A World Apart

Contemporary Israeli Women's Cinema

By

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To my family, Shira-Lou Munk, Gil Singer,
and their daughters Tamar and Stav

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[1] Part of this chapter was published as an article under the title "In the Face of Violence: The Political Reading of IDF Women Soldiers as Represented in Two Recent Israeli Films" Feminist Media Studies 1-15. Volume 19, 2019 – Issue 8.

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Acknowledgments

I began this book in the summer of 2015, when I had the privilege of being a Helen Gartner scholar in residence at the Brandeis Institute at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Since then, much has happened in my life and in the world. I lost my mother and my father, gained two wonderful granddaughters, and experienced the COVID-19 pandemic together with the rest of humanity. I am grateful to the Brandeis Institute, and particularly to Professor Shulamit Reinharz, who served as its director at the time. Thanks to a grant from the Open University of Israel, I was able to sit in libraries and read endless documents regarding Israeli cinema. My ideas on the subject also matured through conversations with my colleagues at the department of Literature and Arts of the Open University of Israel. As I complete this manuscript, there is a war going on in Israel, the Swords of Iron war. In other words, there is never a dull moment in this part of the globe.

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Introduction: Women Filmmakers Apart

The beginning of the millennium has been marked by the birth of a new generation of women filmmakers in Israel that redefined the representations of women in Israeli society in general and in cinema in particular. By focusing on the development of Israeli women's cinema, and analyzing the circumstances and contexts that had contributed to the increased participation of women in creative positions in filmmaking (which lead, in turn, to the increased participation of women as film characters), this book seeks to frame the new role of women in Israeli cinema – no longer extras, but rather motivated subjects that promote new ideas.

In practice, women never possessed an important role in Israeli cinema. Though they were on screen or behind the camera in minor cinematic production functions, their roles – either as actors or filmmakers – were insignificant and not necessarily associated with the evolution of this important art. It should be mentioned that since the early forties, and until the establishment of the Israeli film fund in 1979,[1] Israeli cinema lacked sufficient funding. This situation coincided with women's marginalization in general. But while women's cinema began to appear worldwide in the 1960's, Israeli cinema was exceptionally late, either because of a certain mentality that took roots through years of chauvinist governments, or because of Israeli women's acceptance for playing a subaltern role in this industry (as well as in other public spheres, such as the IDF).[2]

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[1] The Israeli Film Fund (Keren Hakolnoa HaIsraeli) played a major role in the success of Israeli cinema in Israel and abroad. For more information, see https://web.archive.org/web/20230101013120/http://intl.filmfund.org.il/index.asp?id=2&History [Archived]

[2] This is exemplified even in the words of head of the Scriptwriters' Guild of Israel, Amit Lior, in 2016: "What is the actual role of women in the stories that we write? How many times do women themselves move the plot forward, as opposed to simply reacting to a plot controlled by a man? We barely see women protagonists, except in television shows aimed at women audiences or shows dealing with feminine issues. I can't think of one single Israeli television show in which a woman character carried the plot. Women characters exist only to serve the male protagonist, and it doesn't matter if they're Ashkenazi or Mizrahi. Hebrew is a difficult language: protagonist (gibor), man (gever); it's so similar." (Yudovitch, Daphna. "Upheaval: The Mizrahis on the Television Screen are the New Ashkenazis." [Ma'apach: al masach hatelevisia hamizrahim hem haashkenazim hahadashim." November 30, 2016 [Hebrew] https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/.premium-MAGAZINE-1.3137926)

Indeed, Israeli women's marginalization from the hegemonic national discourse designated women as the Other. As such, they were excluded from the political and cultural discourse in everyday life as well as in representation, including cinematic representation, which is the subject of this book. As if trapped in a self-perpetuating loop, their status as excluded subjects in the national discourse reinforced their marginalization, and thus their vulnerability. In this segregating discourse, the Mizrahi woman stood out as an outsider to the extent that she became "the other of the other," namely, the subject who would never become part of the national consensus.

Over time, women developed survival strategies that could be dubbed, "a world apart," as if to say that they refused to participate in a game where the cards have already been dealt, and unfairly. One can spot the same trajectory in the cinematic representation of Mizrahi women who advance along their plotlines within a particular geography that emphasizes their remoteness from the world: The big cities' margins and the development towns in the country's periphery. For example, in Menachem Golan's *The Highway Queen* (Malkat HaKvish, 1971), the protagonist, who first appears in the big city, returns to the town of her youth following a series of romantic disappointments. In this narrative, the town is not a place of choice but rather a place of last resort.

Moreover, the Mizrahi protagonists' process of exclusion, that, as I will later show, ended in self-exclusion, turned out to be productive inasmuch as some of these Mizrahi women leveraged their marginalized position to promote new alternative ideas, thus empowering themselves and their peers. This cinematic shift had already occurred in the mid-1980s when Mizrahi women's cinematic representation began to be designed by women directors in short films such as Dina Zvi-Riklis' *Kurdania* (1984) and Rahel Esterkin's *Jacky* (1990). Stated otherwise, the new representation of women among filmmakers transformed the determinist voice that, in turn, shaped the cinematic protagonists' destinies.

The Evolution of Women Filmmakers

Just as women have been under-represented in filmmaking itself, their films have largely been overlooked in the scholarship of filmmaking. Though some contemporary women artists, including photographers such as Michal Rubner, Michal Heiman, and visual artist Maya Cohen-Levy, have received scholarly consideration, women filmmakers have been left out of the general cinematic discourse. It is possible that the combination of a particular aesthetic with unpopular gender issues, which is featured in their films, may account for their exclusion from serious study.[3] In any event, the result was that Israeli women's cinema has created a world apart.

Notably, while we have been discussing filmmaking in general, it is helpful to take a moment to contemplate the relationship between documentary and fictional filmmaking. Although Israeli women filmmakers lean heavily toward documentary filmmaking—in all likelihood because women, being systematically underfunded, naturally gravitate toward the more modest staff and budget requirements that documentaries entail—most of the film texts analyzed in this book are feature films. This choice, however, is not as atypical as it might first appear in the context of the conventional distinction between documentary and feature films. After all, as a practical matter, fictional and documentary films are closely linked, as fictional films are often based on a representation of reality, and in many cases reproduce an event that actually took place (e.g., *Invisible* by Michal Aviad, 2011, discussed in Chapter 3); in cases where feature films present one version of an event, documentaries often provide them with the historical and cultural background for their fictional narratives. This interdependence indicates that the conventional division between these two cinematic modes is essentially classificatory in nature. It is not surprising, then, that many women

[3] Rachel S. Harris's groundbreaking book, *Warriors, Witches, Whores: Women in Israeli Cinema*, which was published in 2017, serves as an exception. In her book, Harris shows how the representation of women on the Israeli screen has paralleled the misogynistic cultural atmosphere that characterizes Israeli society in general. The book's afterword, entitled "The Effects of Feminist Activism on the Changing Cinematic Landscape," is the point of departure for my present work.

documentary filmmakers, such as Dina Zvi-Riklis and Michal Aviad, have also produced important feature films.

The evolution of Israeli women filmmakers can be characterized as a transition from the margins of history, a place to which these artists were relegated by others, to a separate space, an alternative world that the women filmmakers affirmatively chose to inhabit. Given the hegemonic refusal to include them and their work and art in the general national agenda, women were compelled to leave the public sphere and seek remote areas and marginal narratives. That first transition eventually led to another; those who had been pushed to the margins migrated to another place that was neither the remote and isolated periphery nor the crowded and uniform center. The world apart that Israeli women filmmakers created reflects the formation of an alternative consensus, one held by the fraction of the Israeli population that hunts for the human dimension behind the hegemonic representations and discovers small narratives of personal suffering and satisfaction whose very revelation represents a political act.

The world apart claims an alternative version of national history, whereby women eschew seizing control of the hegemonic male sphere as they continue their quest to create their own safe space. This two-phased transition initiated against the backdrop of The New Sensibility approach, which first emerged in Israeli cinema around 1970.

The 1960s and 70s New Sensibility and Alida Gera

In 1970, a group of young Israeli male filmmakers, most prominent among them Judd Ne'eman, gathered to discuss the cinematic approach that they had developed over recent years, which became known as "The New Sensibility" (HaRegishut HaChadasha).[4] This approach aimed to offer an alternative to the nationalistic-patriotic and machoistic atmosphere that had thus far permeated Israeli feature films. Following in the footsteps of the

[4] An account of the meeting was published more than a decade later, in 1981, in the Israeli cinema journal *Kolnoa*. See Kolnoa Editorial, (Summer 1981): p. 7

French Cinematic New Wave (*La Nouvelle Vague*), these young filmmakers aspired to create low-budget films with maximum artistic freedom. They also promoted and adopted the principle of group filmmaking.

One point that distinguished the Israeli group from its French parallel, however, is reflected in Avraham Heffner remark about the group's formation: "It's simple," he said in his interview for *Kolnoa*, "we were together in the army." While the French New Wave, for its part, was so categorically opposed to militarism that it could not have admitted that war had any redeeming qualities,[5] Israelis were still celebrating the Six Day War victory and recovering from the traumatic Yom Kippur War. In the melting pot of the Israeli army, strong friendships were forged even amidst the pain and moral ambiguity of war. Yet these friendships were mostly male bonds. While Israeli law requires both men and women to serve in the military, at the time, women's participation in this sphere was limited. As women were not part of the friendship circles developing in the male military arena, they were, for the most part, also excluded from the new cinematic adventure.

It is against this background that we should approach the work of Alida Gera, a Jewish American choreographer who emigrated to Israel in 1964 with the hope of contributing to the Zionist artistic project, and was the first woman filmmaker to express and create within the new cinematic language on the New Sensibility. *Before Tomorrow* (Lifnei Mahar, 1969), Gera's only full-length feature film, offers a feminist reconsideration of the relationship between the sexes in Israel. Gera produced her film with the support of Israeli cinema's leading names—such as the cinematographers Adam Greenberg and Amnon Salomon. The small and provincial Israeli film industry was fascinated by this newcomer from New York, and hoped that she would be their entrance ticket to the global market. And yet, as an outseider from both a cultural and a gendered viewpoint, Gera was also perceived as a threat to the existing order. Ultimately, the overwhelmingly male cinematic industry in Israel decided to table Gera's film, and thus her career: Although her work was presented at the

[5] The immediate context was the 1954-1962 Algerian war of independence against colonialist France.

prestigious Cannes film festival, it met with silence by the Israeli cinematic industry. Half a century after Gera's film was made, Israela Shaer Meoded, then a student in the film department at Tel Aviv University, unearthed the film's negatives, thus shining a light on the issue of the poor representation of women among Israeli filmmakers.[6]

Despite its failure among Israeli audiences, *Before Tomorrow* is well worth examining. It is a first attempt in Israeli film at portraying a feminist viewpoint through the depiction of simple narratives detached from a specific place or time, portraying men and women who are not locked into class struggles but rather act in a world free of all constraints regarding social-status. *Before Tomorrow* comprises two short segments. In the first, titled "Spring", Gera follows the courtship between a young man (actor Israel Poliakov) and a young woman (actress Rina Ganor). The setting is unspecified, and the entire narrative feels universal; the Hebrew language, which is hardly spoken here, seems incidental. As their story unfolds, the passionate beginning sours into separation. The unnamed, unidentified protagonists convey a sense of the general nature of a war between the sexes.

The film's second part, titled "Autumn", deals with a less popular topic— romantic relationships in old age. This part opens in a bourgeois neighborhood, with a well-dressed older woman (actress Ruth Harris) heading for her regular café, where she will place her daily order. On the way, she notices an older gentleman (actor Arieh Elias) selling bagels. She approaches his cart and buys a bagel. The day after she buys another one, and so on for a while. The characters grow close, and she invites him to her opulent home. The film ends with the two strolling happily around the neighborhood together.

Although the cinematography of *Before Tomorrow*, by the two leading photographers of the time, Adam Greenberg and Amnon Solomon, might seem to reflect the style of the New Sensitivity, the film's narrative diverges from the principles of that approach. Instead of taking

[6] Shaer Meoded, Israela. The Unknown Cinema: On Early Women's Cinema in Israel (1969-1983). Master's thesis. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2016. [Hebrew]

on weighty cultural and ethical questions regarding Israeli identity, as did the New Sensitivity films, and in contrast with the contemporary comedic Bourekas genre that was popular at the time (on which I will expand below), *Before Tomorrow* presented an unconventional feminist portrayal of everyday events that was in line with burgeoning world trends. Its insistence on the feminist point of view, in a country which was still very chauvinistic, led to its complete failure. The all-male Israeli cinematic milieu had no interest in promoting the film. Thus rebuffed, Gera returned to her work as a choreographer, on the margins of filmmaking, after creating a world apart from contemporary Israeli film – a world that, ironically, was closer to the currents gaining traction in the world at large, with filmmakers such as the French Agnes Varda.[7]

An entire decade would pass before Israel saw another woman turn to cinematography. In 1979, Michal Bat-Adam released her debut feature film, *Moments* (Regaim), which deals with friendship between women, an even more unusual theme than the free-flowing intergender ecosystem portrayed in *Before Tomorrow*. At the time that *Moments* came out, feature films had been used as windows into the male imagination. Israeli cinema told stories about women as seen by men, stories in which women played a secondary or fetishistic role. Even in Israeli films whose titles featured a woman's name, such as *Fortuna* (Menahem Golan, 1966) or *Sarit* (George Obadiah, 1974), the narratives were still told from a chauvinistic point of view that instrumentalized women and turned them into objects of male visual pleasure.[8]

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[7] A similar example would be Edna Politi's Anu Banu: The *Daughters of Utopia* (Anu Banu: Bnot HaUtopia, 1983). Gera's and Politi's films, directed in the span of almost 15 years apart, represent the scarce and unstable status of women films at the time. Both directors were not Israeli, and followed the patterns of the male Zionist endeavor of the time, while focusing on the "unpopular" notion of women protagonists. Moreover, both directed only one film in Israel and left the country shortly after its screening. Both films were critical of the status of women in Israel. Though they did not reflect the dominant ideology of the time and refused to represent the mythological images of the new Jew and his female partner, they did present a rather realistic portrayal of the New Jewish Woman.

[8] On this background, it is interesting to mention Keren Yedaya's debut film Or (Or, My Treasure, 2004), which will be discussed in Chapter 3, a film that returned to this stratagem of naming the film after its heroine's name only this time, in order to tell the woman's own story.

It becomes obvious, then, that the films which were made by women filmmakers created a world apart from the prevailing winds in Israeli cinema by depicting women differently than before. Indeed, the women characters in these films and those that followed moved from being the ""Regarding the Pain of Others" (2003) on the margin to being the protagonists at the center. In parallel to that motion, and in homage to the anti-strategy of "if you can't join 'em, beat 'em," women filmmakers went from being prevented from becoming mainstream cinema makers to becoming counter-cinema creators.

Women's Cinema Challenges the "Patriarchal Code of Spectatorship"

The question of female filmmakers' capacity to create a counter-cinema has been extensively discussed in the past decades. In 1976, film theorist Claire Johnston referred to women's cinema as a "counter cinema" because of its disruption of the traditional narrative practices that were responsible for the objectification, stereotyping, and mythologization of women in film.[9] Johnston explained that because cinematic conventions purported that their presentation of the image of woman was realistic, a revolutionary strategy would need to challenge that pretension to realism. Put differently, it was not enough for women's cinema to engage with the oppression of women through screenplay. Rather, it would have to tackle the oppression through the cinematic language itself —or the way reality was portrayed therein. Yet Johnston did not entirely dismiss Hollywood, arguing that, as a source of accessible entertainment and fantasy, it afforded those women filmmakers who worked in its studios an opportunity to use subversive strategies within the patriarchal structure of the cinema industry to affect a quiet revolution in how women were perceived in society at large.

At about the same time that Johnston was espousing the above approach, Laura Mulvey rejected the possibility of creating women's

[9] Johnston, Claire (1976). "The Night watchers (part one): Rethinking Political Cinema". *Jump Cut*, no. 12-13, pp. 55-56.

counter-cinema from the inside, in Hollywood, and called for a deconstruction of the existing forms of women's representation and of cinematic viewing pleasures.[10] She argued that in narrative cinema, the male viewer identifies with the male character on the screen as he gazes at the female body. The woman herself is represented as a spectacular object of desire for masculine visual pleasure. Mulvey thus called for creating a women's counter-cinema and a radical feminist aesthetic by drawing the spectator's conscious attention to the patriarchal construction of women's image, disrupting the viewer's identification with the male gaze, and combining documentary and fictional narratives all in order to expose the illusion of reality that the film seeks to create.

A decade later, in the mid-1980s, Teresa de Lauretis in her book *The Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction (Theories of Representation and Difference*) proposed a different direction for women's cinema, reconstructive rather than deconstructive.[11] For de Laurentis, women's cinema should strive to produce new images of women while addressing the female viewer rather than the male one, in what she called an "aesthetics of reception." Women's cinema, according to de Lauretis, should relate to its spectator as a woman, regardless of the gender of the viewers, by defining all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist. Women filmmakers should seek new aesthetic forms that distinguish between Woman, which is a mythical, patriarchal construction—the stereotypical essence assigned to women in the aggregate in Western culture—and women, who are individual socio-historical subjects, existing along the axes of class, gender, age, and race. In this way, theorized de Laurentis, women's cinema would engage important issues in feminist communities on a local scale and would leave aside the global audience.

It was only in the 1990s, according to Anne Kaplan, that women's film-

[10] Mulvey, Laura." Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen*, Volume 16, Issue 3, (Autumn 1975), pp. 6–18.

[11] De Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 1987.

making really came into its own.[12] Since that time, a variety of films have been made by women from minority groups in Europe and North America—as well as by women from other parts of the world. In her 1991 article "Women and Film in International Perspective: Where Are We? Where Do We Go?", Kaplan explains that the films of this later phase were characterized by a series of new issues—among them the link between the fictional representation of women in film, and the material conditions of actual women ("Reel Women" versus "Real Women") as well as the question, "Do films by women put the female spectator in a different place than do films by men? That is, do women's films make the female spectator *look otherwise*? Are there different opportunities for identification if the film is by a female director?"[13] She concludes on a hopeful note:

> "Gender Studies" suggests that sexual difference is no longer an issue, that the construction of male and female within patriarchy is somehow equal. We need to actively seek out areas in which women continue to be oppressed by specific constructions that have institutional materiality, and to make cultural products about such terrain.[14]

Notwithstanding Kaplan's optimism, however, her propitious prediction did not come to pass, neither in America nor elsewhere.

On a local scale, the shift described by de Laurentis—from deconstructive to reconstructive—also occurred in Israeli women's cinema. In 2005, Orly Lubin argued that Israeli films tended to construct a normative world in which the woman was positioned at the margins.[15] Even Israeli women filmmakers, in the early years, reproduced ahistorical and universalized concepts of Man and Woman, propagating the idea of Woman as other—a central idea of the patriarchal discourse. In so

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[12] Kaplan, Anne, E. "Women and Film in International Perspective: Where Are We? Where Do We Go?" *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 4 (1991): pp. 37–45.

[13] Ibid., p. 43.

[14] Ibid., p. 44.

[15] Lubin, Orly. "Gvulot ha'alimut: Gvulot ha'guf" (Boundaries of Violence as Body Boundaries), Teoria uVikorett 18 (2001): pp. 103-138. [Hebrew]

doing, they made it impossible to recognize women as actual social subjects in a way that would have exposed the cracks in the patriarchal construction of Woman. In contrast, contemporary Israeli women's cinema constitutes the woman as a key subject in the film narrative, foregrounding her viewpoint and experience in male-dominated Israeli society. It offers varied social identities of women both behind and in front of the camera, as well as multiple female spectatorial positions, enabling more complex sorts of identifications to be formed and allowing for women's identities to be considered along multiple social and historical axes.

Moreover, like feminist filmmakers across the globe, Israeli women filmmakers mostly deal with women's stories. It appears that when women have a choice, they prefer to relate to topics close to their lives. In her article "Challenging the Male Hegemony of Israel's Movie Industry", Nirit Anderman asked four young Israeli women filmmakers, Tali Vinik, Tali Shalom Ezer, Yaelle Kayam, and Maya Dreifus, why they made films about women. Dreifus responded:

> With me it starts from rage. As a woman, I come to the movies, see the way women are presented on the screen and say to myself: Hey, I like to scuffle, too. I like crawling through tunnels, too. I like shouting, too. So why don't I find women like me on the screen? So in my films I want to show a heroine who is different, to say something about the women's representations I see in the cinema.[16]

In this response, we see how far Israeli women filmmakers have come since Gera's attempt to improve the image of women in film met with such failure. As film scholar Raz Yosef demonstrates in his article "Conditions of Visibility: Trauma and Contemporary Israeli Women's Cinema" (2017), alternative contemporary Israeli women's films – such as Michal Aviad's *Invisible* (Lo Roim Alaich, 2011) or Michal Vinik's *Valeria is Getting Married* (Valeria Mithatenet, 2022) – portray women as

[16] Anderman, Nirit. "Challenging the Male Hegemony of Israel's Movie Industry," *Haaretz*, October 10, 2013. [Hebrew]

having their own individual identities and experiences and not being colorless automatons animating the patriarchal construct of Woman. This cinema aims to change the forms in which women are seen, as well as the ways that they experience themselves and the world around them, and construct a new vision of the female social subject.

Male Vulnerability: Breaking the Taboo

In his article "The Lady and the Mask," Ne'eman writes about Jacques Katmor's *A Woman's Case* (Mikre Isha), an avant-garde Israeli film from 1970 which provides an ideal prism through which to examine the vulnerability of Israeli men.[17] This feature film, which attracted a certain international attention, was largely influenced by the French New Wave narrative and style and as such, told in a very expressive way the encounter between an Israeli man and a young woman. In the spirit of the sixties, the narrative revolves around the sexual attraction between the two and its unexplained fatal results.

Ne'eman's innovative argument is that the male hero's liberated and sadistic behavior is not the result of what is generally referred to as "the spirit of the time" but rather of a repressed PTSD, resulting from the unspoken influence of the Six Day War on Israeli soldiers. At the time, this victorious war was considered as the highlight of the New State's existence and no one could suspect the hidden trauma it brought to the young Israeli soldiers.[18] The importance of Ne'eman's article lies in its pointing at the Israeli males' vulnerability, an issue that was kept taboo for generations: Israeli males were not supposed to react, to cry or even to complain about their traumatic experience during the war and when they did so they were considered mentally dysfunctional and were treated accordingly. The public image of Israeli soldiers, as a reflection of the founding fathers' dream of the New Jew,[19] had never been asso-

[17] Ne'eman, Judd "The Lady and the Mask," in *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion*, eds. Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg, University of Texas Press, 2011, pp.74-75

[18] In many aspects, the Six Day War resembles the Vietnam war in that it remained an unavowed trauma that left deep and long-lasting cultural traces.

[19] The "New Jew" is one of Zionism's central concepts, and it refers to the modifi-

ciated with this purported feminine vulnerability. However, the image of the invincible New Jew soldier eventually cracked, and in the 1980s, Israeli filmmakers began depicting the price paid for that image in films such as *Shell Shock* (Helem Krav, Yoel Sharon 1988) and *Burning Memory* (Resisim, Yossi Zomer, 1989). These films present the Israeli soldier as frightened and fearful, thus upending the New Jew's image and revealing an open secret: Soldiers are also of women born. Nonetheless, even this new perspective of vulnerability in the military did not focus on women characters nor was it the work product of women filmmakers.

In "The Lady and the Mask," Ne'eman pioneered the turn toward male vulnerability in Israeli scholarship. As he described it, the trauma that men experience as soldiers profoundly impacts their relations with the world in general and with women in particular. Women function as a sort of guardrail, preventing men from sinking into existential despair stemming from Israel's constant state of armed conflict. Thus, women are always on the alert for their own and others' survival, and men have become vulnerable—like women had always been.[20] This shift has radical implications for the reevaluation of gender roles and opens a new vista on the capacity for compassion, which traditionally had been regarded as a woman's attribute. Vulnerability, which was once deemed a deficiency, had become an asset because it had the tendency to condition those who had experienced it to have compassion on others in the same predicament.

One might consider, in this context, the representation of masculine fragility and vulnerability as can be seen in Nadav Lapid's *The Knee* (HaBerech, 2021) and Eran Kolirin's *Let It Be Morning* (Vayehi Boker, 2021), as well as the impact of this repression on women in Israel has yet to be examined. An increase in domestic crimes, however, has led to

cation that should take place in the Jew's image. After years of oppression and persecution in exile, Zionism aspired to create a strong and invincible Jew who would be free of fears, live a "normal life," and thus achieve Zionism's dream of normalization, meaning, to be a people like any other people. Therefore, the New Jew was represented through his bodily traits, his muscles, and his strength through the use of a specific cinematic language intended to glorify his physical efforts in his new land.

[20] Ne'eman, 2011.

the emergence of a number of politically engaged films on the subject, pointing to the machismo of Israeli society. In this respect, we might consider, for example, Yaron Shani's *Chained* (Eynaim Sheli, 2019), which deals with the subject of domestic violence; though at first sight, it may seem that *Chained* presents an apology for violent husbands, I believe that the filmmaker sought to expose the fragility of strong men, a fragility that sometimes erupts in extreme violence. *Chained* can be considered the apex of a process in Israeli cinema that began in the first decade of the 2000s, in which men (through male filmmakers) reclaimed the right to be fragile (see Hagin, 2008). This stance has significant implications for women, as the "revelation" of men's vulnerability has opened a channel to consider women's vulnerability – which will serve me throughout the book as a key issue to understand the representation of women in Israeli cinema.

On Women's Vulnerability

In *The Conversation* (1974), one of Francis Ford Coppola's well known films, a couple strolls through a park and comes upon a homeless man sleeping on a bench. The woman turns to her male companion and says:

> Oh, look. That's terrible. He's not hurting anyone.…Every time I see one of those old guys...I always think the same thing.… I always think...that he was once somebody's baby boy. I think he was once somebody's baby boy...and he had a mother and a father who loved him...and now there he is...half dead on a park bench...and where are his mother or his father...all his uncles now? Anyway, that's what I always think.

This anonymous reflection on the human condition emblematizes women's attitude towards vulnerability. According to feminist scholar Judith Butler (2012), vulnerability and compassion are the key concepts in the feminine understanding of the world, in general, and the world reflected in films, in particular.[21] This is not only because women have

[21] Butler, Judith. "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation".

been perceived as weak and thus vulnerable but also because developments in occidental culture have led women to realize that the underprivileged position into which they were forced is not a fact of life but rather the result of enduring cultural discrimination. Moreover, when, following the second wave of the feminism movement, women left the domestic sphere and attempted to integrate into the public, hitherto male-dominated domain, they realized that the world was not waiting for them with open arms; on the contrary, it had been celebrating their absence. And Israeli cinema was no exception. Glorifying the military, it quickly excluded women from the hegemonic discourse. Women were subordinated to subaltern positions, left out of the home of Israeli cinema to take up residence on a park bench, and it took more than a generation until a woman's voice broke into the exclusive club of Israeli cinema.

In the late 1970s, women filmmakers finally infiltrated the sacrosanct space of Israeli cinema. Michal Bat-Adam's aforementioned *Moments* (1979) was also the first Israeli film to deal with women's vulnerability – as will be discussed in the chapter dedicated to her work. Delineating new forms of sensibility in which feminine ways of remembering pain and missed opportunity become the ground for friendship between women, *Moments* pioneered a new path in Israeli cinema. In this groundbreaking move, friendship among women is born of the realization of shared vulnerability, that then leads in unexpected directions. One such twist is the dismantling of the dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, which will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this book, as the heroines of Hagar Ben Asher's *The Slut* (HaNotenet, 2011) and Michal Aviad's *Invisible* both renounce their revenge. Considering that revenge and violence belong to the same patriarchal worldview that the women protagonists attempt to reject, the use of compassion – even towards aggressors—can be considered as a subversive weapon.

It is possible to trace this provocative—even shocking—stance toward those who commit crimes against women to shifts in the Israeli ethos. Women, who have long been victimized, are now seeking to rede-

Journal of Speculative Philosophy. Vol. 26, no. 2 (2012) pp. 134-151.

fine their place in the world. Rather than revenge, however, women seek an understanding based on the fact that, like them, men are "of women born," to borrow the title of Adrienne Rich's path-breaking book from 1976. Thus, women's manifestation of compassion towards their now-vulnerable assailants, is in itself a subversive act. In this case, vulnerability destabilizes the traditional dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, enabling women to overcome their rage and perceive the human dimension of the gendered or national enemy.

This reconceptualization of vulnerability has led Israeli women filmmakers to tackle the stereotype of the Mizrahi woman, an issue that began to become more prominent in Israeli life. In the 2000s, the Mizrachi actress/director Ronit Elkabetz directed, along with her brother Shlomi Elkabetz, an extraordinary cinematic trilogy depicting Mizrachi women's oppression in Israel under the auspices of Judaism. Elkabetz, who died in 2016, framed women's vulnerability as an asset that enables them to critique their fragile subject position within the family. In the trilogy, the protagonist, Vivianne Amsalem, learns about the power she can draw upon from inside herself, namely, the power of the weak.

The concept of vulnerability also creates a link between Israeli women and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Both groups are oppressed in the name of an ideology, and, though they differ regarding their aspirations, they discover new and sometimes similar means of resistance. This topic, which only recently has begun to appear in women's feature films, is dealt with extensively by filmmaker Keren Yedaya's trilogy (that will be discussed further in this book) and forms the backdrop to Michal Bat-Adam's latest film *The Road to Where*, where she draws an analogy between the struggle of Israelis and Palestinian refugees for the same piece of land. Although this is not a new motif in Israeli cinema, it is an innovation in Bat-Adam's personal work, where the Other's vulnerability has now been explicitly recognized. Some scholars, such as Rachel S. Harris, see the parallel between women and Palestinians as simplistic,[22] but, in my view, it is a profound rule of nature that life

[22] Harris, Rachel S." Parallel Lives: Palestinian, Druze, and Jewish Women in Recent Israeli Cinema on the Conflict: *Free Zone, Syrian Bride*, and *Lemon Tree"*. Sho-

in Israel makes people aware of the hegemony's unexpected manipulations of ethnic or religious minorities (as far as we can consider women a minority). Many similarities can be drawn between oppressed populations, and drawing attention to these similarities points the way to potential alliances for their joint empowerment. This is one of Israeli cinema's most effective tools for fighting racism and discrimination.

The Mizrahi Woman and the Israeli Screen

From the outset, Mizrahi Jews, often self-defined as "Arab-Jews,"[23] did not take part in the production of Israeli cinema. As Ella Shohat contends, the first roles given to Mizrahi men were those of Arabs, because of a supposed physiognomic resemblance as it is the case in Baruch Dinar's *They were Ten* (Hem Hayu Asara, 1960).[24] As for Mizrahi women, they underwent a similar process, i.e. played roles of Arab women, again based on physical resemblance with some exceptions: Dramatic leading roles were attributed to darker-skinned Ashkenazi women, the most famous being Gila Almagor, who established part of her cinematic career on the Mizrahi woman stereotype, in films such as the aforementioned *Fortuna* and *The Highway Queen*, and later in *Sh'Chur* (Shmuel Hasfari, 1994).

During the late sixties, Israeli cinema became more and more concerned with the social gaps between center and periphery, and more particularly with the Mizrahi population, "The Other Israel." This new concern gave rise to the Bourekas cinematic genre, a genre that combined melodrama with social protest against injustice with films such as *Charlie*

far. Vol. 32, No. 1 (Fall 2013), Purdue University Press, pp. 79-102.

[23] In contemporary Israel, Mizrahi Jews are often defined as "Arab-Jews," because of the Arab countries from which these Jews came and the supposed Arab influences that they absorbed (Shenhav, 2006). They claimed this title was given to them only after long cultural negotiation, at the beginning of which they were termed "Oriental Jews,'' and later, "Mizrahi Jews."

[24] "The schizophrenic complexity of the Jewish-Arab identity in Israel is signaled, to a certain extent, by this phenomenon of exploiting the Sephardim's Middle Eastern body language and Semitic physiognomy, thus casting them as an integral part of the Arab Middle East" (Shohat 1989, p. 75)

and a Half (Charlie VaHetzi, Boaz Davidson, 1974), *Nurith* (George Obadiah, 1972) or *Sarit* (George Obadiah, 1974). Generally taking place in deserted peripheral towns, these films reflected an image of women which was mostly conservative—the good wife at home who raises the family's many children. In fact, the Bourekas genre initially represented an idyllic world in which women were returned to their traditional place. One aspect of the Bourekas's drama was women's fascination by the world of work, in which they could make money and become more independent.

Thus, one of the recurrent themes in such films was the temptation to live in the big city (which would represent a real city as opposed to the development town). But because the Bourekas films supported a sort of regressive ideology according to which the gendered order should return to what it was in the diaspora, these urban escapades often involved prostitution and never ended well. This kind of narrative became a convention, recognizable in most Bourekas films. And because this genre became the exclusive way to represent Mizrahi women, their characters were locked into orbit around their inferior, degenerate hometowns.[25]

The Mizrahi woman character, then, was gradually abandoned as a subject worthy of attention. This socio-economic approach, inspired by the Italian cinema of the time such as Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1950) or *Rocco and his brothers* (1960), and persisted until Moshe Mizrahi appeared on the Israeli cinema scene. Mizrahi, born in Egypt and educated in France, recreated the narratives and visuals of this ignored population. In *I Love You, Rosa* (Ani Ohev Otach Rosa, 1972), set in nineteenth-century Sephardi ("Mizrahi") Jerusalem, a preadolescent boy falls in love with his dead brother's widow. This impossible love affair is depicted on the backdrop of a culturally rich Sephardi world that organically blends religion and tradition, thus introducing the viewers to a Sephardi heritage that Israeli cinema had simply ignored until then. Although *I Love You, Rosa* does not deal directly with Mizrahi culture in

[25] This convention was recently revised in Keren Yedaya's *The Red Fields* (aka Mami, 2018), which is further discussed in chapter six.

Israel but rather with its Sephardi origins, it illuminates an alternative Jewish existence in which Sephardi women are dominant.[26] In 1972, it was nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Best Foreign Film, and it remains a pillar of Mizrahi cinema up until today.

Moshe Mizrahi's work remained an anomaly in Mizrahi cinematography until 1984, when Dina Zvi-Riklis opened a new chapter in Mizrahi women's filmmaking with her debut short film *Kurdania*, a semi-autobiographical narrative about growing up in an eponymous transitory camp (ma'abara)[27] in the first years of the state. Exposing a symmetry between two families, one from eastern Europe and the other from Iraq, who were the last to remain in the transitory camp, the film reveals the shared destiny of the new immigrants in which the women (and children) befriended and supported each other. In contrast to the positive world that the marginalized women built for themselves, the men, especially Mizrahi men, felt stripped of their masculinity. The film is bookended by two evocative scenes involving the Mizrahi family: In the first, a husband practically rapes his wife, their daughter privy to her moans of agony; in the second, which takes place nine months later, he assists his wife in giving birth—while she is again moaning, not only because of the pain

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[26] I Love You, Rosa is one of the few Israeli films that relate to the forgotten period that predated Zionism. During those years, a Jewish population, known today as "The Old Settlement" (HaYishuv HaYashan), led a traditional Jewish life without any national aspirations and lived peacefully in Palestine alongside the Arab population. See also Shemer, Yaron. *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel*. University of Michigan Press, 2013, p. 16; Elazar, Daniel J. The other Jews: The Sephardim today, Basic Books,1989.; Kamil, Omar (2000), "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and His Culture War in Israel", –MERIA – Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 4 No. 4 (December 2000), pp. 1-9.

[27] Transitory camps (ma'abarot) were immigrants' absorption camps established in Israel in the 1950s. They constituted one of the largest public projects planned by the state to implement its socio-spatial and housing policies. The ma'abarot were meant to provide accommodation for the large influx of new Jewish immigrants (*olim*) arriving to the newly independent State of Israel, replacing the less habitable immigrant camps or tent cities. In 1951 there were 127 ma'abarot housing 250,000 Jews, of which 75% were Mizrahi Jews. 58% of Mizrahi Jews who had immigrated up to that point had been sent to ma'abarot, compared to 18% of European Jews. The ma'abarot began to empty out by the mid-1950s, and many formed the basis for Israel's development towns. The last ma'abara was dismantled in 1963. The ma'abarot became an enduring symbol of the plight of Jewish immigrants from Arab lands in Israel (Gavrieli-Nuri, 2015).

of childbirth but also because of the pain of her aversion to her husband. This first film by a Mizrahi woman filmmaker about a Mizrahi woman sympathetically studies her with appreciation of her worth even as the character is still mired in position as a disenfranchised outsider.

Sh'chur, a feminine bildungsroman directed by Hanna Azoulay-Hasfari and her husband, Shmulik Hasfari, was one of the first full-length films to feature Mizrahi women. This autobiographical film, which came out in 1995 and holds a key place in the historiography of Israeli cinema, deals with the obstacles faced by Mizrahi women as they enter the hegemony, and will be discussed at length in chapter 6. Based on a similar autobiographical idea, Ronit Elkabetz and her brother, Shlomi Elkabetz, directed a trilogy: *To Take a Wife* (2004), *The Seven Days* (2009), and *Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem* (2013). These three films, which will be analyzed in Chapter 7, chronicle the journey of the Israeli Mizrahi woman, from displacement due to immigration, through rebellion against patriarchal structures, and finally to deliverance from all constraints.

The innovation of these Mizrahi women filmmakers cannot be overestimated. Moreover, as I will show in my discussion in the first section of this book, the evolution of Mizrahi women's representation in contemporary Israeli cinema accentuates the deviant imaginary that had created the Mizrahi women's caricatured portrayal and exposes the sexist and misogynistic underbelly of Israel's cinematic establishment.

Women Filmmakers – Between the Private and Public Spheres

In recent decades, the voice of women filmmakers has gained prominence in Israeli cinema (Anderman, 2013). Tackling unexpected topics, not necessarily from a gendered angle, women filmmakers are revealing an alternative Israeli experience: Unspoken truths about the nation and silenced aspects of its ideology.[28]

[28] As Yosef put it, "[T]hey work with and against dominant forms of representation—shifting the traditional place of the gaze; blurring the boundaries between documentary and fiction, avant-garde and narrative; and directly addressing the film spectator as a woman." Yosef, Raz. "Conditions of Visibility: Trauma and Contemporary Israeli Women's Cinema." *Signs: Journal of Women Culture and So-*

When Israeli cinema turned to various oppressed subjects during the 1980s, in the cinema referred to as "The Cinema of the Other"[29], it generally addressed male subjects who were Holocaust survivors, homosexuals, Arabs, or non-integrated immigrants. When women did appear, they were often described by male directors as mentally ill, as in Dan Wolmann's *Hide and Seek* (Mahboim, 1980) or Elie Cohen's *The Summer of Aviya* (Ha'Kayitz Shel Avia, 1988). Women filmmakers were still too inexperienced to introduce such themes (though Michal Bat-Adam did deal with this issue in her second feature film, *A Thin Line* [Al Hevel Dak, 1980]). Finally, in the mid-1980s, women's cinematic narratives turned to face the Zionist past and its exclusion of women from nation-building. Some films emphasized the minor role women still played in modern society where men and women came together in urban settings of music and alcohol, as in Idit Shrori's *Weekend Circles* (Maagalim shel shishabat, 1980) or Ayelet Menahemi's *Crows* (Orvim, 1988). These two films directed by women, although very different in their content and vision of gender roles, both depict the loneliness of men and women in the big city. Notably, the women—who feel sidelined and deeply dissatisfied with their lives—fare far worse than the men, who can always fall back on military camaraderie.

These new voices appeared alongside the establishment of the New Israeli Fund for Documentary Filmmaking, in 1993 which also opened up new opportunities for women and fed the flourishing of the New Israeli Women's Cinema, as it known today. At first sight, this cinema plunges into the most personal of narratives. On closer inspection, however, it exposes the meanderings of a society in transition, liberating voices that were long silenced due to the complexity of the political and economic situation. Thus, although Israeli women's films rarely deal with political issues per se, these themes are present in the films' subtext, where they function as catalysts of the events to come.

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ciety 42, no. 4 (2017): pp. 919–943.

[29] Gertz, Nurith. "The Arab as Other in Cinema and Literature," Symposium on Cinema, Politics, and Ideology. Department of Communication, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1992. [Hebrew].

The final theoretical issue that this book explores is Israeli women filmmakers' choice of narrative content and relates specifically to vulnerability. As mentioned previously, women's vulnerability has long been seen as a source of weakness. In the past decade, however, this view has been upended by scholars such as Judith Butler, who approach women's vulnerability as a source of strength, enabling them as it does to perceptively grasp critical social and political realities. In her book, *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance*, Butler argues that the presence of women in the public sphere represents a kind of challenge for the evolution of humanity and humanism:

> The street cannot be taken for granted as the space of appearance, to use Hannah Arendt's phrase, the space of politics, since there is, as we know, a struggle to establish that very ground. And Arendt is at least partially right when she claims that the space of appearance comes into being at the moment of political action.[30]

While women have often been presented on screen as confined to the domestic sphere, this book will follow the trajectory of women in the public sphere and observe their efforts to create an alternative public space inside, or next to, the domestic one. Put differently, in Israeli women's cinematography, space plays a specific narrative role as it often embodies the reapportionment of the public sphere. Therefore, women's appearance outside the domestic sphere should always be regarded as a political act, "[an] embodied performative speech act, to be sure, since in any time or place that we act, the space of appearance for the political comes into being."[31]

In Israeli cultural terms, this political space of appearance is often located in the military, an institution which for many years has served as the beating heart of Israeliness. I will here leave aside the legitimate cinematic praise for an institution that defends its people in the context of continuous conflict. Instead, I shall mention that in Israel, more than

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[30] Butler, Judith. "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (New York: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 12-27.

[31] Ibid.

in any other western country, the military (even when not directly mentioned) is central to any discussion of women's filmmaking arguably, almost every single Israeli man and woman in these cinematic narratives can be assumed to suffer from PTSD. This is because, in Israel, the conflict is ubiquitous: It reaches you at home, through your friends, your children, and the daily news reports.

The Israeli context, then, is one of imminent war and endless battle against indefatigable enemies. But as I will show in chapter 3 women's participation in the military did not engender equality between the sexes. In fact, when it came to the military, Israeli culture and Israeli cinema rejected the notion of equality altogether.[32]

The encounter between religious and secular communities, which is another important Israeli phenomenon and core issue in Israeli life, has been depicted, for example, in Kayam's *Mountain*, which will be discussed in chapter 4. Indeed, the entire category of religious women has only rarely been dealt with, even by women filmmakers. In the few cinematic representations of religious women, such as in Amos Gitai's *Kadosh* (2000), an attempt was made to imagine the experience of a woman caught in the tight web of religious rules and constraints. For all that, however, these female protagonists have mostly been represented as unidimensional and tragic.

In this book, I show that Israeli women's cinema has struggled to separate itself from previous traditions—narrative and representative—to embrace a new world where women are the protagonists. This world, however, bears the traces of the hardships that women filmmakers have surmounted in order to attain artistic and individual independence. The best example is the case of Michal Bat-Adam, the most experienced Israeli woman filmmaker, discussed extensively in this book. Other women, however, such as Mira Recanati, director of *A Thousand Little Kisses* (Eleph Neshikot Ktanot, 1981), responded to the adversity by

[32] According to sociologist Yagil Levy, in the IDF, there is an idea that women should not be in the military because the threat of rape in captivity increases the potential for blackmail on the part of the captors (personal communication, April 14, 2022). Of course, we now know that men and women alike are subject to rape.

withdrawing from filmmaking.

Structure of the Book

This book is composed of two parts: the first deals with recurrent themes and expressions of vulnerability in Israeli women's cinema, and the second focuses on some of the leading female auteurs in contemporary Israeli cinema: Michal Bat-Adam, Keren Yedaya, and the late Ronit Elkabetz. Each of the seven chapters offers an analysis of major film texts and presents an overview of their cinematic forms and narratives, thus presenting an exploratory discussion that seeks to stimulate further discourse.

The first chapter, "Far from the Eyes, Far from the Heart: The Mizrahi Woman and the Development Town, From Menahem Golan's *Fortuna* (1966) to Hanna Azoulay-Hasfari's *Sh'chur* (1995)," offers an in-depth investigation of the representation of Mizrahi women on the Israeli screen, based on some contemporary canonic films in women's cinema. At the same time, it delves into the research to closely examine a key subject in Israeli women's cinema: The Mizrahi woman, a character that has evolved from misrepresentation and marginalization to become a central protagonist.

The second chapter, titled "Blurred Memories: The Taboo of Sexual Assault in Hagar Ben-Asher's *The Slut* (2011) and Michal Aviad's *Invisible* (2011)," deals with two films that unboxed the underrepresented issues of sexual assault and sexual promiscuity. These two films, which were released in the same year, point to new directions for Israeli women's filmmaking such as mother-daughter relations, friendships between women, and mostly sexual abuse in the public sphere.

The third chapter, "Three Points of Views on Israeli Women's Military Experience: Vardit Bilu and Dalia Hager's *Close to Home* (2005), Tamar Yarom's *To See If I'm Smiling* (2007), and Talia Lavie's *Zero Motivation* (2014)," turns to one of the most dominant issues in Israeli culture: mandatory active duty in the military, and examines recent shifts in