

## **Perpetuating Victimhood as a Jewish Identity? The Case of Popular Israeli Cinema Today**

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In the last decade or so, Israeli films have gained increasing visibility internationally. Beyond Israel, they have been screened at prestigious film festivals, won important awards and are often distributed widely, across a range of platforms. At the same time, particularly through the activism of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, Israel is subjected to growing criticism around the world. While the country's traditional allies, primarily in the West, remain politically supportive of it in the main, popular support of Israel in some of these countries is eroding, with boycotts of cultural and academic activities resulting in routine disruptions and occasional cancellations.<sup>1</sup> This curious paradox between the popularity of Israeli cinema, and the decreasing prestige of Israel itself, may be explained by the kinds of films Israelis export: films that present Israelis as victims, albeit of their own aggression.

This chapter examines several Israeli films that focus on the Israeli military which succeeded abroad; a measure that can be judged by their selection for international film festivals, box office performance, and positive reviews in the international press. *Yossi & Jagger* (2002, dir. Eitan Fox), *Beaufort* (2007, dir. Joseph Cedar), *Waltz with Bashir* (2008, dir. Ari Folman), *Lebanon* (2009, dir. Shmulik Ma'oz), *Rock the Casbah* (2013, dir. Yariv Horowitz) and *Zero Motivation* (2014, dir. Talya Lavi), belong to a body of work described as part of the Israeli phenomenon known as "shooting &

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<sup>1</sup> The long history of these sanctions and their widespread practice has merited a dedicated Wikipedia entry. See, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boycotts\\_of\\_Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boycotts_of_Israel).

weeping". The phrase describes the Israeli public's problematic relationship with militarism which is at once lauded and condemned. It encapsulates the soldier's expression of guilt and remorse for culpability in Palestinian suffering. The earliest expressions of this confessional style can be seen in the literary works of S. Yizhar in *Hirbet Khizeh* (1949) and "The Prisoner" (1948), which were Yizhar's reflections on his military experiences during the 1948 war for Israel's independence. Though artistic expressions of soldier's ambivalence towards militarism can be traced from this period,<sup>2</sup> the publication of *Siach Lochamim* (Soldiers Stories, 1967), which contains reflections of soldiers who were mentally scarred by some of the harsh actions they witnessed and participated in during the Six Day War gave rise to the phrase and popularized it. The book impacted Israeli public opinion, was reprinted several times, and was distributed widely abroad. In 2015, Mohr Lushi made a documentary film that reexamines the book's legacy. In it she films the reactions of the same soldiers as she plays back their voices on the original tapes that had been recorded in the week immediately after the war concluded and formed the basis for the book. Discussions about the film in the Israeli media focused on the resonance between questions of moral and legal authority over the Palestinian population that the soldiers had originally raised; and the contemporary political reality which includes the ongoing control of territories. Its impact may have been further accentuated by the presence of Amos Oz, a noted writer, journalist and public intellectual, among the cast.<sup>3</sup> At its most cynical, the phrase also critiques a tendency among Israelis, as Hannan Hever has described it, to

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<sup>2</sup> See Harris, Rachel S. "Forgetting the Forgotten Ones: The case of Haim Gouri's "Hanishkahim"." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 8.2 (2009): 199-214 and Harris, Rachel. "Samson's Suicide: Death and the Hebrew Literary Canon." *Israel Studies* 17.3 (2012): 67-91.

<sup>3</sup> For a contemporary ethical discussion of the phrase and sensibility, see Na'aman, Oded, "The Rise and Fall of the Bleeding Hearts (Aliyatam venefilatam shel yefei hanefesh), *Te'oria uvikoret* 33 (2008), pp. 225-238. For an online version, see, [http://theory-and-criticism.vanleer.org.il/NetisUtils/srvrutil\\_getPDF.aspx/5j7aGe/%2F%2F33-13.pdf](http://theory-and-criticism.vanleer.org.il/NetisUtils/srvrutil_getPDF.aspx/5j7aGe/%2F%2F33-13.pdf).

For an overview about the film's reception, see, Itzkovitz, Gili, [http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/.premium-1.2651353#hero\\_\\_bottom](http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/.premium-1.2651353#hero__bottom), 6.06.2015.

“[rely] heavily on the argumentation and rhetoric of a minority struggling for its very existence.” In this way, the contemporary Israeli reality is cast as a narrative that extends from a Jewish history “steeped in suffering”, and a “ ‘fortress mentality’ vis-a-vis a largely hostile Arab world.”<sup>5</sup> This ability to switch between the position of conquering hero and impotent victim has informed Israel’s world view and is a characteristic of these militaristic films feeding not only Israel’s self-identification, but also reinforcing global opinion which simultaneously wishes to view Israel as a powerful military force responsible for the oppression of Palestinians for which Israel is widely criticized, and as a country in peril that requires international support for its military that must act against a dangerous population intent on Israel’s destruction.

Operating within a cultural framework that views the current political reality as untenable and damaging to the country, these films rarely offer a nuance to the inconsistency displayed in the complacent self-righteousness of world opinion. Instead Israeli filmmakers working in a market which revels in a post-modern discourse of victimhood have turned the trope of Jew-as-victim into one of Israel's most successful cultural exports.

During the 2000s, Israeli military film began to show a distinct shift in its patterns of representation. Previously, films had either considered militarism in relation to an enemy threat even when dealing critically with the experience or with the soldier’s trauma such as in *The Troupe* (1978), *Paratroopers* (1977), *Avanti Popolo* (1986), *Time for Cherries* (1990), *Kippur* (2000), or as a critique of the Israeli political machinery as with films such as *Late Summer Blues* (1987). The change in the

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<sup>5</sup> Hever, Hanan; Gensler, Orin D., “Hebrew in an Israeli Arab Hand: Six Miniatures on Anton Shammas's "Arabesques", *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (Autumn, 1987), pp. 48.

twenty-first century has been that films with a military focus detach service in the IDF from the political background that informs it.

*Yossi & Jagger*, one of the earliest of these new kinds of films, foregrounds a gay love story in the military, focusing on the civil-rights of gay soldiers with little concern for the context of war and military service, which serve as the background to the drama. Situated in a remote redoubt high in the mountains overlooking Lebanon in the north of Israel, the film follows the relationships between two officers, the post's commander, Yossi (Ohad Knoller), and his handsome deputy, Jagger (Yehuda Levi). Yossi who embodies the historical apotheosis of Israeli militarism; a gruff macho soldier, an exacting officer, and a man of few words is contrasted with Jagger, his playful, emotionally vulnerable, underling. Although the two are passionately in love – the film opens with a bold picture of them rolling and kissing in the mountain snows outside the base – their relationship and their homosexuality which are secret constitute the film's main point of drama. While Jagger wants to broadcast their love, Yossi is reluctant to do so. As someone who internalized his society's denigration of gays, he is afraid to lose authority and respect if his secret is revealed. Most of the film negotiates this terrain of fear and deception until the climax at the end when Jagger is mortally wounded, and Yossi mouths the "I love you" Jagger sought throughout the film. The public kiss they share exposes their relationship and effectively outs them.

As Nir Cohen has shown, the soldier's heroism coupled with their touching love story, serves to legitimate homosexuality in Israeli society.<sup>6</sup> By embodying the masculinity of previously heroic roles,

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen, Nir, *Soldiers, Rebels, and Drifters: Gay Representation in Israeli cinema*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012, pp. 104-115.

and by sharing in the national sacrifice the gay soldiers become equal participants within an Israeli society that valorizes army service and regards the IDF as a representative national institution par-excellence. But while the film presents war as attractive and homosexuals as patriotic heroes and masculine objects of desire, the film's tragedy lies in Jagger's death and his loss for Yossi. It avoids any reference to the continued conflict in the Middle East, the enemy who kills Jagger remains an invisible signifier, and the progressive and problematic militarization of Israel society is never touched upon.

The film's central agenda, the positive representation of homosexuality, is accentuated in the film's heightened sense of aestheticism. This is particularly evident in the ways in which the soldier's physical beauty (both male and female) and their semi-naked bodies are frequently displayed in an effort to conjure up, not the scenes of a military encampment, but the permissive and gay friendly city of Tel Aviv. In one scene, soldiers in the bunker dance to a techno-soundtrack as if they were in a nightclub. In an even more unlikely move they then eat freshly prepared sushi in the company mess. Finally, the bunker, which ordinarily appears as an ungainly stone mass, is completely covered in snow, transforming the bleak and barren surroundings into a magical winter wonderland.<sup>7</sup>

Not only successful in Israel, *Yossi & Jagger* was popular around the world as well, probably owing to its unusual setting of a gay love story in the military, which at the time of its release was one of the last frontiers of gay civil rights in the West.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it was also accused of

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<sup>7</sup> In a private conversation with singer Ivri Lider, who sings the title song of the film on the DVD version of it, "Boh" (Come), originally by the singer Rita, he told me that the snow was not an original part of the script but a result of a surprise snowstorm taking place a few days before the planned shoot. George Washington University, October 31, 2006. For a critical discussion of the film, see Yosef, Raz, "The National Closet: Gay Israel in Yossi and Jagger," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 2 (2005): 283-300.

<sup>8</sup> The film received high rating overall on *Rotten Tomatoes* (88 by critics, 74 by reviewers) and *Metacritic* (70 by critics, 7.9 out of 10 by reviewers). More than a decade after it was first released it is still widely available for streaming or DVD

pinkwashing; a cynical appeal to LGBT sensibilities whose express purpose is to divert attention from the oppression of Palestinians by presenting Israel as a liberal country tolerant of LGBT rights.<sup>9</sup> The film's international reception was viewed through the filtering mechanism of audience's own ideas about militarism (that it should be gay friendly) and the Conflict (that Israel denies responsibility for the oppression of Palestinians and is particularly, if not expressly, responsible for any efforts to remedy this situation).

War's structured absence in *Yossi & Jagger* is a theme also shared in *Beaufort* (2007), the first of three films that have come to be known as 'The Lebanon Films,' which also include *Waltz with Bashir* and *Lebanon*. Named for the geographically commanding crusader fortress turned modern IDF bunker, *Beaufort* represents an Israeli stronghold, while its soldiers, deeply embedded underground, demonstrate the illusion of this military supremacy, situating them as victims of hostile and invisible forces. The dislocation of the military fort and the narrative's ultimate presentation of the site as a place that should never have been taken in the first place, and was captured with a heavy loss to life as a result of miscommunications, accentuate the sense of war not only as futile, but as a political and tactical error. Focusing on the story of Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon twenty years after its occupation (2000), *Beaufort*<sup>10</sup> presents the soldiers as victims, unable to retaliate for the rockets that

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purchase on Amazon, Amazon Prime, Netflix and Mubi as well as many other torrent services. In the Gay Cinema category, it has become a classic. Neither is very common for Israeli films as Israeli cinema remains a relatively small and unknown cinema despite its relative success and recognition in the last decade or so.

<sup>9</sup> For a short introduction to pinkwashing in Israel, see a reprint of a *New York Times* article on the subject from 22.11.2011, Schulman, Sara, "Israel and Pinkwashing", [http://queeramnesty.ch/docs/NYT\\_20111123\\_Israel\\_Pinkwashing.pdf](http://queeramnesty.ch/docs/NYT_20111123_Israel_Pinkwashing.pdf). For two articles representative of the debate, see Puar, Jasbir. "Citation and censorship: The politics of talking about the sexual politics of Israel." *Feminist Legal Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 133-142; Ritchie, Jason. "Pinkwashing, Homonationalism, and Israel-Palestine: The Conceits of Queer Theory and the Politics of the Ordinary." *Antipode* 47, no. 3 (2015): 616-634.

<sup>10</sup> The film appeared at the same time as a book of the same name. They are not adaptations of the other but rather two

constantly rain on them. Instead they must wait passively, weathering the assaults, so that the IDF's withdrawal is not delayed. Thus, the film's central drama is the soldier's frustration in this Kafkaesque situation where they can be fired upon, but not fire back, at a site which they should never have taken, while staring at the commemorative plaque naming those who have fallen, pointlessly, before them.

The film avoids the unabashed patriotism of the novel which addresses the soldier's abandonment, instead focusing on the psychological cost of that abandonment but without showing the reasons or overall context for it. The viewer's identification with the soldiers occurs in response to the bureaucratic lunacy of the situation. Situating not just the individual soldier but the army in toto as the perpetual victim of political/government machinations, it thereby sidesteps the political context of Israel's presence within Lebanon.

Through the portrayal of the soldiers' camaraderie, their depiction as a band of fighters whose friendship is forged by the tests they endure the film creates an emotional immediacy. Using conventions from the disaster film genre, *Beaufort* acquaints viewers with the characters building our relationship with them and then subjecting the soldiers to various dangers. As the characters die, the audience becomes increasingly empathetic, moved by their senseless deaths.

The film won an impressive array of awards both at home and abroad.<sup>11</sup> Despite the film's apparent silence over the political context, some critics saw it in the film's subtext and admired this lacunae, reading it as present even in its absence: "The political implications of [the] questions

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projects that developed simultaneously with some shared interaction between the novelist Ron Leshem and film director Joseph Cedar. For more on this see my article, "*Beaufort* the Book, *Beaufort* the film: Israeli Militarism Under Attack" in *Narratives of Dissent, War in Contemporary Israeli Arts and Culture*, Rachel S. Harris, Ranene Omer-Sherman eds., Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> *Beaufort* received 4 Ophir awards in Israel, won the Silver Bear award in the 2007 Berlin Film Festival and competed for best foreign film at the Oscars that year, a rare achievement for an Israeli film.

[*Beaufort* raises] hover in the background, haunting the action rather than dominating it”, wrote A. O. Scott in the *New York Times*, adding that, “the film’s distance from politics allows it to address the moment-to-moment experiences of its characters with intense, unassuming intimacy”.<sup>12</sup> Other chose to view Cedar's soldiers as symbols for the age-old plight of the soldier-as-pawn, sympathetically viewing the soldiers as victims of history and society: “Cedar has created a movie of tremendous power — nerve-racking, astute, and neutral enough to apply to all soldiers, in all wars, everywhere”, said *Entertainment Weekly*.<sup>13</sup>

European critics were less convinced of this. “A film in which the soldiers are only shot at, and never shoot [back], can not be the whole truth”, wrote Harald Jähner in the *Berliner Zeitung*.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Elmar Krekeler of the *Berliner Morgenpost*, wrote that, “at the end, the fortress is blown into dust. The boys put down their armor. They have survived. Not more. The killing continues”.<sup>15</sup> In their view, the film shirked a political and moral responsibility to account for the continued killing and explain it. The French agreed. “Finally,” wrote Clement Grasses, “the limits of Israeli cinema's ability to represent the conflict that never ends should be questioned [as] *Beaufort* is almost touching in its

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<sup>12</sup> A. O. Scott, “Israeli Soldiers Man a Fortress of Futility”, *NYT*, Jan. 18, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/18/movies/18beau.html?ref=movies&r=0>.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Schwartzbaum, “*Beaufort*”, *Entertainment Weekly*, Jan. 16, 2008, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20172267,00.html>. A few other critics expressed similar sentiments, with David Edelstein from the *New York Magazine* writing that, “pro-war audiences on both sides will find Joseph Cedar’s vision irresponsible. I think *Beaufort* captures a higher irresponsibility”, <http://nymag.com/listings/movie/beaufort/>, Jan. 21, 2008. Ella Taylor from the *Village Voice* wrote that, “Cedar's understated humanism—passionate but never glib or easy—renders all the more painful the unstated coda that, six years after Israel's retreat from Lebanon, the wounds opened all over again. *Beaufort*”, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080120094210/http://www.villagevoice.com/film/0803,taylor,78850,20.html>, Jan. 15, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> The critique appears with three others at <http://www.film-zeit.de/Film/18374/BEAUFORT/Kritik/> on Feb. 15, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Elmar Krekeler, “Soldaten verzweifeln an ihrer Aufgabe” (Soldiers Despair of the Task), <http://www.morgenpost.de/printarchiv/kultur/article103077925/Soldaten-verzweifeln-an-ihrer-Aufgabe.html#>, Feb. 2, 2007.

inability to include the enemy [the Israeli soldiers] fight.”<sup>16</sup> As with the accusations of pinkwashing against *Yossi & Jagger*, this position expressed concern at the enemy’s erasure from the narrative.

Ari Folman's groundbreaking award winning feature, *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) positioned this absence as a psychological repression<sup>17</sup> The film is an animated journey into the suppressed memories of the director-protagonist who wishes to understand his exact connection to and participation in the Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1982, during Israel’s military campaign in Lebanon. In an unusual gesture, having recovered the animated protagonist’s role, if not his memories, the film switches to historical documentary footage from the aftermath of the massacre. The screaming women, whose words lie untranslated, is a visually jolting closure that forces the audience to confront the past and encounter the victims of the massacre.<sup>18</sup> Thus the film’s establishment of the soldiers-as-victims due to their psychological and at times physical trauma is confronted when the audience encounters suffering victims in the refugee camps, moments after a massacre. This immediacy erases any other narrative or conflicting experience, denoting an undeniable hierarchy of suffering in which the Palestinian is unquestionably the principle, if not the only victim.

Critical reception of the film was extraordinary. *Bashir* is “not about historical facts but the marks they leave on the soul”, wrote Diedrich Diederichsen in *Die Zeit Online*.<sup>19</sup> “Barely grown men, young,

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<sup>16</sup> Grasses, Clement, “Beaufort”, <http://www.critikat.com/Beaufort.html>, 25.03.2008.

<sup>17</sup> *Waltz with Bashir* is one of the most awarded Israeli film to date as well as one of the most well-known and widely distributed Israeli films abroad. It is probably also the first Israeli film which in some ways mythologized the Arab-Israeli conflict and lent it an artistic quality that transformed its staleness as a ubiquitous news item that managed to transcend its all too familiar documentary character.

<sup>18</sup> The women are actually encouraging the filmmakers to record the horror. For a discussion of this scene, see Alison Patterson and Dan Chyutin, “Teaching Trauma in (and Out of) Translation: Waltzing with Bashir in English,” in *Media and Translation: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Dror Abend-David (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 224-226.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.film-zeit.de/Film/19842/WALTZ-WITH-BASHIR/Kritik/>, 16.12.2008.

unprepared, thrust into brutal, bloody combat”, empathized another German blogger, who also saw the film as a meditation on war in general.<sup>20</sup> Even more probing critics, like *The Independent's* Anthony Quin, could not avoid the film's powerful confessional pull: “*Waltz With Bashir* presents its audience with a serious challenge of interpretation. Folman stresses the slippery, unreliable nature of memory, but is that actually a way of ducking his own responsibility? I began thinking it was, and for a long stretch of this film one detects more sympathy for the traumatized Israeli soldiers than for the massacred civilians of the Sabra and Shatila camps. But then one thinks again of those ferocious slaver dogs at the beginning: does the image signify a confession of complicity? ... one wonders why Folman would include such emotive pictures if they weren't somehow prompted by conscience.”<sup>21</sup> Yet this did not prevent critics from identifying a measure of self-indulgence in the film, like Dave Calhoun of *Time Out* (London), a position that various academic examinations of the film also suggested.<sup>22</sup> These critiques understand Folman’s focus on his own psychological experience as a deception that pretended towards criticism of his own complicity but ultimately retreated to the

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<sup>20</sup> Suchsland, Rüdiger “West Side Waltz”, *Artechoke*, <http://www.artehock.de/film/text/kritik/w/wesiwa.htm>. Undated. Most critics agreed. Bettina Spoerri, writing in the *Neu Zürcher Zeitung* on Dec. 4, 2008 said that, the film presents the self reflection of Israeli soldiers on their pointless and absurd acts of destruction, their total mental overwork and their fear of death and inability to return to normal life again. <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/feuilleton/film/von-der-erinnerung-an-den-krieg-verfolgt-1.1352475>.

<sup>21</sup> Quin, Anthony, “Fighting for the Truth”, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/waltz-with-bashir-18-1027847.html>, 21.11.2008.

<sup>22</sup> See, Alison Patterson and Dan Chyutin, *ibid*, pp. 221-241 as well as Atkinson P. and Cooper S., “Untimely Animations: Waltz with Bashir and the Incorporation of Historical Difference”, *Screening the Past*, 34, 2012. <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2012/08/untimely-animations-waltz-with-bashir-and-the-incorporation-of-historical-difference/>.

conventions of “shooting and weeping” that positioned the soldier as a victim of a political-military machine he had little power to subvert.<sup>23</sup>

*Lebanon*, (2009, dir. Samuel Maoz), the last of the Lebanon series is perhaps the best example of the kind of victimhood dynamics described thus far. Set within the confines of a tank, with the tank’s scope the soldier’s only means of seeing the world beyond, the film’s cinematography imprisons its four protagonists as they participate in the First Lebanon War (1982-1985). Their experiences on the front line offer a visceral claustrophobic encounter with war whose grotesque violence threatens to drown the young men in a moving coffin. The agonizing mixture of confinement, confusion and a profound sense of helplessness evokes the audience’s deep sympathy while it watches as the tank maneuvers in response to inexplicable commands called out on the wireless. Instead of the tank serving as a symbol of force, in which them men are protected, the horrors they see through the narrow confines of the gun sights – much of which they reek themselves, exacerbates their sense of mounting alarm, building into feat that ultimately triggers their own hysteria.

The narrative is comprised of an escalating series of actions which are, to some extent, repetitious. Shortly after the film opens, we see a peaceful lane in the middle of a lush banana plantation. Through the tank's crosshairs we see a pickup truck driving up the lane toward the tank. Suspecting that the truck is booby-trapped or carrying enemy gunmen, the soldiers shoot at it from

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<sup>23</sup> “Then and now, Folman puts himself centre-stage – which means he’s always dancing on the edge of self-indulgence”. <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/waltz-with-bashir>, 1.10.2008. The more academic examinations of the film tend to support its self-indulgent aspect, even if they do not “accuse” the filmmaker directly of it. Raya Morag’s book-length study of what she terms the perpetrator’s trauma is the most substantial exploration of this aspect, which is the subject of other studies as well. See, Morag, Raya, *Waltzing with Bashir: perpetrator trauma and cinema* Vol. 11. IB Tauris, 2013, as well as, Yosef, Raz, "War fantasies: Memory, trauma and ethics in Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 311-326. These critiques focus on the privatization of war memories. As a result, the mentally scarred soldiers are severed from a national context and become patients in a way, an injured minority. And since the injury was caused by a coercive system they had little control of, their portrayal as victims becomes almost inevitable.

close range and blow it to pieces, sending screaming chickens into the air and literally cutting in half the poor, innocent farmer who drove the car, all of which they watch with shocked terror through their gun's viewfinder at extreme close up. Thus begins their grim journey into the battlefields of Lebanon. The series of abominations are exemplified in an early scene in which the tank is directed to help a local Christian family in a bombed out village, invaded by Muslim combatants. Through their gun sights they see into the intimate enclosures of a house, whose exterior wall has been torn down in the fighting. The Muslim forces who apparently did the damage, are now inside the house menacing its inhabitants, particularly an attractive young woman, who seems to have been snatched from her bed, as she is scantily clad in a night gown. The gunner looks on at the woman, shocked by the violent scene. He is ordered to shoot the Muslim fighters, but to do so he must fire a shell through the terrified woman. More than any other moment in *Lebanon*, this scene accentuates the impossible predicament the tank crew members find themselves in, caught in the middle of an ostensibly inexplicable power structure made up of social, political and military forces that have taken them hostage. The soldiers become literally imprisoned in and by the tank, which at some point in the film turns into a monstrous, living creature, covered in slime, oozing black oil, filled with excrement and dead bodies. A dirty, ugly, smelly beast whose physical deformity expresses the moral degradation of its inhabitants, and the actions they are forced to perform.

Lebanon won the Leone d'Oro award at the 66<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival in 2009 and was enthusiastically received around the world. *The New York Times* empathized with the director, attributing the cinematic scene to an autobiographical exorcism, which was supported by media interviews with the director. "For Mr. Maoz, now 48, the sense of responsibility for killing remains strong.... 'There is no escape from it', [Mr. Maoz] said softly. In the end you were there, and your finger pulled the trigger. That there were no choices makes no difference. ... to make the film was a

partial catharsis, Mr. Maoz said. But the war remains the first thing he thinks about in the morning and the last before going to sleep.”<sup>24</sup> On the Anglophone *Rotten Tomatoes* most critics, as well as the lay responses posted on the site, concurred.<sup>25</sup>

These filmmakers were not the first to use film as an artistic response to their personal experiences of war. Judd Ne’eman who had served as a medic in the paratroopers during the Six Day War, The War of Attrition and the Yom Kippur War, and Amos Gitai who had been called up to the reserves during the Yom Kippur War, had used film both as a cathartic medium to exorcise their own military experiences, and as a medium for critiquing the political establishment. However, their films (for example, Ne’eman’s *Paratroopers* [1978] and Gitai’s *Kippur* [2000]) had served as outliers against a cultural consensus – even within the artistic community – that militarism and the political establishment were aligned and were serving the national good. Their films generally showcased the impact on the individual and the ways in which the Israeli military system worked to destroy the weak and vulnerable.<sup>26</sup>

Israel’s wars before 1982, including the War of Independence (1948), the Suez Crisis (1956), the Six Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) – were perceived by a majority of Israelis as

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<sup>24</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/movies/01lebanon.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/movies/01lebanon.html?_r=0), 30.07.2010. Similarly, Australian critic, Leigh Paatch, wrote in the *Herald Sun*, “Rarely has a film so intensely conveyed the catastrophic shock to the system a first time on a battlefield must wield. It all comes down to the same conundrum again and again in Lebanon. A mistake made on the spot must be lived with for the rest of your life”. <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/movies/film-review-lebanon/story-e6frf8r6-1225964663032>, 02.12.2010.

<sup>25</sup> Almost all of the critics posted on the site praise the film for similar reasons and none of the 104 critiques mention the Palestinians. Of the 383 lay comments about the film, four comments only mention the Palestinians. Two of these comments appear twice under two different names and on different dates. One of those spouts harsh anti-Israeli invectives about the image of Israeli soldiers as victims and seems to have been written by a crank: “Este estúpido cuento de los pobres soldados judíos víctimas que tienen que luchar contra los monstruosos terroristas palestinos ya sabe a popo” (This is a hashed and stupid story about poor victimized Jewish soldiers who have to fight monstrous Palestinian terrorists). See commentators, andres V, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/lebanon-2010/reviews/?page=11&type=user&sort=>, October 24, 2010, and andres74varela, <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/lebanon-2010/reviews/?page=10&type=user&sort=>, January 4, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> For more on this, see Gertz, Nurith. "The medium that mistook itself for war: Cherry Season in Comparison with Ricochets and Cup Final." *Israel Studies* 4, no. 1 (1999): 153-174.

“no-choice” defensive wars that were fought against imminent Arab aggression. Hence, even when the costs were high, both physically and mentally, the sacrifices were deemed worthy of the cause and actually inspired many artists to laud them in literature, poetry popular songs, plays and films.<sup>27</sup> That the Lebanon War elicited a very different kind of artistic reaction is therefore significant and explains much of the trauma those films articulate, a reaction that was likely born as a result of the tension between soldiers’ initial sense of patriotism going into it and their cruel awakening at its conclusion and after.

By contrast with previous artistic works, the Lebanon films appeared during a time of greater ambivalence about the sanctity of the Israeli military, and a questioning of the war itself, as Rachel S. Harris has argued, “the central position of the army in Israeli society has been weakened from several directions. The opposition to military attacks, maneuvers, and acts of aggression led elements in society to question the position, authority, and purpose of the army.”<sup>28</sup> The sheer number of the Lebanon films, and their closely timed appearance, as well as their acceptance and celebration within Israel and internationally, demonstrates a seismic shift in the criticism of Israeli militarism, the political establishment’s support for “wars of choice” and the impact on the country’s psyche. Since then, two recent films, *Rock the Casbah* (dir. Yariv Horowitz, 2013) and *Zero Motivation* (dir. Talya Lavie, 2015) have expanded the conversation about Israeli militarism, moving from the contested and politically complex situation of the Lebanon war, to consider the issues of occupation at home and the engagement with civilian populations (in *Rock the Casbah*) and with issues of discrimination and the

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<sup>27</sup> On the enthusiastic reaction of various Israeli artists to the country’s early wars and military campaigns up to 1973, see “Chapter 3: Jewish and Fanatic: Images of Religious Zionists” in my book, *Directed by God: Jewishness in Contemporary Israeli Film and Television*, Huston: University of Texas Press, 2016, pp.196-265.

<sup>28</sup> Harris, Rachel S. *An Ideological Death: Suicide in Israeli Literature*. Northwestern University Press, 2014. 75

permissive attitude towards masculine and military violence (*in Zero Motivation*). At the same time, these films perpetuate the “shooting & weeping” narrative.

*Rock the Casbah* is one of only two Israeli films made about the First Intifada (1987-1991), the first campaign Israel fought against civilians rather than regular armies.<sup>29</sup> Based on the personal experience of its director, the film follows the difficult situation that a small group of soldiers encounters when it is stationed on the roof of a house from which one of their comrades was hit and killed during the first riots in the Gaza Strip in December, 1987 (the riots came to be known later as the First Intifada). The house belongs to a Palestinian family that had nothing to do with the attack. Thus, both parties, the Israelis and the Palestinians, are presented as hostages, victims in the clutches of a conflict that is bigger than both.

The film does not consider the significant milestone that the First Intifada represented, nor the political and historical forces that led to it. Instead, it offers a narrative that appears dislocated in time, a continuous image of the contemporary political reality in which the Israeli military is stationed within Palestinian civilian areas, engaged in urban warfare that makes victims of Palestinians and Israelis alike. Rather than comment on this tragic perpetuation, *Rock the Casbah*, as its name suggests, focuses on the simple innocence of the young soldiers it portrays, who wish they could go out with girls and listen to rock music instead of being stationed on an isolated rooftop in the middle of a dirty refugee camp asked to do impossibly complicated things they care little if anything about. Yet, since neither the

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<sup>29</sup> The first one, *One of Us* (dir. Uri Barbash), was released in 1989, very close to the actual conflict. The film does not deal directly with the incursion of Israeli soldiers into Palestinians civilian life as it focuses on the army’s investigation into criminal acts by policing soldiers.

wider context of the conflict nor the narrower context of the riots themselves are given, viewers are left with both groups, Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians, embraced in a kind of enigmatic dance of death.

In one of the most symbolic scenes in this film, we see Tomer (Yon Tumarkin), the most innocent looking and vulnerable of the young soldiers stationed on the roof, bring a young Palestinian suspect to the army's local HQ for questioning. No one knows what the man was arrested for and what he is accused of, including the Palestinian himself. The suspect's hands are handcuffed and his eyes are covered, and Tomer staggers with him along the empty corridors of HQ, surrealistically looking for somewhere to deposit him. At one point, the two stumble into the mental health office and Tomer, prisoner in tow, asks the surprised officer for an interview in order obtain a discharge from service in Gaza on mental health grounds. Looking at the odd pair before her, the officer tells Tomer to come back after he has delivered his charge. But when Tomer finally returns, the office is closed and the officer is gone. For a brief moment he stares blankly at the door and then leaves dejectedly, to return to his rooftop duty. Tomer may have obtained access to the Castle, but that did not make the System any less arbitrary, surreal or alienating than it was for Kafka's K.

The film offers an innocent young man, victimized by obscure, all-powerful forces. Although Palestinians also fall victim to the same cruel and arbitrary forces, their violence against the young Israeli soldiers ultimately makes them part of the powers that work against the soldiers. Despite both Israelis and Palestinians being victimized by random circumstances that are beyond their control, the film's narrative angle offers the audience's sympathy to the Israeli soldiers.

In his review of the film, *Ha'aretz* film critic Uri Klein, commends the director for his direct engagement with the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet the film itself, writes Klein, "avoids articulating a brave

message, lacking political or ideological context and adds nothing to the reality it describes”.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, writing about the scene described above, Klein points to its eloquence in “describing the sense of stress and anxiety, the mental isolation and the emotional abandonment the soldiers who serve in the territories feel”. Precisely because the violence unites occupier and occupied, he writes, all sense of reality is lost. As a result, the soldiers are thrown on the mercy of viewers, who truly feel sorry for them.

Klein is a sophisticated and exacting critique for whom cinematic considerations often take precedence over more ideological ones. Most Israeli critics of the film were more impressed by the empathy it creates with the soldiers, even as they acknowledged the pro-Israeli bias that inheres in this stance.<sup>31</sup> Their surprise at the empathy the soldiers receive in the film should be viewed against the fierce public debates in Israel concerning the occupation; debates that have escalated precipitously in recent years. As the occupation becomes increasingly more normalized, the shrinking voices that call for it to end grow louder and more desperate. None of these complexities are visible in the film, an elision that may have elicited critics’ surprise in Israel.

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<sup>30</sup> Uri Klein, “Rock the Casbah – Parity above All” (Izun me’al hakol), *Ha’aretz* online, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/movie-reviews/1.1936758>, 24.02.2013. This seems to have been the critical consensus in Israel, with one critic spelling out clearly that by “presenting IDF soldiers as the real victims of the occupation [the film] creates a distorted picture that eschews self-criticism”. See Duvdevani, Shmulik, “Rock the Casbah: Shooting, Weeping and Clearing One’s Conscience”, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4347751,00.html>, 22.02.2013. Another critic, Adva Lanciano, complained, in effect, that the film interferes with the victimization of the soldiers by trying to be too balanced and a bit clichéd. See, “Rock the Casbah, An Impressive but Disappointing War Movie”, [http://www.mouse.co.il/CM.articles\\_item,519,209,72444,.aspx](http://www.mouse.co.il/CM.articles_item,519,209,72444,.aspx), 27.02.2013.

<sup>31</sup> Shmulik Duvdevani literally labels the film a “shooting & weeping” film. See, “Rock the Casbah: Shooting, Weeping and Scouring their Conscience” (Rok bakasbah: yorim, bochim, umetzachtzechim et hamatzpun”, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4347751,00.html>, 22.02.2013. A more telling comment is found in Amir Bogan’s review of the film: “At the end of one of the film’s screenings in the recent Berlin Film Festival, an Arab woman wearing a hijab approached director Yariv Horowitz. I am from Gaza, and after watching the film I feel sorry also for the soldiers’, she told him”. This kind of response is precisely the kind of reaction this article attempts to articulate. See, Bogan, Amir, “Not All is Well: Yariv Horowitz on Rock the Casbah” (Lo hakol sababa: Yariv Horovitz al rock bacasbah), <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4356218,00.html>, 14.03.2013.

Unfamiliar for the most part with these internal debates, and given its narrative bias, the film's favorable reception abroad makes more sense. It won the Confédération Internationale des Cinémas d'Art et d'Essai (CICAÉ) Award in the 2013 Berlin Film Festival, the Judges Award in the Aubagne International Film Festival in France and the Audience Award in the Bergamo Film Festival. But otherwise, the film did not raise much interest around the world and attracted very limited critical attention, most likely because it says very little that is new about the conflict, rehashes received truths about the "complexity" of the situation, and is too close to television reports about its continuation. At the same time, the few critics who did comment on it sympathize with the impossible predicament the soldiers are faced with, marking the soldiers as victims of a situation beyond their control.<sup>32</sup>

The case of *Zero Motivation* is more unusual, because the film is not only removed from any kind of combat, it focuses on female soldiers, clerks who serve in an office at a remote IDF base somewhere in the south of the country. The film is a sardonic comedy about the follies of military service, particularly the service of women, who serve in auxiliary roles facilitating male soldiers bureaucratic and sexual needs. At the center of the film is Zohar (Dana Ivgy), a hopelessly bored office clerk, whose chief ambition is to beat the record on the computer game minesweeper, and her friend Dafi (Nelly Tagar) who longs to be transferred to a base nearer Tel-Aviv, where the wretchedness of her useless army job would be mitigated by a real life in the city outside the base.

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<sup>32</sup> *Rotten Tomatoes* has only two critiques and no lay responses posted:  
[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rock\\_ba\\_casba\\_2013/?search=rock%20the%20casbah](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rock_ba_casba_2013/?search=rock%20the%20casbah).

In addition to being an updated critique of the inanity of army service in general, a sort of *Catch 22* or *M\*A\*S\*H*,<sup>33</sup> the film is also a biting satire of the service of women in the IDF, a topic which has not received much attention in Israeli cinema to-date.<sup>34</sup> It contains several droll scenes that deal with military chauvinism in refreshingly sophisticated ways, including absurd philosophical comments about the meaning of life in the context of the army, several “masculine” discussions of sex from the perspective of women, and one coffee-serving parody, staged as an ironic dance. At the same time, and despite the film’s sharp critical agenda, the female soldiers in it remain fundamentally beholden to the “green beast”, a common nickname for the IDF in Israeli vernacular. Because while the film mounts a clever campaign against many of the IDF’s problematic attitudes toward women, it does not examine the role of the army in Israeli culture more generally, focusing more narrowly on the service of women in military and advocating their fuller and more meaningful integration into it.<sup>35</sup>

In one of the film’s most critically precise moments, which exemplifies the acerbic, self-deprecating humor that animates it, Dafi, initiates a new clerk, who has just arrived to join the team, in the workings of the office. As she walks the newcomer around, Dafi shows her the girls’ most prized possession, a staple gun, which is kept hidden in one of the drawers for fear it will be pilfered by

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<sup>33</sup> *M\*A\*S\*H* was an American 1970s TV series, a dark comedy about the absurdity of war and military service. Although it began as a novel which was then made into a film, it was the TV adaptation of the film that made it famous.

<sup>34</sup> Surprisingly, given the frequency of military conflict in the history of Israel and the importance of service in the IDF as a corollary, relatively few Israeli feature films deal with these issues. Out of more than 650 Israeli feature films that were made since 1948, only about 70 films deal with Israeli wars and service in the IDF. That is, a little more than 10% (numbers based on Wikipedia entries). Out of those films, far fewer deal with the service of women in the IDF, which was never deemed important for the overall war effort or the perpetual state-of-emergency that has existed in Israel in some form or other since its inception. These films include *The Troupe* (Halehaka, Dir. Avi Nesher, 1978), *Girls* (Banot, Dir. Nadav Livyatan, 1985), *Close to Home* (Karov labayit, Dir. Dalia Hagar & Vidi Bilu, 2005), *Room 514* (Heder 514, Dir. Sharon Bar-Ziv, 2012) and *Zero Motivation*.

<sup>35</sup> Films do not have an obligation to provide viewers with either history lessons or comprehensive cultural and political assessments. But when a film about the IDF narrowly focuses on its chauvinism with few references to its many other problematic aspects – not just in Israel, everywhere and in all armies – it creates an impression that the army is otherwise perfect.

someone from another office. The gun from this first scene is used in a later scene: at a melodramatic moment of despair Dafi takes it out of hiding, points it at her head, announces her intention to kill herself and presses the trigger. Luckily, the gun has no staples in it, and Dafi continues to live, manages to leave the base and return to it after a while as an officer, an elevated role that frees her from some of the office's more tedious chores. In the film's climax, Dafi and Zohar engage in a war in which the staple gun becomes a weapon fired to devastating effect.

Folded into this story are both rebellion against the army as well as submission to it. Dafi's suicidal threat is thwarted when she becomes an officer within the system, returning to the base to head the human resources office. This twist in the plot is one in a series of clever ironies that make up its humor and comprises its sophisticated critique, but the joke is ultimately on Dafi. As I have shown in my study about Israeli culture between the two Intifadas (1987-2000), the 1990s generation in Israel expressed its alienation from an increasingly jingoistic political establishment by a withdrawal from public life and sometimes, in the pages of the literature it wrote, even from life itself. Some of its most memorable literary protagonists were celebrated losers, passive heroes who often hurt themselves deliberately or even killed themselves as an ultimate act of rebellion.<sup>36</sup> Yet, unlike the heroes of the intifada generation, whose dispirited rebellion found expression in their inaction and their disconnection from the national community, Dafi seeks the community's embrace. Her clever plan to leave the base ultimately brings her back to it, only this time as a much more integrated and invested member of the national community.

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<sup>36</sup> Keret was the major literary voice of the dispirited Oslo Generation. His heroes are often "losers" who express the frustrations they feel about an increasingly incomprehensible world through violence against themselves. For specific examples, see chapter 3 in my book, *Israeli Culture between the Two Intifadas: A Brief Romance*, Houston: University of Texas Press, 2013.

In some ways, *Zero Motivation* is a comic version of *Beaufort*. In both films a group of soldiers is trapped in a remote and isolated military installation, threatened by a menacing and amorphous system, which grinds and oppresses them. Both films handle these difficulties very differently, of course. While the soldiers in *Beaufort* are threatened by an external enemy and are generally motivated to serve, the soldiers in *Zero Motivation* hate the army and are a threat to themselves. In both films, however, the soldiers are ultimately presented as victims, a narrative which has been ingrained so deeply into Israeli consciousness, that even a mordant comedy like *Zero Motivation* is predicated on it.

The trouble is, that such films fail to create a critical distance between their protagonists and the context within which they operate, that is, the IDF. Precisely because *Zero Motivation* is a comedy, it illustrates very clearly this failure of Israeli filmmakers to create truly ironic heroes, who would sever the connection between the subject and the nation, or in Israeli-Jewish parlance, between the individual and the group. If irony is the critical difference between the “is” and the “ought”, *Zero Motivation* contains very little of it. Even Zohar, whose actions are sometimes truly subversive, ultimately wishes to be transferred elsewhere, hopefully to a less desolate base. She stops short of actions that would seriously endanger her connection to the group and is reluctantly satisfied with her role as a radical within it. This vacillation between distance and belonging is one of the elements that sustains the victimization discourse in these films. It allows the protagonists to distance themselves from those aspects of Israeli society that are most criticized, especially abroad, without incurring the cost of that critique. By presenting themselves as victims of the same system which victimizes others, they distance themselves from that critique and align themselves, falsely perhaps, with more genuine victims.

But as this article contends, this is likely the reason for *Zero Motivation's* phenomenal success, both in Israel and abroad. In addition to sweeping all the major prizes of the Israeli Film Academy in 2014 (Ophir Prize), it also won the best film award at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City. Moreover, the film was a commercial success, attracting more than half a million viewers in Israel alone – a rare occurrence – and was widely distributed abroad as well.<sup>37</sup> Recently, the rights to it were bought by BBC America for a future development as a cable TV series.<sup>38</sup> Critical response to the film has also been explosive and overwhelmingly positive. *Rotten Tomatoes* lists 134 of them. Most of them laud the film. Few scold the director for making a loony comedy about a topic as grave as the Israeli military. Nick McCarthy of *Slant Magazine*, complained that “the lack of observation on the surrounding political situation is all but washed over in favor of juvenile gags”.<sup>39</sup> Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* noted how “for the most part, the real world, including Israeli politics, hovers off screen.” Although, she added, “if you’re inclined, you could read the movie as a vaporous critique of the country’s militarization. Or not”.<sup>40</sup> To both, Jordan Hofmann of *The Guardian* has this to say: “There are some whose politics have no room for a film like this. ‘This is not a laughing matter’, they’ll say. This attitude negates reality, and perhaps negates storytelling in general. *Zero Motivation* is a shot of honesty, in which short-term goals are far more important than larger geo-political ones. Perhaps because they are the only ones over which we have any control”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Shavit, Avner, <http://e.walla.co.il/item/2798587>, 5.11.2014.

<sup>38</sup> Anderman, Nirit, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/1.2963205>, 1.06.2016.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/zero-motivation>, 23.04.2014.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/03/movies/zero-motivation-an-israeli-comedy.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&r=0,2.12.2014>.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/05/zero-motivation-review-female-soldiers-idf>, 5.12.2014.

The reactions to the film around the world bear Hoffman's words as the film's reception in Turkey, for instance, illustrates well. Turkey has cooled its relations with Israel significantly after Erdogan's rise to power in the early 2000s and public opinion in Turkey concerning Israel has soured significantly since then. The enthusiastic reception of the film in Turkey's most important film festival, the IKVS festival in Istanbul, therefore thrilled Israeli diplomats. "It was exciting to hear Turkish viewers laugh out loud and appreciate Israeli humor, especially Israeli army humor," said Israel's then vice consul to Turkey, Avidan Kenar, who considered it a significant achievement given the negative opinions about the IDF in Turkey.<sup>42</sup> But I think that what the consul and the reporter celebrated – the writer seemed as giddy as the vice consul about the film's success in Turkey – is not just the common humanity that all viewers of the film will immediately recognize and respond to. Part of it is also the denigration of the IDF in the film, the beastly dimensions of the Israeli army, which inevitably turn the protagonists into its hapless victims and find common ground with viewers around the world who are otherwise critical of Israel.

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<sup>42</sup> Eichner, Itamar, "Zero Motivation Stole the Show in Turkey", <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4646829,00.html>, 14.04.2015.