowering music, this force causes her voice to gradually fade, the monologue falls silent, and the spectators are able to trace it only by her excited movements. Thus the spectators are forced to reconstruct this absence actively in their mind according to its reading earlier. This is only one example of a theatrical practice by means of which responsibility is transferred to the audience. Rather than being passive recipients in a world saturated with images which have little to do with their personal experiences, the spectators become aware of their active participation in a theatrical event. Positioning actors and audiences in the same space allowing them to understand that they are collaboratively producing theatrical images enables the theater activate what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls "an aesthetic of response" (185). Moreover, Levinas's account of the encounter with the "face" of the other (Levinas, "Ethics" 75) allows theater and performance — both cultural practices in which such an encounter is a central element — appropriate for probing ethical questions regarding the Other.

In conclusion, in Israeli apocalyptic plays a critical gap opens up between the fictional narrative that ends with destruction and the theatrical apparatus that creates a sense of continuity. The theatrical text delivers a message to the audience, inviting them to increase their engagement with and accountability for continuity, not merely during the theatrical event, but more significantly, once that event is over. The drama's moral imperative to provide a "positive" ending to the apocalyptic narrative in the world outside the auditorium thus countering the effect of its ending on the stage. The ethical question which such an ending raises for those who have experienced a live theatrical performance is: what measure of personal responsibility must I take for crisis situations in the world in which I live? And what action must I take so that what transpired there, in the theater, does not occur in reality? I postulate that this is what makes theater a more ethical medium than any other.

## Works Cited

- Abdelfattah, Hany. "National Trauma and the 'Uncanny' in Hage's Novel *De Niro's Game*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.1 (March 2012): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss1/X>>.
- Altizer, Thomas J.J. "Modern Thought and Apocalypticism." *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. Ed. Stephen J. Stein. New York: Continuum, 1998. Vol. 3, 325-59.
- Austin, John Langshaw. *How to do Things with Words*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1962.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." *Selected Writings*. By Walter Benjamin. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996. Vol. 4, 389-400.
- Bouzaglo, Shimon. *Geshem Shahor* (Black Rain). Tel Aviv: Or-Am, 2008.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Traumatic Awakenings (Freud, Lacan and the Ethics of Memory)." *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. By Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. 91-112.
- Collins, John J. *The Apocalyptic Imagination*. New York: Crossroad, 1984.
- Cook, Stephen L. *The Apocalyptic Literature*. Nashville: Abingdon P, 2003.

- Dan, Joseph. *Apocalypsa Az Ve-Achsav* (Apocalypse Then and Now). Tel Aviv: Yedioth Aharonot, 2000.
- Dürrenmatt Friedrich. *The Physicists*. Trans. James Kirkup. London: Samuel French, 1963.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965.
- Feuer, Menachem. "'Mad Laughter' in Federman's *The Twofold Vibration*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.1 (2009): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/5>>.
- Funkenstein, Amos. "History as Predestination: The Apocalyptic Mentality." *Perceptions of Jewish History*. By Amos Funkenstein. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. 70-87.
- Ginsburg, Ruth. "'Veim Avakesh Leonie, Evrach Mimcha Elech, 'o al Pikaeska kkdam-Ttraumatit'" ("If you seek my iniquity, I shall flee from you, unto you," Or, On the Pre-traumatic Picaresque.") *Mikan: Ktav-et le-heker ha-sifrut ha-ivrit* (Mikan: Journal for Hebrew Literary Studies) 13 (2012): forthcoming.
- Goldberg, Amos. "Mavo" ("Introduction"). *Lichtov Historia, Lichtov Trauma* (Writing History, Writing Trauma). By Dominick LaCapra. Trans. Yaniv Farkas. Tel Aviv: Resling, 2006. 7-27.
- Greenberg, Tamir. *Hebron*. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007.
- Hamadan, Mas'ud. *Text, Theoria VeParshanut* (Text, Theory, Interpretation). Jerusalem: Magnes P, 2009.
- HaSfari, Shmuel. *Tashmad*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv U, 1982.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- Kaiser, Georg. *Gas I, Gas II*. New York: Ungar, 1963.
- Ka-Tzetnik [Szeintuch, Yechiel; De-Nur, Yehiel]. *Salamandra*. Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009.
- Ka-Tzetnik [Szeintuch, Yechiel; De-Nur, Yehiel]. *Tzofen Edma. Masa HaGarin shel Aushwitz* (The Code Edma: Nuclear Vision of Auschwitz). Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987.
- Karin-Frank, Sheyli. *Raaion HaUtopia* (Utopia Reconsidered). Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1986.
- Kaynar, Gad. "HaNatzism VeHashoa KeMetaphora shel Dimui Atzmy Bamahaze HaIsraeli" (Nazism and the Holocaust as a Metaphor of Self-image in Israeli Plays). *Bama* 138 (1994): 73-92.
- Kermode, Frank. "Apocalypse and the Modern." *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?* Ed. Saul Friedlander, Gerald Holton, Leo Marx, and Eugene Skolnikoff. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985. 84-106.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. London: Oxford UP, 1967.
- Ketterer, David. *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction and American Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1974.
- Klaic, Dragon. *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.
- Kopit, Arthur. *End of the World*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
- Lehamann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. Karen Jurs-Munby. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Lerner Moti. *Hevlei Mashiah* (The Birth Pangs of the Messiah). Tel Aviv: Or Am, 1988.
- Levin, Hanoch. *Murder: A Play in Three Acts and an Epilogue. The Labor of Life: Selected Plays*. By Hanoch Levin. Trans. Barbara Harshav. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003. 211-44.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Ethics as First Philosophy." *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989. 75-87.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Reality and Its Shadow." *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989. 129-43.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. "The Image of 'The End of the World': A Psychohistorical View." *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?* Ed. Saul Friedlander, Gerald Holton, Leo Marx, and Eugene Skolnikoff. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985. 151-67.
- Lisiak, Agata Anna, Louise O. Vasvári, and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. "Bibliography for Work in Holocaust Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.1 (2009): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/11>>.
- Milner, Iris. *Kirei Avar. Biography, Zehut VeZikaron Besiporet Dor HaMedina* (Past Present: Biography, Identity, and Memory in Second Generation Literature). Tel Aviv: Am-Oved Publishers, 2003.
- Poirier, Richard. "Writing off the Self." *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?* Ed. Saul Friedlander, Gerald Holton, Leo Marx, and Eugene Skolnikoff. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985. 216-41.
- Ridout, Nicholas. *Theater & Ethics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Robinson, Douglas. *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.
- Robinson, Douglas. "Literature and Apocalyptic." *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. Ed. Stephen J. Stein. New York: Continuum, 1999. Vol. 3, 360-91.
- Scholem, Gershom. "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism." *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. By Gershom Scholem. New York: Schocken, 1971. 1-48.
- Shapiro, Jerome F. "Atomic Bomb Cinema: Illness, Suffering, and the Apocalyptic Narrative." *Literature and Medicine* 17.1 (1998): 126-48.
- Sobol, Yehoshua. *Syndrome Yerushalaim* (Jerusalem Syndrome). Tel Aviv: Or Am, 1988.
- Weiss, Peter. *Marat/Sade*. Trans. Geoffrey Skelton. New York: Pocket Books, 1963.

Author's profile: Zahava Caspi <<http://cmsprod.bgu.ac.il/humsos/departments/heblit/Segel/Academic/zahavaCV>> teaches Hebrew literature at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. Her interests in research include modern Hebrew literature and Israeli theater in both socio-political and theoretical contexts. In addition to numerous articles, Caspi published the books *HaYoshvim Bahoshech. Olamo HaDramati shel Hanoch Levin: Subject, Mehaber, Tzofim* (Those Who Sit in the Dark: The Drama of Hanoch Levin. Subject, Author, Spectator) (2005) and *Hinei Yamim Baim. Apocalypsa ve Ethica Batheatron HaIsraeli* (Here Come the Days: Apocalypse and Ethics in Israeli Theater) (2012). Caspi is editor of *Mikan: Ktav-et le-heker ha-sifrut ha-ivrit* (Mikan: Journal for Hebrew Literary Studies). E-mail: <[caspi@bgu.ac.il](mailto:caspi@bgu.ac.il)>