Confessing Without Regret: An Israeli Film Genre

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AN ISRAELI FILM GENRE

Livia Alexander

“You felt guilty at the age of 19. Unwillingly, you took on the role of the Nazi. You were there, firing flares, but you didn’t carry out the massacre.”

—Therapist to Folman’s character, Waltz with Bashir

The international success of Ari Folman’s animated mockumentary Waltz with Bashir (Valts im Bashir) (2008) brought to the forefront a genre dominant in Israeli filmmaking: confessional cinema. First emerging during the time of the first intifada (1987–1994) and focused on addressing the actions taken by Israeli soldiers against their perceived Palestinian and Lebanese enemies, Israeli confessional cinema was initially heavily preoccupied with the moral dilemmas and self-questioning triggered by the outbreak of the first intifada, with films like Testimonies (Eduyut) (1991) and What Happened (Ma Kara) (1988). The evolution of the genre through the post-Oslo years, the outbreak of the second intifada (September 2000–2004), the Second Lebanon War (July 2006), and continuing today mirrors the changes that took place in the broader Israeli society and its perceptions of itself and those it considers its enemies. These perceptions are not unproblematic, because the way the confessional films perceive these others—as enemies (or victims, as the scholarly literature on confession would have it)—is symptomatic of an issue at the heart of Israeli confessional cinema: that the films disregard other ways of collectively describing or imagining Palestinians in relation to Israel (e.g., as colonized or oppressed people, or as fellow citizens).

Beginning by questioning the effects that the suppression of the first intifada had on the moral conduct of Israeli soldiers, Israeli confessional
cinema shifted to a focus on anger at the Palestinians and Lebanese for forcing Israelis to compromise their humanity, and then began to vindicate and validate the actions of Israeli soldiers amid growing international criticism. It is a genre in which confessing Israeli soldiers perceive and promote themselves as the actual victims, and in which Palestinian and Lebanese civilians and fighters have no presence. Palestinians and Lebanese have consistently challenged the Israeli narrative concerning acts of violence, but Israelis generally, and Israeli cinema more specifically, have by and large excluded them from the discourse. The continuing conflict and Israel's state of war with Arab nations have stood in the way of a Zionist vision that never included the Palestinians. This point is typical of most settler colonial nationalisms and their disavowals of prior presence, as is explicitly evident in our discussion of the absence of Palestinians in confessional films. The fact that one cannot erase the Palestinian presence from the land despite the desire to never include them—as demonstrated by Meron Benvenisti's study, Sacred Landscapes, and Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti, and Eyal Weizman's architecture collective, Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency—is a useful insight for the films under review here. While these voices remain absent, it is perhaps most productive to study the limits, shape, and construction of that absence rather than imagining if there "should" be a presence. In other words it is in keeping with Zionist discourse that Palestinians not appear in films as victims or visible subjects who might trouble the anxiety being expressed on the part of confessional soldiers. But in fact, these absences constantly "speak" to the presence of Palestinians.

Confession and forgiveness in this genre of Israeli cinema take place outside the official space of state practice and institutional structures. Confession unfolds between individuals and the recording lens of the camera, between former soldier and filmmaker, and finally, between the latter two and audiences. The prominence of soldiers' confessions in Israeli cinema suggests the prevailing belief in both the political and moral powers of telling as healing, as studies on torture and reconciliation demonstrate, underscoring the presumption that once a confession is made, nothing more is needed for both perpetrators and victims to "move on," politically as well as personally? Yet, as scholars such as Leigh Payne point out, rather than closing a chapter, in fact one is opened, linking the past to the present and opening up a debate over signification and interpretation of these past acts and violence. However, for individual confessing soldiers engaged in the cinematic medium as part of a familiar effort to leave a troubled past behind, the Israeli context bears a typography that departs from most criti-
cal scholarly engagements with questions of confession, reconciliation, and forgiveness rooted in post-conflict peace-building efforts. Thus while the individual acts of confessing soldiers might be set in the past, the Israeli collective engagement with its occupation of the Palestinian Territories, its animosity toward its Palestinian citizens, and its military excursions in Lebanon, are ongoing. A second disjuncture is at play between the soldier’s own authoritarian position over the civil population under his or her jurisdiction while in active military duty and Israel’s self-perception as “the only democracy in the Middle East.”

Within this context of ongoing occupation and conflict, the debate unfolding in Israeli cinema over the nature of confession, forgiveness, and regret has an urgency that is very much based in ever-evolving debates about Israel’s view of itself in light of increasing international criticism. Ironically, this focus on confession gives undue political power to the perpetrators of military crimes. For Payne, perpetrators’ confessions interpret the past and by so doing advance political debate and consequently democratic discourse, or what Payne refers to as “contentious co-existence.”

However, the emphasis of Israeli cinema on the tortured soul of the confessing soldier as the victim of his own act leaves that promise unmet. Instead the space opened up by the cinematic field of public confession offers a forward-moving moment of absolution and cleansing so that the repenting soldier can find personal redemption and seek reintegration into Israeli society, and humanity at large. It is a process that strikingly excludes victims and concerns itself with appealing to Israeli audiences, or at most, the international community. Here, however, it is worth considering the ways in which Palestinians or Lebanese in these situations might be better characterized than merely as victims. Rather than shoehorn Lebanese and Palestinians back into these Israeli narratives as victims, I would like to extend the range of possible discourses here. The discourse of victimhood is less politically useful since it accepts the dichotomous terms of colonization, even if it does so in a concerned, liberal kind of way. I do not mean to suggest, as others might, that there is some heroic resistance that means Palestinians are never victims, but rather that there is something about the liberal victor-victim discourse that reinscribes a Zionist narrative of Israeli exceptionalism.

Despite changing circumstances over the years, an ever-shifting blend of victimhood and entitlement continuously informs and shapes mainstream Israeli discourse, anchored in the experience of the European Jew as a victim of pogroms and the Holocaust on one hand, and in the Zionist
enterprise on the other—an enterprise fashioned according to the governing principles of European colonialism, which placed the rights and interests of European powers over those of indigenous populations and allowed for the appropriation of land and natural resources. Israeli scholars such as Ilan Pappe and Avi Shlaim, known as “the new historians,” have examined this official Zionist historiography, critically assessing Zionism’s colonial roots in the British Mandate period and the ethnic cleansing and injustices it brought about. In cinema too, a growing number of filmmakers, primarily documentarians, have taken on a more critical examination of the Zionist narrative and its outcome in films such as Have You Ever Shot Anyone? (ha-im Yarita Pa’am be-Mishehu?) (1995) and For My Children (la-Yeladim shel I) (2002) by Michal Aviad; Yulie Cohen Gerstel’s trilogy, My Terrorist (ha-Mehabel Sheli, 2002), My Land Zion (Zion admati) (2004), and My Brother (ha-Akh shel I) (2007); and Amit Goren’s Another Land (Eretz Aheret) (1998), among many others. Yet despite the growing number of films, questions of guilt, regret, and accountability remain unaddressed for the most part in a cinema that portrays its makers and subjects as tragic victims caught up in existential moral dilemmas. It is a discourse that by and large prompts mainstream Israeli public opinion to resort to accusations of anti-Semitism in response to critiques of Israeli official policies and avoid a fuller engagement with questions of power and policy between an occupying Israeli army and the occupied Palestinian population. In My Terrorist Israeli director Yulie Cohen Gerstel follows Fahad Mihyi, a Palestinian who in 1978 carried out an attack against an El-Al flight crew in London in which she, a young flight attendant, was lightly injured. Years later Gerstel decides to seek him out in his prison cell in England as part of her critical reevaluation of the Zionist ideology she was brought up with. Gerstel refers to him throughout her film as a terrorist to whom she grants her forgiveness for the attack. Gerstel has grown to accept that the Zionist project has dispossessed Palestinians, but does not take the next leap to frame Fahad’s act as a struggle for his country and people, as opposed to merely being a terrorist attack (suggesting his were irrational acts motivated by blind hatred and not the result of critical independent thought). She has the power to effect Fahad’s release from prison, which fails to resolve the imbalance in their power relationship. She seeks his release because of what she perceives as his redemption, not hers. He has changed his ways; he understands now that what he did was wrong. Both narratives of perpetrator and victim, forgiver and forgiven, articulated by Gerstel, are mediated and framed by and within an Israeli-Zionist framework at the core of her
study, and refrain from a critical engagement with questions of victimhood and forgiveness. Here again is where we can productively consider alternatives to the discourses on victimhood that emerge in Gerstel’s narratives. In other words, are there other political alternatives that might emerge from Gerstel’s film that move us beyond that dichotomy, one which merely replaces an Israeli victim with a Palestinian one? Can the issue be reframed to show that what she leaves out is politics, occupation, colonialism, and racism, among others? Thinking about the situation in those terms, I argue, gives a different kind of critical purchase on an issue that is not so much about personal agency and culpability and suffering as it is about larger and more complex narratives and causes.

Israeli films are not alone in their depiction of the victimization of Israel’s soldiers and an absent enemy. As David Desser shows in his discussion of American Vietnam War movies, this is an ideological tendency characteristic of war films, be they Israeli, American, Japanese, or German. As in American Vietnam movies such as *Apocalypse Now* (1977), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Israeli soldiers/protagonists appear as little more than victims of outside forces beyond their control. However, unlike other cinemas discussed by Desser, Israeli films attempt to engage a reality in which war is not fought against a distant enemy in a foreign land but between two interacting societies in close proximity. Furthermore Israeli films advocate or lament the lack of coexistence, while concomitantly failing to step out of their national boundaries to achieve an understanding of the broad historical complexities of the conflict. Afflicted with political blindness, these films focus initially on what they regard as the deterioration of Israel’s ideals and then later on the country’s assumed moral superiority, and they offer a monopolitical track of inquiry from an Israeli-Zionist perspective. There is no recognition that the ongoing conflicts Israel is embroiled in are the culmination of a long historical process, rather than just an arena for national accidents, bad leadership, and a trigger for abnormal situations—as I will discuss further. Israeli confessional films, much like American films about the Vietnam War, are, as Michael Klein dubs them, “films of closure,” disentangling themselves from their perceived enemies both epistemically and spatially.

**First Intifada: “Shooting and Crying”**

The outbreak of the first Palestinian intifada in December 1987 brought to the surface some of the underlying ideological tensions in Israeli society.
To the Israeli public, accustomed to continually seeing itself as the victim, the army’s harsh repression of the intifada triggered a principled dilemma over what it perceived as the moral deterioration of Israeli society. In contrast to previous wars, during which Israel fought other armies, the country now engaged a new kind of enemy, civilians, in most cases children. Taught to believe in Israel as a humanist, peace-seeking nation, the Israeli public faced reports and television clips of soldiers mercilessly beating and shooting “legions” of stone-throwing children. The brutality was encapsulated by Yitzhak Rabin, then defense minister in Yitzhak Shamir’s national unity government, who, in reference to the Palestinians, ordered Israeli soldiers to “break their bones.”

Because it forced Israelis to deal with Palestinian demands for the establishment of an independent state, the intifada also sparked a fierce debate over the future of the Occupied Territories. Secular and religious nationalist parties of the Israeli right regarded any concessions to the Palestinians as a betrayal, and advocated the use of force to suppress the uprising, a complete separation from Palestinians, or, alternatively, the transfer of Palestinians to neighboring Arab countries. These seemingly deep differences did not, however, break down the boundaries of Israeli national political consensus regarding the conflict. Both main political camps agreed that Palestinians, as demonstrated by the intifada, represented a threat to the Jewish national project; they differed only in the methods they preferred for dealing with the threat.

For some filmmakers the first intifada raised issues that represented an extension of the moral dilemmas they faced earlier that decade, when the Israeli army invaded Lebanon in June 1982. Because most filmmakers preferred to distance themselves from the political realities around them, only a relatively small number feature films engaged the first intifada directly, and even then, only during the first few years of the uprising. Such films include What’s Wrong? (Ma kara?) (1988), The Cage (ha-Klal) (1989), Green Fields (Sadot yerukim) (1989), and Outlook (Nekudat taispit) (1990). Other films explore it only tangentially, and include One of Us (Ehad mishelanu) (1989) and A Deserter’s Wife (Isha zara) (1992). According to Israeli film scholar Shmulik Duševani, the general silence and political disengagement characterizing Israeli cinema during the time of the first intifada can be attributed to confusion felt by filmmakers who were baffled by images of armed soldiers fighting stone-throwing children, even as their films marked how unviel peace—promoted in Israeli cinema of the 1980s—had become. These films therefore convey much about Israelis’ attitudes

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about themselves, the conflict, and Palestinians. They depict the Israeli man in uniform as a tortured soul—a soldier who bemoans the immorality of shooting at civilians while all the same carrying out what he regards as his patriotic duty to his nation. These films belong to what has become known in Israel as the “shooting and crying” syndrome, coined after a song by a famous Israeli pop singer, Ci Heiman.

Film as a Courthouse: *One of Us*

Many of the first intifada films dealing with Israeli occupation conclude with a confession of the murder of a Palestinian (as often happens in real life—the killing of the boy Muhammad Durra in 2000, for example). The murder victim is usually an innocent passerby, a woman or a child or, as in the case of *One of Us*, a “terrorist”—although the act of violence is never dramatized. In *What’s Wrong?* the father of the main character, Gai, cannot sleep at night, worrying about his son, a young soldier on military duty in the Occupied Territories. At first relieved to see Gai waiting for him as he arrives at work, he notices his son’s grim expression. “Dad, I killed a woman today,” he spits out in agony. The frame freezes on the soldier’s torment-ed face before fading in a slow superimposition to a blatantly clichéd and romantic portrayal of a Palestinian woman: an abstract character, nameless and faceless, she has no history or story. In *Outlook* an Israeli soldier avenges the death of a young Palestinian boy he had grown fond of as he watched the boy’s family from his literal and metaphorical position at a military observation point. In his anger the soldier shoots the Palestinian man responsible for the boy’s death. In *One of Us* an audiotape discloses an officer’s implication in the murder of a Palestinian prisoner, but he stores the incriminating tape with his girlfriend instead of destroying it.

In first intifada films an apparently nonnormative action, such as the killing of a woman in *What’s Wrong?* or of a child in *A Deserter’s Wife*, appears as a “mistake” or, as in *Green Fields*, the result of temporary insanity and an “abnormal situation” into which a normal family has been thrown. These films offer doxious solutions that have to do with restoring whatever moral strength Israelis imagine themselves as having had in the past. “It’s an image of a confused, crazed, desperate nation that has rid itself of its past ideals but has found nothing to replace them [with],” reads one critic’s view of the vision of Israel in *Green Fields*. The unchallenged depiction of Israel’s “past ideals” notwithstanding, the predominance of confession suggests that by the act of pleading guilty to a “mitigated” murder, order, and
normalcy can be restored. As Peter Brooks puts it: "Confession of wrongdoing is considered fundamental to morality because it constitutes a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis for rehabilitation. It is the precondition of the end to ostracism, reentry into one's desired place in the human community."  

Many have pointed to the narcissistic essence of the confession genre, from Augustine to Rousseau to Dostoevsky's fictional characters. Confession, Dennis Foster argues, "requires that a private knowledge be revealed in a way that would allow another to understand, judge, forgive, and perhaps even sympathize." In addition to these films constituting an expression of remorse and a search for redemption, at some level, in their relationship with the viewer, they also act as a courtroom in which the audience members serve as judges. Using Bakhtinian language, Brooks argues that the confession, even if it comes in the form of a monologue, always has a built-in listener, which makes the confession dialogic. The reaction of the listener, even if silent, is factored into the confessant's address. Indeed, Brooks adds, "the listener's response is in a deep sense what the speech is all about." 

The direct dialogue between confessant and audience-as-judge transfers the confession from a private to a public act and the accused from the filmic text to society at large, implicating the audience in both the confessant's sense of guilt and in the confession's possible redemptive qualities. As Brooks argues, those who stand accused are everyone and at the same time no one, reflected in a mirror the confessant holds out to his contemporaries. At the same time confession suggests a division between the remorseful and those without remorse. By confessing Israelis on the left believe that they hold the moral high ground while right-wing factions, who see no need for such expressions of culpability, are regarded by them as bearing the responsibility for the conflict even more than Palestinians.

Uri Barabash's One of Us exemplifies the use of the dual principles of redemptive and legal confession. Based on a play written by the filmmaker's brother, Benny Barabash, the film opened about a year after the first intifada broke out in the Occupied Territories. Adapted to the screen, One of Us is one of the first Israeli films to touch on the effects of the occupation on Israeli soldiers. The film, which deals with an investigation of an elite military unit suspected of the murder of a Palestinian prisoner, opened in the theaters the same week that four soldiers of Giv'ati, an elite army team, were pardoned for the charge of beating a Palestinian to death. They were acquitted on the grounds that convicting them would negatively affect
the sense of solidarity and morale necessary for soldiers to carry out their duties. This political context made the film especially relevant.

In the film an army investigator, Rapha' (Sharon Alexander), arrives at a military base in the Occupied Territories to inquire into the death of a Palestinian prisoner detained there. Upon his arrival Rapha' is surprised to find that the commander of the suspected unit, Yotam (played by Alon Aboutboul), is a former friend and colleague from basic training. A third friend, Amir (Dan Toren), was killed by the slain Palestinian. The main question Rapha' faces is whether to expose the truth about the circumstances surrounding the death of the Palestinian prisoner, who was tortured and eventually shot, or maintain his loyalty to his old friends and approve their version of the story. Torn between his understanding of the truth and the solidarity of the army unit, Rapha' expands his investigation to reexamine his relationship with the group.

Rapha' functions as both interrogator and confessor. His forgiveness and dismissal of the falsified file will allow Yotam, the defendant/confessant, to rejoin society and will clear him, and the Israeli mainstream, of culpability in the unjust actions of the Israeli occupation. On many levels the film functions as a public courtroom, in which Yotam, while addressing Rapha', concomitantly addresses a second, extratextual interrogator/confessor, the audience. In one scene a symbolic courtroom is created in the same place where Amir was killed. After much prodding from Yotam, Rapha' begins to recount in legal language the offenses Yotam's unit committed against the local Palestinian population: "On the night between August 1 and 2 you assembled all of the residents of the refugee camp in the main market square. Then you made them crawl on the ground." Yotam, in response, becomes a defendant, explaining the motives behind his actions. Rapha' is positioned with his back to the camera at the corner of the frame, while Yotam addresses him and the audience at the center of the frame. As the scene reaches its climax Yotam narrates the events leading to Amir's death.

The film, however, constructs a specular image reflected in the affinity between the investigator and the subject of his investigation. It places different values on the life of an Israeli soldier and the Palestinian he killed—a noncharacter, but the only Palestinian in the film. He is consistently referred to as a terrorist, and references to his acts reflect the film's image of Palestinians in general. Yotam, though eventually confessing to his complicity in the murder, does not experience moral remorse for his acts; his only regret is that he was caught. The dilemma the film presents does not center on the morality of Yotam's actions, but on how they affect the long-
standing relationships that sustain this microcosm of Israeli society. The
death of the Palestinian prisoner has no meaning other than as a trigger for
this principled debate.

The film is open-ended, offering no clear solutions. Barabash avoids
bringing the events to their dramatic conclusion. Some of this ambiva-
lence can be attributed to the intervention of the military in the making of
One of Us. In exchange for providing one of its bases for location shooting,
the army demanded certain changes be made in the film to fit with mili-
tary views. For example, the military objected to the ending of the story in
the original script, which suggested that Yotam murders Rapha. A second
objection related to Rapha’s destroying the evidence once he discovers the
truth. The army’s disapproval led to a compromise, the ambivalent shot at
the end of the film in which it is unclear whether Rapha’ has burned the
incriminating investigation file. Army officials also demanded that the tone
of the scene in which Rapha’ is brutally beaten by the soldiers of the platoon
under investigation be softened, to defuse any possible critique or negative
portrayal of the army. To create an additional barrier between the film and
the reality to which it supposedly alludes, One of Us opens with a statement
by the Israeli military spokesman denouncing any connection between
reality and the events in the film.

The film’s ambivalent ending avoids any judgment of the characters,
who all withdraw into themselves, reflecting the response of certain seg-
ments of Israeli society to the first intifada. For mainstream Israeli society,
the audience for all of these first intifada films, the military suppression
of the uprising was another milestone in Zionism’s fall from grace and a
sign of the country’s moral deterioration. Even if people chose to distance
themselves from politics, they were not abandoning the basic assumptions
of Zionism, of Jews’ right to a national homeland in Palestine. On the con-
trary, they were concerned only that the moral high ground was lost. Such a
view is one of the highly problematic aspects constitutive of liberal Zionist
discourse, which never took into account, or preferred to ignore, the fact
that a successful fulfillment of its vision meant dispossession and tragedy
for the people already living in Palestine.

The first intifada dramatized the inherent contradictions, biases, and
iniquities of Zionism. In the face of these contradictions many of Israel’s
so-called liberals choose to avoid confronting this unpleasant reality alto-
tgether by assuming the privilege of withdrawing into their private lives.
As attempts to regain this false innocence through admission of guilt fail,
confession becomes a goal in and of itself, after which there is nothing.
Normalcy is not restored and escapism and detachment become the alluring alternatives.

Second Intifada and Beyond: “Shooting and Laughing”

Israelis who sought a peaceful settlement welcomed the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords with great euphoria, regarding it as the end of a century-old conflict. As Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin points out, the accords did not signal a change in Israeli attitudes toward Palestinians; they reflected the desire to preserve Israeli-Zionist identity and goals. The end of the conflict could ultimately bring the final realization of the Zionist dream: normalcy. This dominant word in the Israeli discourse rests on the Zionist ethos of ending Jews’ abnormal status in the diaspora and making them into a nation among nations by establishing a Jewish national state in the biblical land of Israel.

The outbreak of the second al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000 abruptly ended the discussion of normalcy through the Oslo Accords’ proposed separation and the two-state solution as a means to ending the conflict, evident in important shifts that have occurred in confessional cinema since 2000. While the dominance of confession in the first intifada films suggests a heavy sense of guilt in Israeli society, by the time of the second intifada the onus of responsibility for these acts often shifts to Palestinians and Lebanese. The guilt expressed in these films shifts to anger and blame at what “the situation” makes innocent Israeli soldiers do, and then to a feeling of righteousness and vindication for any acts of violence carried out by the Israeli military, an attitude condemned in one instance by Palestinian MP Dr. Jamal Zahalka, who called it “shooting and laughing.” The ensuing blanket condemnation of Zahalka in the Israeli press notwithstanding, his comments point to important changes in the practices and prevailing discourse of the Israeli military. Uri Blau, writing in Haaretz, discusses t-shirts printed for Israeli soldiers graduating from military training programs. The slogans printed on these t-shirts reflect the blatant racism and brutality that have become rampant among soldiers. One shirt, ordered by a sniper unit, includes an image of a pregnant “Arab woman” clad in a stereotypical veiled dress, and is captioned, “One shot kills two,” celebrating the accomplishments of a successful sniper. The banality that came to characterize Israeli occupation and the everyday conduct of IDF soldiers was further expressed in the public uproar surrounding pictures posted by a former female soldier, Eden Aberjil, on her Facebook page in the summer of 2010. Having com-
pleted her military service as a warden in one of Israeli's military prisons in the Occupied Territories, Aberjil shared photographs taken during her military service on Facebook. Against captions like "the most beautiful time of my life," Aberjil is seen smiling into the camera while a number of Palestinian men sit just behind her, blindfolded and handcuffed. The exchange between Aberjil and her friends is no less revealing than the images themselves. One remark includes a crude sexual innuendo about Arab men's alleged enhanced sexuality—"He has an erection because of you, for sure." Another sarcastically says, "I wonder if he has a Facebook page! I have to tag him in the picture," alluding to the practice of tagging the names of people in photographs posted on Facebook, inadvertently emphasizing the anonymity of the Palestinian prisoners captured by Aberjil's photographs. While the Israeli military denounces such activity as extreme nonnormative behavior, and Israeli liberals condemn it as further evidence of the corrupting power of the occupation, only a few dare to examine the underlying dual premises of Zionism—victimhood and entitlement—and its colonial underpinnings in order to fully engage the moral trajectory of Israel's evolution as a nation.

The films do not offer a direct engagement with military acts of violence, remorse, or either the challenges that come with guilt or the political analysis that might come with the passage of time. Some films, such as Wasted (Mevuzbazim) (2006), The Alpha Diaries (Shalom pluga alef) (2007), Every Mother Should Know (Teda kol em ivriya) (2008), and My First War (Hamilchama Harishona Sheli) (2008), have begun to blame the Israeli government and the military leadership for inept management of the recent wars. At the center of the political debate that followed the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, and reflected in Every Mother Should Know and My First War, was the Israeli public's critique of what it perceived as the political and military leadership's failures. The debate was less over whether the war was justified and more over the concern that soldiers had been sent to carry out an ill-planned and badly executed war campaign. Here soldiers were portrayed in the media, popular culture, and film as victims of a reality stronger than them, rather than as active agents shaping society and responsible for electing its leadership. The films of this period engage with trauma and provide a healing platform for former soldiers to share the scars left by their military experiences. Israeli confessional films repeatedly iterate the idea of insanity and a hallucinatory reality that takes over as one leaves the boundaries of Israel for the Occupied Territories and Southern Lebanon. "Sometimes I feel a little crazy," says one of the female soldiers in To See If I'm Smiling (Lir'ot im ani mehayehet) (2007). "I have these memo-
ries of things that are unrelated to reality and maybe never happened. But I know they did happen, as I feel them so intensely.” The tension between amnesia and remembrance is implicit in the filmmaking process. As the soldiers seek to forget, the act of narrating to the camera reactivates their memories. The impulse to forget seems to kick in only after military service is over, in hindsight.27

Most of the recent confessional films reiterate the soldiers’ lack of agency and depict them as innocently carrying out orders delivered from above, victims manipulated by unidentified callous politicians. They describe a sense of fear, trauma, horror, and being under attack. The enemy in these films remains invisible, and the consequences of these soldiers’ actions remain absent; the soldiers cope with a reality that is imposed on them, but not one in which they are active participants. By the time of the second intifada, post–September 11 discourse also begins to permeate the narrative landscape, in which Israel’s battles are seen as embroiled in the global war on terror. Soldiers repeatedly label Palestinian and Lebanese fighters as terrorists, and any acts against civilians are justified by their harboring terrorists. Given that these fighters emerge from and are integral to the fabric of their respective societies, and that they represent a popular resistance against Israel, the failure to distinguish combatants from noncombatants only serves to further justify Israeli military attacks against civilian targets.

**Filmmaker as Healer: Waltz with Bashir**

*Waltz with Bashir* is perhaps the quintessential and most internationally known confessional film in Israeli cinema of the 2000s. It seeks to engage with an earlier trauma, experienced by director Ari Folman as an IDF soldier during the First Lebanon War in 1982, that culminated with the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps massacre, where thousands of Palestinians were killed by Maronite Phalangists, then under Israeli military control. It shuttles in time between past and present, where Folman’s character, through the process of making the film, tries to make sense of his traumas and recover erased memories of former comrades, friends, psychologists, and other key figures involved in the war. The fictional narrative of the film is based on documentary-style interviews, but Folman uses animation to illustrate the stories of those he speaks with as a means to reactivate his buried past. He creates a complete story about his alleged comrades during the war, drawing on testimonies of former soldiers who responded to his newspaper ad inviting interviewees to give testimony to their experiences of the war. Various
critics have taken issue with the film's animated format as an inappropriate form for the harsh and tragic issue at hand. Joshua Simon argues that the film (as well as another Israeli film made at that time, Eran Rikli's *The Lemon Tree* [2008]) demonstrates that "the only way that contemporary Israeli cinema is able to deal with politics is to make a children's movie." For Yitzhak Laor the film's comic book style has a reductive effect that estranges and distances the viewer. For him nothing in the film is linked to reality and actual memory, as opposed to manipulated memory. One could argue, however, that it is precisely because the film addresses "unspeakable" events to recover a traumatic past that the choice of animation reactivates suppressed memory while commenting on the subject's inner state of mind. The film's stunning visual style allows viewers to empathize with its protagonists, not as heroes but merely as sensitive individuals. Folman's choice to animate his film obviously breaks any pretense of the indexicality of footage and reality. One could further argue that his choice to animate is a deliberate attempt to cast doubts on the already illusive nature of memory and emphasize the subjective nature of its depiction of the war. The recorded interviews of actual people provide the voice-overs for the animated figures, and the real individuals are mixed with fictionalized characters, further blurring the distinction between reality and imagination.

*Waltz with Bashir* claims to reveal the folly of war in general, the wasted human life, the insanity of battle, and the pain it inflicts on those participating in it. The film animator, David Polonsky, said in an interview that one of the most important things for him in animating the film was not to introduce the soldiers as children and victims. "They are not shooting and crying. There is no romantic glory and forgiveness in war. [The film offers] a clear and simple message that war is a terrible thing. We made a great effort not to pass the message that war is something heroic and that soldiers are . . . heroes and . . . role model[s]." Folman adds, "[The film] lacks the Israeli military sheen, glorification of the soldiers. Everyone in the film is an anti-hero." *Waltz with Bashir* then, according to its makers, represents another milestone in the trajectory of political films released since the first intifada, depicting the ongoing transformation of the hero in Israeli cinema as a reflection of the loosened grip of Zionist mythology (though not necessarily its underlying ideological principles) over the country's society. Following Israel's near defeat in the 1973 War and the controversy over the First Lebanon War, the heroic figure of the nationalist era was transformed first into a man crippled by the trauma of war and then into the "shooting and crying" character of the intifada era. Films of
the 1990s such as *Burning Memories (Resisim)* (1989), *The Deserter’s Wife* (1991), *Real Time (Zman emet)* (1991), and *Time for Cherries (Onat hashaduvedanim)* (1991) all depict the Israeli soldier as disturbed, crippled, or paralyzed by the experience of war, be it the Lebanon War or the intifada. The futility of war marks the protagonist as a victim and stands as a barrier between him and a peaceful existence.

While Folman battles with amnesia and lost memories of his own wartime actions, another strand of pervasive memory invades the film’s landscape—that of the Holocaust. The film synthesizes imagery and key concepts that are iconic in Israel’s official discourse about the Holocaust. Consequently, the film shows how the Jewish state’s assumed duty to “never forget” shapes and informs its present engagement with its enemies, and how Folman’s own family legacy as a son of Holocaust survivors connects him to the collective memory institutionalized by the state. *Waltz with Bashir* is replete with visual references that have become synonymous with the memory of the Holocaust, such as the little boy raising his hands at the Auschwitz concentration camp, and the skeletal figures of the young men emerging from the sea in Folman’s hallucination scene—his only memory of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The latter scene is pivotal to my analysis of the confessional particularities of the film, a primal moment of purity and sublime transformation, where the naked soldiers emerge from the purifying sea to don their combat fatigues and engage in the messy business of war. The young men submerged in the calm baptismal waters rise—inocent, puzzled, and confused—gazing at Beirut burning in front of them. They put on their uniforms as they slip into their new role as soldiers, transplanted into this new context almost by divine intervention, suggested by the bloody orange sky and rising dawn. The young soldiers appear perplexed, out of place, silent witnesses as they stare at the anonymous and uniformly clad sea of women passing by them. The repetition of this scene throughout the film marks it as a primal moment of rebirth, a cleansing moment before and outside of time, that provides Folman the necessary space where absolution and healing can take place. Shuttling between his moments of amnesia and hallucination, the film ultimately creates an extratemporal space where characters can escape responsibility.

In the soldiers’ discussions of memory, Folman’s absence in the narrative space further serves to absolve him—and by extension audiences identifying with the main character—from responsibility for the crimes addressed in the film. The making of the film as a therapeutic process relieves the protagonists not from a sense of guilt over the war’s dead victims, as Udi
Aloni points out, but from the unpleasant images of war. What the film consciously and deliberately aims to do is to break down reality into little pieces of torn memory, fragments of memories loosely pieced together. It is that deliberate insistence on incomprehension and amnesia that ultimately absolves the characters not only from the past but also from their present lives as compromised individuals crippled by their past traumas. Folman's traumatized character shifts the victimhood from the camps survivors of the massacre to the witness cooperating with the perpetrators. The actual casualties are not shown in the film, except for an allegorical reference in the opening scene, where a herd of angry dogs shot by an Israeli soldier during the war comes back to haunt him in his dreams. Against this substitution of Palestinian or Lebanese enemies with dogs stands, therefore, the Israeli humanist soldier who agonizes over having shot dogs, suggesting the overall superiority of Israeli soldiers and their moral quandaries. The dogs, as a reference to Palestinians, function as a catalyst that triggers the suppressed memory for the traumatized Israeli soldier, who is stuck between a faceless enemy and a reckless leadership.

The film's kindly protagonist, Folman, is haunted by what he saw as a witness to the massacre, which triggers his amnesia of the war. It is only in the last few minutes of the film that Folman presents actual footage of the massacre and anchors the bloody story of the war squarely outside the boundaries of Israel and its actions, limiting all blame to blood-thirsty Phalangists seeking to revenge the death of their leader, Bashir Gemayel. Such a strategy overlooks the heavy Israeli shelling of densely populated cities and towns that lead to the deaths of thousands of civilians. The film ultimately reduces the First Lebanon War to the massacres of Sabra and Shatila. Israeli critics of the film have pointed to the ultimate responsibility of the Israeli leadership, and more specifically of the then minister of defense, Ariel Sharon, for the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, and accused the film of deflecting both individual and collective responsibility for the incidents. Folman looks to these massacres not as a way of addressing guilt or individual accountability but in order to depict the trauma of war. The absolution offered by the confessional genre becomes in Waltz with Bashir a purging of the personal and collective responsibility of Israeli society (as opposed to the Israeli leadership). As Folman says in the film, "It's not in my system," and in an interview in the Israeli press: "A massacre is not on the radar of people like us. You don't even conceive that people are slaughtered for three days. You don't put the pieces together." Yet the making of the film took place when Ariel Sharon, who was condemned for his role...
in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, was elected again as prime minister. The film itself was released in Israeli theaters during the Israeli attack on Gaza in December 2008, when over a thousand Palestinian civilians died, including hundreds of women, children, and the elderly, invoking scenes that according to Israeli critic Gideon Levy were not that different from those portrayed in *Waltz with Bashir*. Folman’s overall emphasis on the folly of war in general, as opposed to its specific instances, disables any critical engagement with real wars. Ultimately, *Waltz with Bashir* is skillfully punctuated by absences: It’s not me. It’s not a war movie. It’s not our massacre. I have no memory.

**Questions of Accountability: Z32**

Documentary filmmaker Avi Mograbi’s *Z32* was released at about the same time as *Waltz with Bashir*. Although it did not get the same international attention as Folman’s film, *Z32* presents an intellectually far more sincere and in-depth engagement with the question of Israeli military violence, guilt, and responsibility. The film tells the story of a young Israeli and former soldier in a military elite unit, identified as Ronnie, who is haunted by his guilt for partaking in the killing of two innocent Palestinian policemen in an army revenge operation. The film is named after the file belonging to the Israeli human rights group Breaking the Silence that documents the incident on which the story is based. It revolves around the soldier’s attempts to absolve himself and seek forgiveness from his girlfriend and from the world more broadly. The actual incident, which lasted about twenty minutes, is told and retold throughout the film, conveying the soldier’s almost obsessive insistence on forgiveness, as if the mere repeating of the story could suffice to bring absolution.

As with most of his previous films, Mograbi structures *Z32* along parallel narratives that link his engagement as a filmmaker with the documentary subject of the film itself and integrates fictionalized segments that serve as a commentary on the documentary footage, accentuating the discursive nature of documentary filmmaking. Here he interjects Brechtian musical interludes that expose his own process of questioning and his struggles in making the film: Is he helping to harbor a murderer, while scraping together another film out of the situation? Can this person be forgiven? As Ginsburg has pointed out, Mograbi “insists that the process of making a documentary is one of the crucial, if not the most crucial aspects of the reality depicted and that, therefore, the process should be included in the documentary.”
Mograbi intentionally avoids asking his protagonist about his motivations. He is solely focused on the act around which the film is centered. Thus Mograbi avoids discussing with Ronnie his guilt in order to avoid subjecting himself to the soldier’s desire for forgiveness and becoming Ronnie’s judge and prosecutor, redeemer and forgiver. It is Ronnie’s girlfriend who fulfills those functions. Mograbi also seeks to avoid developing any relationship with the soldier because, he says, he felt that might create unavoidable empathy.37 The question of empathy is treated as a gendered matter, whereby the soldier’s girlfriend is assigned the role of caregiver and forgiver. Sheltered from his violence and alluded to as having not served in the military, she offers the insights of an outsider, interrogator, and confessant, but is treated as ultimately incapable of understanding the soldier’s plight. Equally, the director’s wife struggles to comprehend the director’s desire and need to engage with this confessing soldier’s need for redemption. Both women, in their disparate roles, have difficulty understanding, and are passively positioned outside the masculine dichotomy of violence and empathy at the heart of this film. This depiction begs the question about Israeli women’s role as active participants in national violence, portrayed in films like To See If I’m Smiling.

Mograbi is preoccupied with the question of violence in Israeli society, a thread that runs throughout his films. This violence, in Mograbi’s opinion, is far from limited to the confines of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and war zones with neighboring Arab counties and seeps into every aspect of Israeli daily life—in interactions on the street and in parliament, as well as inside homes. In Z32 Mograbi’s own living room functions as a central arena where the questioning of morality and accountability plays out, a space where Ronnie’s confession is recorded, where Mograbi’s orchestra convenes to accompany Mograbi’s contemplative singing. It is a space where Mograbi collapses Israeli society’s insistence on the dichotomous landscapes between “here” and “there,” between high morals represented within the boundaries of Israel proper and the actions of those easily dismissed as wild weeds generated by Israel’s engagement in the Occupied Territories. Mograbi sarcastically crones, “It happened somewhere out there, don’t bring it over here. . . . It’s a story about a soldier who was raised to be one of the hot shots. Who was cultivated to wait until they let him . . . charge.”

Self-reflexively, Mograbi then analyzes the effect of this violence on his fictionalized self—the filmmaker in the film. In Z32 the performance of the confessional act is expanded beyond the scope of the soldier narrating and repeating his story to include the filmmaker himself. In the fictionalized scenes Mograbi’s character enters into a performative duo with the con-
fessing soldier. In a sense this dialogical performance with the confessant extends Mograbi’s underlying premise that as a filmmaker he cannot avoid becoming implicated in the same violence that his film seeks to explore. The camera is not only a recorder of violence, but also precipitates it. Thus, in contrast to Waltz with Bashir, here society, filmmaker, and camera are all generators and active participants in acts of violence, not merely passive consumers or observers of it. Ginsburg asked whether these reenactments, ironic as they are, function to reveal or in fact to mask the filmmaker. It is that tension that Mograbi seeks to play on.

Mograbi's camera, which in earlier films served as a witness, reporter, and opposition activist, opens up a space of reflection and debate in Z32. The violence permeating every scene in films like August (Ogust) (2002) and Avenge But One of My Two Eyes (Na'am ahat mi-shtet enai) (2005) now occupies a new space, configured as a postclimactic arena, a therapeutic space. Except for the thread that follows Ronnie and Mograbi's return to the scene of the crime to reconstruct the events surrounding the killings, all other scenes take place in closed private spaces: the filmmaker's living room, Ronnie and his girlfriend's apartment, a hotel room in India where the couple is staying. The filmmaker's living room workspace, populated by characters, is also the director's own private space and comfort zone, into which his wife walks in one of the scenes. Ronnie's apartment, where he has soul-searching conversations with his girlfriend, is also the space where he carries on with his everyday life, as reflected in a sequence that takes place while the couple are eating their lunch. The camera in Z32 takes on a dominant role as if it were one of the characters in the film, seeking a final and ultimate space where engagement and healing can be explored. The film opens with Ronnie and his girlfriend as they switch on the camera, getting ready to engage each other as witness and confessant, and the camera plays a crucial role. "Is it rolling? . . . Do you think the frame looks good? . . . Okay, talk," the girlfriend tells Ronnie. At first they address their awkwardness speaking to the camera, acknowledging its presence. By the end of the film, however, the camera becomes the final witness, as the exasperated couple reach the limit of their exchange, and words can no longer provide the necessary shield and relief. When language fails, an awkward silence falls as they gaze into the recording lens and finally decide that nothing has really been resolved and there is nothing left to do but turn it off.

Ronnie is incapable of making the ultimate confession—"I am a murderer. Instead he is focused on, and even obsessed with, his personal redemption and ability to reintegrate into society and resume his "normal" life.
After a long exchange with his girlfriend—in which she struggles to understand his predicament and clearly exclaims that what he was engaged in was murder—Ronnie does not even pause, ponder or reflect, but immediately bolts out, "And do you forgive me?" His actual engagement with the implications and meanings of his actions is limited to his own absolution. He then continues, in an accusing tone, "You know, it calls for some kind of forgiveness or acceptance." The reconciliation he wants is with his own people, society, and life partner, not with his victims and their families, as is so strikingly evident in the reenactment scenes of the crime, where the Palestinian victim is absent. Mograbi's return to the scene of the crime with Ronnie to reconstruct the details of the event is similar to the parallel scene in *One of Us*; here the scene becomes the ultimate courtroom where Ronnie must confront his crime. But while in *One of Us* the courtroom scene is aimed at excavating a hidden truth, in *Z32* that truth has already been told, and it is its interpretation that is being contested. The issue of responsibility is at the heart of Mograbi's exploration, not only the soldier's personal responsibility for his actions, but also the responsibility of a society whose culture makes such actions possible. In some respects Mograbi is inadvertently exonerating the soldier and absolving him of his own responsibility by putting the onus on society that makes good people do bad things.³⁸ The film is further centered on what Israelis could argue is an extreme event: a revenge operation carried out in response to the Palestinian killing of six Israeli soldiers. As it is an extreme event, Mograbi is able to offer a clear moral dilemma for Israeli audiences who view the occupation as a necessary measure to guarantee their security.

Throughout his work Mograbi is highly conscious of the implications of Zionism and Israel's presence for Palestinians. While Mograbi is critical of the Israeli state, he does not necessarily address Zionist ideology more specifically as a possible starting point to critically examine and evaluate Israel's current violence. Furthermore his films, *Z32* included, focus primarily on the consequences of Israel's control of Palestinians for Israelis, and Palestinians are absent from *Z32*'s landscape. One can attribute that absence to Ronnie's disregard for Palestinians, most strikingly evident in the reconstruction scenes, where he completely ignores the presence of any Palestinians passing through the frame as he retells his story of the killing. But Palestinians and the Palestinian presence are generally absent from Mograbi's films as a whole, punctuating the lingering effects of their presence, and mirroring their absence from Israeli society. Mograbi leaves Palestinian agency to Palestinians and focuses his discussion on the conflict
as an internal Israeli issue. The unifying core space of most of his films, a critical engagement with his own living room, so to speak, remains largely off limits. It is a site that, while representing his internal struggles vis-à-vis the outside world gone mad, remains a space of civility. Perhaps not coincidentally, Mograbi's musical references to Bertold Brecht, which annotate and comment on the crumbling world outside, are most strongly associated with the perceived high values of the European culture of early Zionism and, with his own home at the center of Tel Aviv, reflect that culture's precarious position in contemporary Israeli society.

_Waltz with Bashir_ and _Z32_ were developed and released around the same time, yet offer dramatically different approaches to the question of accountability. Both films reflect on a soldier's trauma during military service, but neither shows us archival or documentary footage of the events addressed. Both films offer distinct styles to address this visually inaccessible past, infusing theatricality and drama into the narrative elements, whether recreating a past and evoking an emotional reaction to it through visual (_Waltz_) or musical (_Z32_) elements. Both films strive to make illustrative or cognitive associations between image, sound, and testimony. While Folman opts for highly deft animation to present his characters, Mograbi chooses to put a digital mask on the face of his character to disguise his identity. The brilliant execution of the masking may leave viewers wondering if they are privy to the soldier's actual facial characteristics. Throughout the film Mograbi reminds us of the mask in shots that tease out its presence. This technique allowed Mograbi to retain access to the soldier's facial expressions as an important element of his character, while allowing the soldier to hide his identity to avoid any legal liability. While Mograbi strives to remove barriers between viewer and character, Folman's decision to animate his film seems to indicate a pull in the other direction, providing his characters a shield behind which they can stand and act. Yet the film's lack of emotional depth leaves viewers with a sterile sense of the horror of war and the moral dilemmas the film wants to address. The choice of animation and disguise emphasize what has already become an accepted truism about subjectivity and the active role of narrative in documentary films.

Both films are framed by a particular set of musical references that signify the filmmakers' respective struggles with the declining ideals of and challenges to Zionist Israel's Ashkenazi Jewish elite. The European cultural heritage of the Viennese waltz provides the frame in _Waltz with Bashir_, as does the music of Wiel and theater of Bertold Brecht in _Z32_. It is a tradition now punctured by the rhythm of gunshots, as the Israeli soldier waltzes in
the midst of a street battle to the whistle of bullets shooting by; it crescendos with soul-searching Brechtian music and lyrics sung by Mograbi as he contemplates military morality and the responsibility of Israeli society.

In The Politics of Regret Jeffrey Olick addresses how the rise of individualism, increased division of labor, and the growth of polyglot modern societies effects a greater need for forgiveness as a means to regulate and maintain social order. Within such dense networks of relations any one action triggers a wide circle of implications. Israel was a polyglot society from its inception, and its binding glue has been the firm hold of Zionist ideology. The internal and external political-existential challenges to the Israeli state, as evident in Israeli confessional cinema, coupled with the rise of individualism and a consumer society in the 1990s, have loosened the threads binding Israel’s people. The main question now is, what part of itself does Israeli society hope to regulate in the making of these confessional films? The discourse is internal, aimed in most instances (Z32 being the exception) at healing and restoring to Israeli society its moral image of itself, but also international, as Israel seeks to maintain its image as “the only democracy in the Middle East” in the face of growing international criticism. Ultimately, the act of confession implies a desire for forgiveness, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and penance. Because the majority of Israeli films do not really address guilt or responsibility, they confess without regret toward their victims. In the absence of engagement with the direct victim in the epistemological space of confession, reconciliation cannot realistically be the intended outcome of the confessing Israeli perpetrator/soldier; rather, what we witness as viewers is the desire to confess in order to forget.

NOTES


3. In addition to the references listed in notes 1 and 2, there has been extensive literature on this subject, including Mark Gibney, The Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Jennifer M. Lind, Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).


6. Following the international criticism of Israel’s attack on the flotilla to Gaza in May 2010, for example, Israeli public opinion turned against Turkey. Previously, Israelis had regarded Turkey as their only Muslim ally in the region and a popular tourist destination for cheap vacations; however, they now heavily criticize Turkey for its long-standing brutal suppression of Kurdish human rights. The UN and its various agencies, once regarded as a source of support, are now frequently criticized for their one-sided condemnation of Israel. While obviously other instances of international human rights violations are strongly condemnable, this attitude among Israelis avoids and seeks to deflect attention from and engagement with Israel’s violation of human rights and international law.


8. This point about Vietnam movies is made by Tony Williams, “Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies,” in Anderegg, Inventing Vietnam, 125.


11. Shmulik Duvdevani, Guf Rishon, Matzlema: Kolno’a T’udi Ishi be-Israel [First-Person Camera: Documentary Filmmaking in Israel] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2010), 86.


17. Brooks, Troubling Confessions, 164.

18. Various Israeli films reflect this attitude; one can find it in Palestine Circus (Kirkas Palestina) (Eyal Halon, 1998), and more so in documentaries such as 119 Bullets and Three (119 kadurim ve-shalosh) (Yeud Levanon, 1996), Inside God’s Bunker (be-Tokh ha-bunker shel elohim) (Micha Peled, 1994), and Reflection: A Diary of a Reserve Soldier 1989 (Hishtakfut: yomanu shel hayal milu’im 1989) (Yishai Shuster, 1991).

19. Barabash, more than any other Israeli filmmaker, directly engages problems of contemporary Israeli society. In his best-known film, Beyond the Walls, and its sequel, Beyond the Walls II, he examines Arab-Jewish relations within an Israeli prison. In his next film, Dreamers (ha-Holmim) (1987), an English-language epic, he focuses on an early community of Jewish settlers in Palestine. One of Us (Ehad mi-shelanu) (1989) signals the beginning of Barabash’s interest in various aspects of the Israeli army. Together with his brother—scriptwriter, former military lieutenant colonel, and Peace Now activist Benny Barabash—he developed this theme in films like the musical Strawberries (le-Lakek ta’tut) (1992), focusing on a military musical troupe, and the television series Basic Training (Tironut), which has aired on Channel 2 since 1998.


22. As Tom Segev points out, what constitutes normal and abnormal can be debated. For him the impoverishment of most countries in the non-Western world is actually “normal.” A state to which only members of one particular religion are allowed to immigrate while its indigenous people are denied similar rights is “abnormal.” Tom Segev, “Mekhonit Folsvagen ba-kibbutz, nani‘ah” [Let’s Suppose, a Volkswagen in the Kibbutz], in Sefer Haaretz: ha-shana ha-75 [Haaretz: The Seventy-fifth Year], ed. Yehoshua Knaz, 173–76 (Tel Aviv: Shukan, 1996).


25. Aberjil’s Facebook photographs generated a heated discussion in the Israeli press. See, for example, Uri Misgav, “ha-Banaliyut shel ha-Kibush” [The Banality of Occupation], Yediot Aharonot, August 20, 2010; Haaretz, “I would gladly kill

26. This sentiment was epitomized in a speech given by renowned Israeli writer David Grossman, who lost his son Uri during the last day of the war; he gave a strong voice to the Israeli leftist elite in debates on the war as well as the IDF and government leaderships’ abandonment of soldiers on the battlefield.

27. But, as Israeli critic Yitzhak Laor considers in his critique of Waltz with Bashir, do these films ultimately serve to protect their audiences from the memory of the war, in this particular instance the massacre of Sabra and Shatila? “Is the director’s amnesia in the film providing a cinematic space for audiences to keep a safe distance from its horrors, from actually remembering it?” Yitzhak Laor, “Dor Shalem Doresh Tashlum,” Haaretz, February 27, 2009, http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=1067189.


32. The image of dogs also triggers Israeli associations with the Holocaust, as testimonies by Holocaust survivors often described the ways in which the Nazis used dogs against Jews in the camps. The association between dogs and Nazis is also referenced by the dog in the German porn movie one of the Israeli soldiers watches during the film. In a piece commissioned by the Sharjah Biennale in 2009, artist Agnes Janish created “Man to Man,” a claustrophobic maze that references the dog kennels at Auschwitz, where the food, conditions, and health care were comparatively better than those endured by human prisoners at the camp. In the artist’s commentary about the piece in the biennale’s catalog, Janish references the legacy of this experience and its emotional impact as it relates to the Israeli-Palestinian context. See Provisions, Sharjah Biennale catalog, (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Foundation, 2009), 249–56.

33. According to Human Rights Watch, 1,125 Lebanese died during the 2006 Lebanon War, as well as 119 Israeli soldiers and 40 civilians. See Human Rights Watch, Why They Died: Civilian Casualties in Lebanon During the 2006 War, Vol. 19, no. 5(E), September 2007.


37. Avi Mograbi, interview with the author, New York, September 14, 2009

38. In her introduction to Evil to the Core, an exhibition presented at the Digital Center in Holon, Israel, in 2009, curators Galit Eilat and Ran Kasmy Ilan reference a variety of works by behavioral psychologists, philosophers, and artists who sought to examine similar issues of docility, social conformity, morality, authority, and obedience, and perhaps most importantly, questions of disobedience and its contested relationship to loyalty and patriotism, especially in the Israeli context. See http://www.digitalartlab.org.il/ExhibitionPage.asp?id=372&path=level_1.