Miri Talmon, Yaron Peleg, eds. *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. xvii + 373 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-72560-7.

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In Search of the Elusive Israeli "Collective Unconscious"

The story of Israeli cinema begins, much like organized Zionism itself, with the initiative of the movementâs inspiring leader, Theodor Herzl. A Viennese playwright and journalist, Herzl was early to grasp the superb capability of the new medium to document Jewish life in the Land of Israel and to propagate the Zionist cause. âThe kinematograph is going to be â¦ a most efficient weapon of modern propaganda,â he stated in October 1900, and promptly concluded: âLetâs use it now!â Herzl also secured the funding for a film and appointed the first Zionist filmmakers. The result was an absolute (though also, in retrospect, amusing) failure: the first three cinematographers Herzl assigned could not operate the camera he bought; the fourth finally sent the camera from Palestine back to Vienna, together with some filmed material which had never been developed due to its âpoor quality.â[1] Herzlâs failure to produce the initial Zionist film was the starting point for the peculiar relations between ideologically motivated filmmakers and the suspicious (though not entirely unsupportive) establishment, which characterized decades of Jewish cinema in the Land of Israel. On the one hand, Zionist funds demonstrated little interest in sponsoring film productions (Ben Gurionâs famous disdain for film and television was a long-lasting one; in the early 1960s he still reminded his listeners that biblical Moses did well without ever going to the movies). On the other hand, the principle that instigated Herzlâs flop continued to excite Zionist activists who believed that a ârealistâ portrayal of Jewish life in Palestine would help facilitate the forma-

tion of the national community. Influenced by Herzlâs vision and by popular Zionist tropes, Jewish European filmmakers of the early 1910s laid the foundations–and outlined the standard imagery–of Zionist and early Israeli cinema. The aesthetic and ideological preferences of directors and spectators have considerably changed over the years. Yet, the early filmmakersâ aspiration to document, define, and transform collective identities has informed a century-long effort to envision the Israeli self-image on the screen.

Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg's *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion* is an intriguing inquiry into this ambition to negotiate self-perceptions in Zionist and Israeli films. With the premise that film provides a glance into the âcollective unconsciousâ (p. ix), it introduces a diverse collection of studies that analyze the varying expression of Israeli identities from the early years of the British Mandate to the early 2000s. As an introduction to Israeli visual culture and its relations with major trends in Israeli society, this volume is a significant addition to the scholarship in this field. Together with a few other recent publications it reflects both the growing international interest in the intricacies of Israeli identity politics and the current prevalent recognition of Israeli cinema (manifested *inter alia* in the multiple Oscar nominations, prestigious prizes, and presentations at international festivals during the last decades).[2]

According to the authors of this volume, Israeli (and Zionist) films have generally conformed–through dif-

ferent methods and in different contexts–to a specific âmoodâ of the time of their production. Most articles in the book seem to embrace a distinct categorization of Israeli films that corresponds with certain âphasesâ in Israeli history. The initial phase, according to this approach, demonstrates commitment to the Zionist narrative, propaganda, and self-image. Beginning in Mandate Palestine, with filmmakers such as Yaacov Ben-Dov, Nathan Axelrod, and Helmar Lerski, this stage, with films such as *Hill 24 Doesnât Answer* (1955), continued into the early 1960s. Accordingly, these films displayed the ânewâ muscular, heroic Jew; adopted the Labor Zionistâs enthusiasm for manual work and collectivism; presented Zionism as the remedy for past traumas; and showed the âOtherâ as primitive and perilous. The second phase, which lasted into the first Intifada, shifted the emphasis from a deliberate effort to âconsolidate and create an Israeli communityâ to a ânormalized local cinematic idiomâ (p. xii). While they still featured a mostly âmasculine worldâ of Ashkenazi Jews, films also expressed willingness to challenge and deviate from the traditional conventions (manifested in the criticism of Israeli militarism; the focus on the individual rather than the collective; and the introduction of new heroes–war widows, *Mizrahim*, Holocaust survivors, and young, horny, selfish city-dwellers). The third phase, developing since the early 1990s, corresponds with the optimism generated by the Oslo Accord, and with the desertion of melting-pot ideology in favor of Israeli multiculturalism. It featured films of a new generation of filmmakers, who often celebrated their âOthernessâ (as homosexuals, Orthodox Jews, new immigrants, Mizrahi Jews, and Arabs). These filmmakers, according to the reviewed articles, were not merely critical of old Zionist paradigms and current politics. Rather, they articulated a âpost-Zionistâ approach (i.e., they were ready and eager to question the principles of the Zionist credo, and were sympathetic to its victims and outcasts). Finally, the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process added a sense of depression, helplessness, and sometimes apathy to the multiculturalism of the 1990s.

The generalization about the historical development of the identity discourse in Israeli cinema has some notable advantages as a starting point for the discussion of Israeli films. Mainly, it reveals similarities and links between seemingly unrelated phenomena. Thus, for instance, the avant-garde aesthetics and fascination with decay and death among the young auteurs of the ânew sensibilityâ (explored by Judd Neâeman) concurred with new visibility of Mizrahi Jews and urbanite bums in the

early seventies (discussed in Peleg and Yaron Shemerâs article). Both identified with the new readiness to challenge the existing image of the Israeli âcollectivity.â Similarly, Anat Zanger shows how the biblical story of the *Akedah* is repeated in the contemporary âphaseâ of Israeli cinema in different films with the same woeful conclusion, which underscores contemporary awareness to âthe complicated relations between Zionism and its concomitant ethos of binding and sacrificeâ (p. 235).

This scheme, however, overlooks several complexities and nuances. This is most evident in the articles that address the early years of Zionist and Israeli cinema, which allegedly demonstrate an âintensive and deliberate effortâ to envisage *the* ethos of Labor Zionism. Ariel L. Feldsteinâs informative article, for instance, has some noteworthy insights on the uniqueness of Zionist propaganda films; yet he depicts Zionist filmmakers as a homogenous group of people with similar views and objectives. This approach disregards the different aesthetic and the different ideological influences on its development. Emphasis on the tensions and diversity which shaped early Zionist films would have resulted in a much more nuanced image of Zionist identities and their integration within the Zionist movement. An alternative approach is demonstrated in Jan-Christopher Horakâs article on Lerski, which shows how Lerskiâs unique biography and experiences were integrated into his Zionist films. This point could have been pushed much further: a photographer and cinematographer who worked in North America, Weimar Germany, and Palestine, Lerski embodied the notion of transnational German (liberal) culture. The assimilation of his bourgeois liberal sensibilities into Labor Zionist art discloses the tensions, conflicts, and oppositions that were incorporated within Socialist Zionism. In addition, as Horak himself has noted in previous publications, many Zionist films in the 1930s catered first and foremost to a German-speaking audience (in Palestine and in the Jewish communities in Germany).[3] As in many articles in this volume, a careful consideration of the specific target audience could have unveiled the different self-perceptions within the Zionist camp. A focus on the visualized âcracksâ in Labor Zionist ideology–and the ways different views have finally been integrated within it–would probably teach us more about Zionism than the premise that early films adhered to it.

The assumption that Israeli films correspond with *the* Israeli self-image–or with *the* Israeli societyâs outlook vis-Ã -vis Zionist nationalism–is problematic mainly since within this framework film often functions as an âillustrationâ for a presupposed disposition. In such

cases, film analysis plays the subsidiary role of explaining how a particular film belongs to the presumed hegemonic paradigm of its era. Certain articles in the volume transcend this obstacle and introduce alternative contexts for the reading of Israeli film. The articles on the cinematic language of trauma, on the changes in the moral judgment of the Kibbutz, and on the representation of religious women in a transnational context of filmmaking are good examples of potential paths for future studies. Another significant example is the interesting debate between Sandra Meiri and Dorit Naaman about the interpretation of the film *Fictitious Marriage* (1988): the former argues that the failure of the protagonist to remain âthe Other withinâ at the end of the film manifests the filmmakerâs criticism of the rigid (white male) Zionist perspective; the latter sees this ending as an indication of the Israeli inability to assume the Otherâs perspective. This fascinating debate has an essential place in a book that seeks to map Israeli âidentities in motionâ through film analysis. But the discussion of these opposing perspectives here is too narrow. In order to evaluate these interpretations we probably would be interested in questions such as how was the film marketed, who was the target audience; what were the specific political, cultural, and social conditions in which it was produced; how does it compare to the literature and theater of the time, and so on. The constructive discussion of film as an emblem of major tendencies within its social and cultural surrounding requires a serious consideration of the broad historical and cultural contexts.[4]

The selection of films discussed in this volume is also noteworthy. While the perspectives and themes vary, many of the authors repeatedly discuss the same films. Films such as *Hill 24 Doesnât Answer*, *Beaufort* (2007), *Walk on Water* (2004), *Turn Left at the End of the World* (2004), *Wooden Gun* (1979), *Siege* (1969), and a few others are markedly overrepresented in the volumeâs articles (the remarkable exceptions to this propensity include Gilad Padvaâs article on Amos Gutmanâs films and Olga Gershensonâs on Russian-speaking filmmakers). This selection of films raises a few important questions. First, what makes a (âtypicalâ) âIsraeliâ film? The English-language *Hill 24*, directed by the British Thorold Dickinson, receives much attention in the book (while Otto Premingerâs *Exodus* [1960], perhaps the most explicit manifestation of mainstream Zionist self-perception, is left out); similarly, *Siege* was directed by the Italian Gilberto Tofano. The thoughtful comparison between Amos Gitai's *Kedma* (2002) and Tawfik Abu Wael's *Atash* (2004) in Nurith Gertz and Gal Hermoniâs article extends fur-

ther the boundaries of âIsraeliâ film (*Kedma* was funded largely by European funds and premiered in France; *Atash* is described in Gertzâs previous publication as a Palestinian film [5]). This article also highlights the relative scarcity of the Arab Israeli voice in a volume which–justly–takes pride in disclosing the voices of various Israeli âOthers.â

With a few exceptions, neither the editors nor the authors explain the selection of the repeatedly discussed films. The contributors might have expanded their discussions by including other equally important and interesting feature films, e.g., *Life According to Agfa* (1993), *Rocking Horse* (1978), *Avanti-Popolo* (1986), *Hole in the Moon* (1964), or *But Where is Daniel Wax?* (1972). In addition, the discussion of certain topics in the book is conspicuously crippled by the omission of documentary films. For instance, the representation of the Holocaust in Israeli films is considerably limited without a serious discussion of documentaries such as *Because of that War* (1988), *The Specialists* (1999), *A Film Unfinished* (2010), *The Flat* (2011), and even *Pizza in Auschwitz* (2009). Similarly, it is hard to think of the representation of the Arab âOtherâ without documentaries such as the highly influential television productions *Amud HaâEsh* (1981) and *Tkuma* (1998), or, for that matter, Avi Mugrabiâs disturbing cinematic journeys. The past two decades have witnessed a booming industry of Israeli documentary film productions. Analysis of these documentaries–many of them, indeed, are obsessed with the notion of identity and its fluid meaning–would arguably teach us more about the current Israeli âunconsciousâ than the lavish productions of the kind of *Beaufort*.

That said, Talmon and Pelegâs *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion* is a valuable contribution to the study of Israeli cinema and Israeli culture in general. The eloquent articles discuss a variety of topics and viewpoints that results in a broad survey of different genres in different historical and social contexts. The emphasis on the connections between film and its social surrounding makes this book an extremely useful tool for the teaching of Israeli cultures and ideologies. The volumeâs methodological framework leads to intriguing analyses which demonstrate the potential trajectories of the future scholarship of Israeli cinema. *Israeli Cinema* is an excellent starting point for the discussion of Israeli visual culture and its expression of transient Israeli identities.

Notes

[1]. See Yoseph Halachmiâs detailed account of the production of this film: Yoseph Halachmi, *Ru-*

ach Raanana: Parashat HaâSeret HaâZioni HaâRishon BeâEretz Israel, 1899-1902 (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2009).

[2]. Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); and Raz Yosef, *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

[3]. Jan-Christian Horak, âZionist Film Propaganda in Nazi Germany,â *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 4, no. 1 (1984): 49-58.

[4]. Such broad-contexts approach is common in current studies of national cinemas; for instance, Noah Isenberg, ed., *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[5]. Nurith Gertz and George Khaleifi, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 197-198.

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