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Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel

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Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel

by

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Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel

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This study explores the construction of Mizrahi (Oriental-Jewish) ethnic identity in contemporary Israeli films and its inscription by power imbalances and by the positionality of the Mizrahi in Israeli society. Against the widespread dismissal of ethnic divisions informed by the precept of societal pastiche, this work articulates the modalities through which Mizrahi films (made by Mizrahi filmmakers and others) employ narratives, characters, and space to cull ethnic differences in the depiction of this ethnic group. Accordingly, this study of Mizrahi cinema reveals how even when the filmic text is seemingly foregrounding dilemmas pertaining to class and gender, the ethnic issue lurks underneath and threatens to burst forth.

For decades after the establishment of the State, Israeli films mostly acquiesced with Zionism's dominant discourse, whereby the Mizrahi was deemed an inferior other whose "Levantine" culture was believed to pose a threat to the Western-oriented Zionist

enterprise. This study proposes that the attested commonalities between Mizrahi and Arab cultures of recent Mizrahi films are meant precisely to offer an alternative to the hegemonic ethno-national narrative, and to remedy the social and cultural marginalization of the Mizrahi group that this discourse has allowed to persist. But this work also attends to the problematics involved in the attempts by second-generation Mizrahi filmmakers to reclaim their parents' Arab culture. The barrier of language and the impossibility for most of them of going back to their parents' countries of origin necessitate a construction of the past that is highly mediated and tortuous.

Beyond its analysis of the pro-filmic materials, this study inquires about the role cultural policies and institutional power in Israel have recently played in shaping Mizrahi cinema. *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel* examines how fund allocations and television programming have created the Mizrahi niche in cinema—a space that defines and contains contesting voices more than it nourishes them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

I arrived in Israel to embark on my study on December 31, 2003. Two weeks later, I met with the library and archive staff of The Jerusalem Film Center (Jerusalem Cinematheque) to discuss my research needs. At the end of my first day there, I was introduced to Lia Van Leer, founder and director of the Film Center, who, four months later, was awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement for her contribution to Israeli cinema. She inquired about my research project, at that time titled "The Absence of Power and the Power of Absence: Women, Sephardim,[1] and Arabs in Israeli Cinema." Van Leer commented that the study of women and Arabs in Israeli cinema is timely and merits much attention. But then I was taken aback when she dismissively commented that the Sephardi issue is passé and went on to support her claim.

During my stay in Israel through July 6, 2004, I heard similar remarks from lay people and a few members of the film community as well. However, I also learned that what they often meant by the assertion that the Sephardi/Mizrahi issue was passé did not necessarily involve a denial that this ethnic group was subjected to discrimination and oppression. It was rather their way of expressing one of three positions.[2] First, that public and critical discourse regarding this issue has been so exhaustive in the last few

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[1] Sephardim are Oriental Jews. The next section of the introduction elaborates on this and other related terms, including Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Temporarily, I will employ "Mizrahim" and "Sephardim" interchangeably. The ending "im," as in Mizrahim, is a Hebrew marker of the plural form.

[2] These sentiments are reflected in an article with Israeli artists and media professionals published in the weekly *Ha'ir* ("Ashkenazim from the Bunker," 9/25/1998, pp. 34-49). The article sets out to explore the extent to which Ashkenazi Jews feel threatened by the putatively gradual domination of Mizrahi culture.

decades that any additional study seems redundant. Second, that Israel has succeeded in forming a truly pluralistic society. This position is informed by the assertion that ethnic differences are no more than adornments to the country's societal blend. The motivating discourse here involves the belief that the Israeli melting pot has facilitated the emergence of the new Israeli—a hybrid who is neither Ashkenazi (originating in Europe) nor Mizrahi. That position is also guided by an alternative perception that the Israeli people managed to form a truly multicultural society that is tolerant of and even encouraging of sociocultural differences. And, third, that Israel's social problems are related to class, not ethnicity. Advocates of this view argue that, while in the past the Mizrahi predicament was particular and merited its own scholarly work and remedies, these days, and mostly due to the neo-liberal right-wing economic policies, the ethnic issue is subsumed within the broader social dilemma pertaining to the working class (including Palestinian and foreign day laborers), the unemployed, and single mothers. Congruent with these three approaches is the sense—shared, as we shall see, by Israeli scholars and filmmakers—that the flaunting of the ethnic issue in present-day Israel smacks of undue "whining."

My personal background as a son of Iraqi-Jewish parents, coupled with my academic training in Israel and the U.S., have made me fully aware of the importance and relevance of the Mizrahi issue to understanding Israel's past and present. Yet, the primary motivation for changing my dissertation topic to *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel* was not so much to counter the claim that the Mizrahi problem is no longer relevant, but to inquire why Israelis so eagerly resort to this

conviction and adopt one of the aforementioned views. Stated differently, although my work will critically explore the representation and the role of the Mizrahi in contemporary Israeli films, my study's main goal is to identify and analyze the key cinematic discourses regarding ethnic identities. This involves the articulation and culling of difference, alterity, and marginality against the widespread dismissal of ethnic divisions predicated on the precept of societal pastiche.

MIZRAHI CINEMA: DEFINITION AND PARAMETERS

Although this work does not attempt to provide a full historical review and assessment of the different terms referring to this Israeli community and ethnic group of Oriental Jews, it is necessary to address the more widespread usages and examine their denotative and connotative meanings. Mizrahim, Mizrahiyim, Edot ha'Mizrah,[3] Sephardim, Oriental Jews, Arab-Jews, Jews of the Muslim and Arab world, Jews of the Middle East, and Sephardo-Mizrahim are but some of these terms. As we shall see, the specific term chosen as an identity marker often betrays sociopolitical and ideological stands toward Israeli society in general and the ethnic dilemma in particular. It is in this context that I will expound on my choice of the term Mizrahi which, in turn, will guide me in delineating the parameters of Mizrahi cinema.

Interestingly, despite the plethora of terms referring to this one group, its counter group is called by one name: Ashkenazi. Official language, largely the product of the Ashkenazi hegemonic group, coined the uncomplimentary term Edot ha'Mizrah. The

[3] The modern Hebrew usage of "*edot*" has no equivalent in English; the closest translation would be "ethnic communities."

term is problematic on at least three grounds: (1) It connotes a scattered and underdeveloped community;[4] (2) It marks the Mizrahi group, whereas the Ashkenazi group, to which "*edot*" is never attributed, remains unmarked; and (3), related to this marking, it clearly places the Mizrahi as an other, albeit not the ultimate other.[5] Schematically, one can imagine a van diagram, where at the core of Israeli identity (one circle) is the unmarked Ashkenazi; at the center of the other circle is the Arab/Palestinian enemy; and the overlapping area is that of the "*subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 1994c:86), consisting mostly of Oriental Jews and Druse.[6] To put it blatantly, in this sociopolitical coinage of "*edot*," the "good" Arabs—e.g., the Druse (or the Christian Falangists during the Lebanese Civil War)—and the "not-so-good" Jews—the Orientals—are designated as Israel's social and cultural margins.[7]

The critical work of Israeli sociologist Shlomo Swirski in the 1980s was among the first to challenge the official term Edot ha'Mizrah. In *Israel: The Oriental Majority* (1989), Swirski employs the term "Mizrahim"—a coinage, as Sami Shalom Chetrit (2004a:43-48) suggests, that was meant to challenge the putatively dispersed or underdeveloped state of Mizrahi communities. This new term, therefore, attempts to flaunt commonality, unity, and consciousness regarding the so-called Edot ha'Mizrah.

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[4] See, for example, Chetrit (2004a:43).
[5] For more on the problematics of "*edot*," see Ben-Rafael (1982), Domínguez (1989, Chapter 6), and Shohat (2001b).
[6] The Druse are Arabs who splintered from Islam in the 11th century to develop their own clandestine religion. The Israeli Druse, unlike their Arab-Muslim counterparts, serve in the Israeli army and enjoy a better status in the eyes of most Israelis.
[7] For a discussion of how in Israeli discourse some non-Jewish groups are designated *eda* (singular of *edot*), see Dominguez (1989:178-188).

Contemporary radical scholars in the fields of sociology and media studies, such as Ella Shohat and Yehuda Shenhav, prefer the term "Arab-Jews," which they use in reference to their own origin. This choice is a deliberate attack on the Zionist Manichean articulation where "Arab" and "Jew" are deemed antonyms.[8] "Arab-Jews," therefore, suggests that the term (and by implication, the people to which it refers) is as legitimate as "European-Jews" or "American-Jews" and should be cleared of any negative associations.[9] My main reservation in using this term is that, although it provides a succinct identity marker for certain Jewish Oriental communities, it excludes non-Arab Mizrahim, such as Iranian and Turkish Jews.[10] Likewise, the term "Jews of the Muslim Middle East" excludes Oriental Jews from the non-Muslim Balkan countries. Conversely, "Sephardi Jews," which literally translates as Spaniard Jews, is too inclusive; it encompasses all Jews who originate from Spain (including the relatively well-off patrician community of Jews settled in Palestine hundreds of years prior to the emergence of Zionism at the end of the 19th century and known as *Samech Tet*—an acronym for "Pure Spaniard").[11] Furthermore, presently, this term is often understood to be predicated mostly on a religious identification—all those who follow the Sephardi Jewish law as coded in the 16th century.

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[8] See, for example, Shohat (1997b, 1999a, 1999b, 2001a, and 2001b).

[9] A counter-argument points to the incommensurability of "Arab-Jews" (but not "Iraqi-Jews," for example) with terms such as "European-Jews"; whereas the latter addresses geographical origins (i.e., country or continent), the former does not. It bears noting that the Israeli census does not employ "Mizrahim" or "Edot ha'Mizrah"; instead, it employs the category of "Jews of Africa and Asia."

[10] I will elaborate on the problematics of "Arab-Jews" in Chapter 3.

[11] In one respect, if this term is taken literally, it is also too limited; it excludes some Oriental Jewish communities, such as the Iraqi, which has always been indigenous to the Middle East.

Although "Mizrahiyim" is not nearly as common as "Mizrahim," it merits our consideration. "Mizrahiyim" employs a Hebrew suffix, "yim," to create a noun from an adjective, and it therefore underscores essence rather than qualities. "Mizrahim," on the other hand, is a form fluid enough to be used as an adjective and noun. The main shortcoming of "Mizrahim" is that it is based on a misnomer. As Daniel Elazar (1988:24) maintains, over the course of Jewish history, large Mizrahi communities (literally, Easterners) lived west of their Ashkenazi counterparts. Bearing in mind this conceptual hurdle, my work employs "Mizrahi" and "Mizrahim" as the preferred terms referring to Jews of the Middle East, including North Africa and Ethiopia, and Jews from the Balkans. The inclusion of these areas and countries is based on both territorial contiguity and, to a large extent, shared experiences and traditions. The majority of Jewish immigrants from these places arrived in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, they suffered similar hardships and discrimination, and many had Arabic as their mother tongue.[12] The employment of the term "Mizrahim," as discussed here, is meant to avoid categories relying exclusively on genealogy; the definition and the following analyses intimate that geographical, cultural, and lingual commonalities are the preeminent elements from which identity is molded.[13]

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[12] "Mizrahim," as I use it in this work, is also an exclusionary term. It does not include Jews from some of the former Soviet Republics whose genealogy suggests that they are "Orientals." Also, considering that the collective experience of the old Sephardi Jewish population in Palestine (the *Samech Tets*) is, at least in some perspectives, markedly different than that of the Mizrahi immigrants of the post-1948 era, I will have only cursory references in my work to this Sephardi community.

[13] For a further discussion of terms referencing the Mizrahi community, see Shohat's "Rapture and Return" (2001b).

Accordingly, although the ethnic origins of filmmakers will be broached in various discussions, "Mizrahi cinema" in this work is defined by the films' subject-matter, not by the filmmakers' ethnicity. Mizrahi cinema includes all films pertaining to the Mizrahi ethnic issue in their choice of characters, cast, locations, storyline, and music. It will be clear from my discussions in Chapter 2 that it is unviable to have a pre-determined inventory of qualifiers determining what renders a single work a Mizrahi film. Instead, this study is more interested in looking at the corpus of films in which, in one manner or another and to a smaller or greater extent, the Mizrahi—as a theme, role, locale, etc.—is present, or conversely, when the Mizrahi should have been addressed but has instead been elided. My intent is to discern prominent themes, discourses, tensions, and common filmic strategies in this overall body of Mizrahi cinema.

FILM CORPUS

This study of Mizrahi cinema focuses on films—features, documentaries, and shorts—produced since the early 1990s.[14] It is first necessary to explicate the rationale for setting this period of contemporary cinema apart from its predecessors and, then, to expound the significance of including documentaries and shorts in my study.

Israeli media have gone through significant changes since the introduction of cable and multi-channel television systems over ten years ago.[15] These revolutionary developments impacted the film industry's infrastructure and facilitated the emergence of new cinematic and televisual genres. Thematically, whereas the films of the 1980s often

[14] This work also makes several references to television programs that generated public interest, as reflected in high ratings and ensuing debates.
[15] Until the early 1990s, Israel had only one television channel shared by two public stations.

revolved around the Arab/Israeli conflict, the films of the 1990s are marked by a tendency to address head-on questions about Israeli identity, thereby providing an inward and reflective look into the Israeli self. Topics that had previously been deemed too frivolous (due to the urgency of "national unity"), deviant, or controversial, and were therefore left mostly untreated, have gained center stage since the 1900s. Films dealing with homosexuality, domestic violence, emigration, religious schism, and corruption outnumber others and *are* the mainstream now.

Similarly, as Yosefa Loshitzky suggests in the introduction to her book *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (2001), there has been a shift in the mindset of the Israeli public from a politics of ideas (the overarching discourse about Zionism) to a politics of identity—a phenomenon most conspicuous in the works of women, Palestinian, and Mizrahi filmmakers as well as in films made by recent immigrant filmmakers from Russia and the former Soviet republics. All these features that set the cinematic period since the early 1990s apart are congruent with sweeping political changes in the electoral system, the liberalization of the Israeli economy, and the rise of post-Zionist and Israeli new-historicist scholarly work and political critique.[16]

[16] There is no agreed-upon definition of "post-Zionism," but, broadly speaking, the term alludes to academic literature that emerged in the 1980s and meant to challenge the hegemonic Zionist narrative, mainly vis-à-vis its historiography of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The emergence of the scholarly work of Israeli new-historians and post-Zionists—including Ilan Pappe, Tom Segev, and Benny Morris—has been attributed, to a large extent, to the Israeli government's concession in the mid-1980s to gradually allow public access to confidential state documents. For more on post-Zionism and the critique to which it was subjected, see the following anthologies: *The Other Israel: Voices of Refusal and Dissent* (Carey and Shainin, eds., 2002), *Israel and the Post-Zionists: A Nation at Risk* (Sharan, ed., 2003), *The Challenge of Post-Zionism: Alternative to Israeli Fundamentalist Politics* (Nimni, ed., 2003), and *An Answer to a Post-Zionist Colleague* (Friling, ed., 2003a).

Over 80 feature films have been made in the past fifteen years, only a few of which tackle directly or circumstantially the Mizrahi issue. But this work includes the study of documentaries and shorts not only because features on this topic do not constitute a corpus large enough for a scholarly study. The following account for the meager presence of Mizrahi feature films will suggest that a study of documentaries and shorts may reveal more about Mizrahi identity and struggle than feature films do. The cost of the average Israeli feature ranges from $600,000 to $1,500,000, a fraction of which is normally needed for the production of documentaries and shorts. Most features in Israel rely heavily on public and government funds, which normally cover approximately 50% of the costs. This dependency is more detrimental to Mizrahi feature filmmakers and, by extension, to topics relating to Mizrahi communities. Mizrahi filmmakers often lack the connections to centers of power and the financial and cultural capital their Ashkenazi counterparts enjoy. What I propose here is clearly not that Mizrahi filmmakers' heritage is limited, but that within the Israeli cultural hierarchy it is limiting. When the large majority of fund directors and lectors and nearly all major media owners and broadcasters in Israel have been of Ashkenazi origin,[17] it is no wonder that the cultural capital Mizrahi filmmakers have is undervalued and that their political agenda, mainly of the radical breed, often alienates those who need to decide what films are funded.

Whereas documentaries and shorts also depend on public funding and broadcasting sponsorship, they operate within a more flexible framework. For example,

[17] See my discussion "The Mizrahi Niche" in Chapter 4.

a significant number of the most prominent shorts and documentaries have been made by film students whose primary obligation was to their schools and have therefore been relatively free of the broader cultural, societal, and institutional constraints which bind the less-privileged feature filmmakers. My premise, then, is that the non-feature film, due to low costs and relative independence, provides precisely the space necessary for Mizrahi cinema to breathe and endure. Accordingly, I would suggest that fresh cinematic trends, innovative aesthetics, and unorthodox discourses are very likely to develop in the cinematic margins—the non-feature films—which, in turn, may affect mainstream cinema. It is my hope that identifying these pioneering strategies and articulations in Mizrahi documentaries and shorts will, therefore, benefit a study of Israeli cinema at large.

METHODOLOGY

My study is guided by scholarship in film and media studies, postcolonialism, semiotics, gender studies, and psychoanalysis. This multidisciplinary approach to the study of cinema will be applied to a defined and relatively narrow corpus of films as outlined above. Implied, therefore, in this methodology and in the following literature review, is the suggestion that a study of marginality, liminality, and hybridity can benefit most from a theoretical framework which itself is marked by syncretism.

Specifically, this work incorporates textual, contextual, and ethnographic study of Mizrahi cinema. Over the last few years I have watched and analyzed over forty contemporary fiction and non-fiction Mizrahi films. This corpus of films constitutes the large majority of all Mizrahi films made in the last fifteen years. Films were not

included in this study either because no viewing copy was available during the period of my research or simply because no article or fund's listings included a mention of those films. In neither case was there an intent to exclude those few films.

The Jerusalem Cinematheque Research and Library unit and Cinematheque Tel Aviv are the two main archives where I located film reviews for the works I analyze in this study. The objective of this phase in my study was to acquaint myself with the ideological and discursive frameworks from which various film critics and reviewers approach Mizrahi cinema. In this context, it was as important to my study to identify what was not being broached in these articles and reviews. As I will later explore, omissions, whether within the film diegesis or in the discourse about it, are as relevant to my study as what has been included.

The last phase of my research included over thirty recorded interviews with filmmakers, as well as with fund directors, film program directors, broadcasters, and scholars in the fields of media and ethnicity.[18] I assign much importance to the interviews with Mizrahi filmmakers, which constituted the bulk of the interviews I conducted. Not only was I interested in their responses to my inquiries, but I deem it necessary in a study about this subaltern group to let its people be heard by conveying their thoughts, attitudes, and critiques regarding their own and others' works.[19] The

[18] Notably, I had been personally acquainted with approximately half the interviewees prior to my research periods in 2004 and 2005. A number of the filmmakers and fund directors attended the film department at Tel Aviv University at the time I was a film student there in the early 1980s, and I also had worked on film projects and television programs with a few others after I earned my B.F.A. degree in 1983.

[19] The extent to which there is often a disregard for what the filmmaker has to say can be illustrated in a special event on Israeli media in the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, May 12, 2004. The evening started with a screening of Doron Tsabari's *The King of Ratings* (*Melekh ha'Reting,*

interviews were often conducted in a conversational manner in which both sides exchanged views; my hope is that I provided my interviewees with a comfortable stage to express themselves.

During my research stay in Israel, I attended conferences, lectures, and symposia pertaining to Israeli media, society, and culture. I also participated in various demonstrations and rallies for political and social causes that I support and consider relevant to my study. I found the meetings and symposia that the non-profit social organization The Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow (Hakeshet Hademocratit Hamizrahit) organizes to be most intriguing and enlightening; often, as I will discuss in the following chapters, the debates in the meetings of this organization reflected conceptual squabbles and uncertainties I have been wrestling with throughout.[20]

In the interviews and data gathering, my emphasis was on elements pertaining to the construction of Mizrahi identity in cinema and how it relates to issues of

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2001), followed by a panel discussing the predicament of Mizrahim in Israeli media. The panel, though, did not include the filmmaker, who sat in the audience.

[20] On Hakeshet Hademocratit Hamizrahit from its web-site:
"Introduction:
Hakeshet Hademocratit Hamizrahit is an apolitical, non-parliamentary social movement whose goal is to affect the current public agenda in the aim of bringing a change into the Israeli society as a whole and to its institutions. The organization is Mizrahi (Jews from Arab and Muslims Lands and the East) in its goals, universal in its beliefs, and open to all those who identify with its values. The movement strives to bring about a meaningful change [within] the Israeli society and implement values of democracy, human rights, social justice, equality, and [multiculturalism].
Fields of activity:
From the day of its establishment, Hakeshet Hademocratit Hamizrahit has been active in four main fields: land, employment and unemployment, education, and activity in the form of coalitions. During 2003 Hakeshet Hademocratit Hamizrahit expanded the scope of its activity and enlarged its number. This was achieved especially through coalition activities, also on the international level. A major part of the organization's work relates to organizing conferences, media expose and performances on central issues."
(http://www.ha-keshet.org.il/articles.asp?action=form&article_id=216)

representation, difference, power hierarchies, and subversion. Likewise, my research set out to explore how in contemporary Israeli films the terms under which the cinematic attempt to delineate the outlines of Mizrahi identity call for an articulation of a Mizrahi position vis-à-vis other subaltern groups, thus leading to reflections about intersectionality and alliances.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 provides the contextual and theoretical framework of my study. It offers a diachronic overview of major trends in Israeli cinema and highlights the central characteristics of Mizrahi cinema in each period. The chapter also engages a critical review of world and Israeli scholarly literature in the fields of film/media studies, postcolonialism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and, most prominently, cultural studies. Pivotal to my study are the works of Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, Hamid Naficy, and Ella Shohat on ethnicity and race, identity, multiculturalism, and the struggle for social change.

Chapter 2 will first engage a meta-critique—an attempt to delineate the parameters of critique for Mizrahi cinema and to point to a critique's own vulnerability. The chapter will proceed with an analysis of the problematics of representation in order to examine the burden to which filmmakers from a subaltern group are subjected. By relating the two burdens this chapter identifies—those borne by the film critique and by the filmmaker—I propose that critiquing *is* a form of representation, and therefore, that writing about (Mizrahi) cinema should be understood as fashioned within specific social, cultural, and political contexts. Furthermore, this chapter proposes that the imbrication of

critiquing and representing is even more self-evident considering that in filmmaking, to use Bakhtinian terminology, one assumes the language of the interlocutor (viewer) and, therefore, filmic representation arguably renders the filmmaker a critic of sorts of his/her own work.

The cinematic discourses and devices constructing the Mizrahi character on the screen is the focus of the third chapter. This chapter will first challenge the usefulness of adopting the essentialist/constructionist dyad model as a critical or hermeneutic tool. Indeed, this chapter's emphasis on the role culture plays in the construction of Mizrahi identity, particularly in the case of the hyphenated Arab-Jewish designation, renders such an either/or approach untenable. Culture epitomizes the concurrence of stability and change, genealogical origins, and invented collective selves that characterizes any ethnic, racial, or national groupings. The chapter will then ask what the modalities of the quest for cultural identity are. We will find that, unable to find materials in the seemingly multicultural Israeli society to adequately identify a contemporary, collective Mizrahi culture, filmmakers often resort to the reconstruction of the past in an attempt to glean an "authentic" Mizrahi self, unmarred by the alien culture which the Mizrahim were often coerced to adopt. Another strategy filmmakers employ to evoke Mizrahi identity is to underscore the geographical proximity and cultural affinity between the Mizrahim, whose origins are mostly in the Arab and Muslim Middle East, and their Arab neighbors and fellow citizens of the past. The articulation of *Mizrahiyut* ("Easterness") through its link to Arabness is clearly meant to subvert the supremacy of the decades-long oppressive Ashkenazi-Zionist discourse which attempted to eradicate precisely this likeness.

Chapter 4 attends to the postmodern articulations of Thirdspace and hybridity in an effort to map Mizrahi positionality as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Our discussion will reveal that even as those articulations permeate Mizrahi films, the performative play of space and identity does not take place in a societal limbo; indeed, we need to explore what conditions hybridity and Thirdspace, what their impact is, and who sets the rules for that play. Consequently, the chapter examines how in Israeli films the geographical and the societal psychic periphery—the space inhabited mostly by Mizrahim—is set against the center. The discussion, guided by Edward Said's (1978) distinction between topos and geography, proposes that the periphery is not defined by its "objective" distance from a metropolitan area, but by ideologically motivated reasoning and perceptions. This argument, which feeds back into the issue of representation, will lead us to addressing non-diegetic filmic realities, namely, distribution, exposure, and reception exposure. Consequently, a key question this chapter poses—to shift the terms of critical analysis from Gayatri Spivak's question "can the subaltern speak?" (1988)—is "who listens when the subaltern speaks?" The question comes into sharp focus in the consideration of Mizrahi niche cinema—a space designated for Mizrahi filmmakers and audiences.

Chapter 5 problematizes one-dimensional, "top-down" approaches that overlook power dynamics and subversion. It identifies several models or areas where the seemingly cinematic absence, or the marginalization of the Mizrahi Other, turn, in a dialectical fashion, into a motivating force, thus granting this group the power it has otherwise been lacking to represent and be represented. Accordingly, my discussion of

Mizrahi cinema will relate agency to victimhood rather than offer their incompatibility. Finally, we will suggest that agency rendered in Mizrahi protest (within cinema and without) leaves its impact not only on the subaltern group, but also on the hegemonic group which is now compelled to define *itself*.

If all previous chapters resorted to articulations of the Mizrahim as a relatively unitary collective, the final chapter will attend to intra- and inter-group relations. Initially, the chapter examines the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in its cinematic construction of the Mizrahi woman. As such, intersectionality prompts us to consider discursive and representational differences along gender lines within the Mizrahi camp. Specifically, my discussion here inquires whether Mizrahi feminist cinema offers the nourishing conflation of gender and ethnicity in portraying the experiences of Mizrahi women, or, alternatively, whether it elides ethnicity precisely as it foregrounds dilemmas shared by Israeli women of all ethnicities. Intersectionality also calls for an inquiry into the relations between ethnicity and class. As mentioned above, a widespread social stand in Israel today is to let go of the ethnic issue and, instead, to harness all efforts to remedy class problems which have plagued Israel. If the documentary *The King of Ratings* (*Melekh ha'Reting*, 2001) portrays ethnicity and class in two mostly non-convergent routes, *White Gold/Black Labor* (*Zahav Lavan/Avoda Sh'hora*, 2004) provides a case study for how, despite the cinematic attempt to stifle ethnicity in favor of a broader social commentary, ethnicity nevertheless lurks from within the "internal shadows of exclusion." The chapter's final section will explore the commonalities and alliances

between the Mizrahi group and other Others in Israeli society, most noticeably, the Palestinians.

Chapter 1

Literature Review and Historical Context

The growing interest of media and cultural studies in race and ethnicity has yielded an insightful and provocative literature on identity, alterity, and power. To assess these contemporary theoretical frameworks and their applicability to my study of the Mizrahi in Israeli cinema, they need to be contextualized within (and against) the Marxist, structuralist, and psychoanalytical master theories of modernism as well as classical film theories.

This chapter's first section, "Theoretical Framework" problematizes binary constructions of power relations (e.g. colonizer vs. colonized) and attends to the dynamic and dialectic nature of power struggles. Whereas certain postcolonial works underscore the dispersed nature of power to proffer a theory of power's relativism, my study is just as interested in the locations (e.g., institutions, class) where power congeals. Similarly, this critical review, which I will expand on in future chapters, will challenge postmodern constructivist and deconstructionist strands which qualify their conceptualizations of "identity," "self," and "Other" to the point of emptying these concepts of any extra-discursive relations. My critique will suggest that identities and subjectivities, albeit contingent and unstable, have to be employed in order to articulate difference, power relations, and struggle and, just as importantly, to inspire social and political change.

"The Mizrahi Problem" in the chapter's second section will delineate prominent features of the Mizrahi predicament in Israeli society and its articulations in recent works.

The "Historical Review of Periods and Genres in Israeli Cinema" section will provide a cursory diachronic review of the construction of the Mizrahi in Israeli films and will explicate recent studies of ethnicity and identity in Israeli cinema. My references to recent publications on ethnicity in Israeli films are meant to set the parameters for my own critique of those films.

Theoretical Framework

BACKGROUND

The study of cinema, and the analysis of national cinema in particular, often calls for an exploration of the relationships between economic, cultural, and sociopolitical realities and the films produced. An orthodox Marxist approach would suggest that the base—the socioeconomic structure—determines all cultural artifacts, including cinema. Conversely, postcolonial theories, and mainly the cultural and ethnic studies I will focus on in this work, often challenge these linear, reductionist, and overly deterministic aspects of the Marxist grand theory. Instead, they explore more complex relationships between culture and the economic base. But first, a brief discussion of Siegfried Kracauer's realist theory and Soviet and Western European structuralism is needed to establish the initially influential frameworks which film and postcolonial theories have later addressed, re-examined, and often repudiated.

Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) is a pioneering work in theorizing national cinema. In this study of German cinema between the end of World War I and Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Kracauer asserts that, "[T]he films of a nation reflect its

mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media" (5). Surely Kracauer is aware of the large variety of themes in a given national cinema. Yet he proposes that beneath the superficial diversity, the academically trained critic can identify the deep-rooted mass-psychological disposition of a society—a stable core on which the heterogeneity of all filmic texts is predicated. Accordingly, Kracauer's theory posits a unidirectional relationship between reality and its artistic manifestation. According to this theory, film critics have a defined role and methodology; their work should involve an inductive process whereby the psychological disposition of a nation can be inferred from the films it produces.

A critical analysis of Kracauer's realist theory will henceforth inform my discussion of more recent media and film studies and of their relevancy to the analysis of Israeli cinema. Whereas Kracauer's interest lies mostly in the text itself and the forces (the deep-rooted national psyche) which produce these texts, contemporary scholarly work in the field of media studies assigns much importance to all components of the communication process, including production (encoding) and the interpretation (decoding) of the text by the reader/viewer. To be cogent, Kracauer's theory has to rely on a relatively static and homogeneous society or nation-state and, therefore, to some extent on ahistorical conceptualizations. Similarly, Kracauer's realist theory discounts the richness, heterogeneity, and tensions on which this polysemic audiovisual medium is constituted. Kracauer's articulation of deep psychological dispositions (structures) is problematic also because it lends itself to essentialism. Moreover, the suggestion that cinema is merely a reflection of the society proposes a causal relationship between the

two, where the former is the byproduct of the latter. This theory, therefore, dismisses the possibility that cinema is capable of effecting social change. Whereas Kracauer's critique of the cinematic text deems the text and politics of cinema derivative of people's psychic proclivities, my study will problematize this causal link to render filmic representation a stage for vying discourses and ideologies, feeding back into people's beliefs and preferences.

The shortcomings of Kracauer's realist theory are evident when applied to Israeli cinema. Due to the country's pandemic political and demographic changes since its establishment, any viable endeavor to study Israeli cinema has to consider issues pertaining to power relations and to locate this cinema within specific historical contexts. Israel's current population of 6.8 million is more than eleven times its population in May 1948 when it was declared a state. The increase is largely due to waves of immigration from the Arab/Muslim world in the 1950s and 1960s and from Russia and the former Soviet republics in the 1990s. Additionally, the 1967 War resulted in Israel's control of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where 3.6 million Palestinians currently reside. Other than these changes, Israel has witnessed major political shifts since it was established. Whereas in earlier years socialist, secular parties were in power, in the last twenty-five years, right-wing, national-religious, and neo-liberal (advocating a free-market economy) parties have set the political tone in Israel. Finally, Israeli society is marked by major schisms, including ethnic divisions (Mizrahi vs. Ashkenazi), differences in seniority ("established"/"old timer" Israelis vs. new immigrants), a national division (Arabs vs. Jews), and the division between religious and secular Jews. This cursory depiction of the

shifting political and social cleavages points to dynamic, evolving, and unstable sites of struggle. Yet, Kracauer's theory does not provide a satisfactory theoretical framework to analyze national cinema in dynamic and evolving societies.

Soviet and Western European structuralist master theory is subjected to a similar critique leveled at Kracauer's work due to its largely ahistorical stand. Structuralism is marked by its insistence on identifying the deep structures underlying a text (or all texts), irrespective of the time and place in which it is produced and received. It is a closed system that often elides the broader contextual elements.[21] Structuralism's scant treatment of the multilayered relationships between society and culture would seem to make theory of little relevance to a study focusing on cinema as a cultural artifact that should be understood from within the sociopolitical context in which it operates. However, the following discussion is meant to address key terms coined by structuralist scholarship and, by means of critical review, to set the stage for my discussion, later in this chapter, of poststructuralist contributions to reading the filmic text.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) seeks to identify the structures that underlie the diversified nature of the *parole*—the spoken language. In his analysis of the synchronic and associative (paradigmatic) aspects of *langue*,[22] he attempts to discern lingual elements that transcend the historical (diachronic) aspects of language. Roman Jakobson's (1960) notion of the selective and the combinative modes of language and A.

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[21] This sweeping generalization clearly does not apply to all structuralists. For example, Roman Jakobson (1960) postulates that the act of communication involves extra-textual elements.

[22] In Saussure's theory, *langue* is a language system, a model that transcends its specific usages, and "a self-contained whole and a principle of classification" (1916:9). *Langue* is contrasted not only with *parole*, but also with *langage*, which I will discuss later.

J. Greimas' (1989) grammar of narrative theory regarding the relations of opposites and negations of the semantic units (semes), expand on Saussure's theory to apply structuralism to all literary texts.[23] Common to the structuralist theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Saussure, Greimas, Seymour Chatman, and Tzvetan Todorov is their endeavor to identify the basic elements of the text and the suggestion that these elements, often sets of binary opposites, have equal weight.

Structuralism's elision of context, coupled with its treatment of the text as a system consisting of value-free replaceable units, risks ignoring issues of power, ideology, and hierarchy. Indeed, as we shall see, poststructuralism and deconstructionism challenge their predecessor precisely on these grounds, and postulates instead that language is an unstable, open system where meaning and power are interlaced. Likewise, structuralist theories pose methodological problems when applied to the study of cinema. The richness of the cinematic text does not lend itself easily to identifying sets of binary opposites; binary opposites selected by the critic/scholar may seem arbitrary and subjective rather than inherent in the text. Furthermore, even when a consensus might be reached regarding the narrative "semes" (its basic meaningful units) and their relations (e.g., man:woman = mind:body), we are still unable to determine whether the author or the reader takes this paradigm at face value or ironically and critically (e.g., the notion that "man" is associated with "mind" and "woman" with "body" may be highlighted in order to challenge this association). Finally, structuralist

[23] The selective is a paradigmatic/metaphoric element in a system based on replacements; the combinative is a syntagmatic/metonymic element in a system based on associations and contiguity.

theories tend to ignore the polysemic nature of the text and they undermine the role of the reader/viewer as a participant (agent) in the production of meaning.

And yet, a pivotal feature of structuralism is specifically useful in the study of literary and filmic texts—its focus on relational patterns rather than discrete units. As mentioned earlier, Russian structuralists and their contemporary Lévi-Strauss assert that the meaning of the text derives from the functions or the relations between its components. The significance of this articulation is evident in the works of various poststructuralists (mainly deconstructionists) and in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of speech.

The key terms in Bakhtin's literary theory—heteroglossia, polyglossia, and the centrifugal vs. the centripetal forces—point to the synthetic nature of languages. Bakhtin renders speech a complex, contingent, dialogic (negotiated) phenomenon, and this is the area he sets out to explore in his work. In "Discourse in the Novel" (1981a), Bakhtin defines "heteroglossia" (*raznorečie*) as the totality and diversity of speech types in the novel. Heteroglossia is predicated on the negotiable, fluid, and intertextual aspects of our speech. Whereas heteroglossia is to be found within a language, polyglossia refers to the same dynamic elements across different languages.[24] Bakhtin opposes language theories that place all speech between two poles—the unitary (official) language and the individual speaking this language. Similarly, for Bakhtin speech is more than simply a linear, one-dimensional process, with one speaker and one listener using one and the same speech system. Speech is, therefore, always a social phenomenon. Lingual

[24] See "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, (1981b).

"assimilation" connotes a creative process "filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness,' varying degrees of awareness and detachment" (1986:89). This dialogic approach is pivotal in Bakhtin's theory of the novel. He argues that not only does the speaker assume and accommodate the language of the other, but that, furthermore, the speaker's own language is constructed vis-à-vis the other's language. It is "a process of coming to know one's own horizon within someone else's horizon" (1981a:365).

Comparing Bakhtin's theory of speech to Lévi-Strauss's study of myth we find that they both recognize the primacy of the social context in the constructions of, respectively, speech and myth. For Lévi-Strauss (1963), myth is a communal artifact designed to overcome deep-rooted contradictions.[25] Bakhtin is interested in the specifics of the dynamics, subversions, and tensions with which language is imbued; for Bakhtin, language is the actual site of competing discourses. While Lévi-Strauss, in other words, suggests that the construction of myth diffuses or reconciles contradictions experienced in the social realm, Bakhtin maintains that the construction of speech is strewn with unresolved tensions and conflicts embedded in the sociocultural domain.

In Bakhtin's analysis, the sociocultural component of language is directly related to the political and ideological power the unitary (official) language exerts over the diversity (heteroglossia) of the non-official, even subversive languages and dialects people use. In this context, Bakhtin introduces his notion of the official language's

[25] "[T]he purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963:229).

centripetal force, which attempts to subdue heteroglossia—the centrifugal force. Language as a whole, according to Bakhtin, is a site of constant struggle and appropriation between these two forces:

> Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward. (1981a:272)

Considering that these processes and tensions, which mark forces within a language and between languages, are indicative of power structures, struggle, and subversion in speech and narratives, Bakhtin's theory is indispensable to our understanding of contemporary postcolonial scholarship, and particularly some of its key concepts—syncretism, alterity, and even nationhood. These aspects of Bakhtin's theory figure centrally in Jesús Martín-Barbero's (1993) work on Latin American media and in Stam's (1989) study of cinema. Likewise, Bakhtinian conceptualizations will be pivotal in my analysis of the construction of and cinematic relation between center and periphery, which I explore in Chapter 4.

It is, however, worth addressing Robert Stam's (1989) qualified enthusiasm about Bakhtin's work, and specifically what he contends is Bakhtin's failure to fully theorize power relations and his disregard for the power imbalance in the appropriation of the other's speech. Indeed, the appropriation of "sub-culture" into mainstream (as is often the case with "ethnic" music) by media corporations may just as well enhance and perpetuate power disparities rather than reduce them. The underlining dilemma regarding those articulations is that even when subaltern groups—women, blacks, colonized

people—are seemingly empowered, one has to ask a further question: Who ultimately benefits from these cultural and lingual exchanges?

The scholarship of Stuart Hall at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (henceforth the Centre) attempted to relate language, discourse, and culture to ideology and to locate these relations within specific historical contexts. The Centre's various studies borrowed research methods from distinct disciplines, including ethnographic fieldwork interviews common in social studies and text-based studies typical of the humanities. Indeed, it is this versatility and the Centre's focus on the micro-sociopolitical level that enabled it to surmount the overarching Marxist claim regarding the supremacy of the base over superstructure (culture).

To fully assess the legacy of the Centre, it is worthwhile to compare it with the scholarly work of the Frankfurt School. Although the Centre's work incorporated aspects of the Frankfurt School's discourse on power, culture, and capitalism, the Centre's theoretical framework, methodology, and definition of the field of study set it apart from its predecessor. While the Frankfurt School deemed mass culture inferior and, therefore, antithetical to a desired social and political critique, the Centre was most interested in studying popular culture. Whereas the Frankfurt School offered a grand narrative devoid of specific ethnic, racial, and gender differences and is therefore perceived as fundamentally monolithic, Eurocentric, and male-chauvinist, the interdisciplinary nature of the Centre's scholarly work entailed the exploration of particular localities, and also the interstitial spaces where gender, race, and ethnicity intersect. Finally, the Centre

rejected the Frankfurt School's top-down approach that deemed the consumer of popular culture a dupe who imbibes indiscriminately the products of the "culture industry."

The works of Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault on ideology, power, and discourse greatly inspired the Centre's scholarly endeavors. For Althusser (1971), "ideology is a 'Representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162). In other words, false consciousness—Althusser's assertion that ideology is predicated on illusions people have regarding their freedom and the belief they hold that class differences are natural—is encoded in specific class relations and material conditions. It is in relation to these ideologies that the individual is subjugated, interpellated, and recruited as a subject/object in the system of production and reproduction. Althusser's main contributions to cultural studies lie in his understanding of "the conception of ideologies as practices rather than as systems of ideas" (Hall, 1980a:32), and in his insistence that even more important than the well recognized power of coercion the state has (Repressive State Apparatus—RSA) are the all pervasive Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), such as the institutions of school, church, and family.

In accordance with the works of Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Althusser, Hall assigns great importance to discourse as the locus of power:

> Discursive 'knowledge' is the product not of the transparent representation of the 'real' in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions. Thus there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code.... There is no degree zero in language. (1980b:131-2)

Following Barthes' semiotic theory, the codes for Hall are:

> [T]he means by which power and ideology are made to signify in particular discourses. They refer signs to the 'maps of meaning' into which any culture is classified; and those 'maps of social reality' have the whole range of social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest 'written' in them. (134)

In the next sections, I will explore key theoretical articulations rendered by postcolonial theories. I am particularly interested in their analytic maneuvering to carve a discursive space between polarized positions deemed too extreme, untenable, or even impossible. Generally, this study will often intimate the possibility that a large body of contemporary scholarship in cultural studies/postcolonial theory attempts to address the following dilemmas by navigating between difficult and often contradictory and objectionable positions: How is change (political, social, etc.) possible if a hegemonic power perpetuates itself and if, therefore, subject and agency are deemed problematic? Conversely, what are even the meaning of and need for change if a theory challenges clear power demarcations and, at times, as in extreme forms of constructivism, suggests that our only knowledge of the world is coded and tainted by language and cultural constructions, or even that there is no real (extra-discursive) world "out there"? How can one advocate political activism (e.g., promoting affirmative action to advance blacks' causes) when identity is rendered an artificial construct ("blacks" as a fictitious construct)? If race, ethnicity, gender, and class are all floating signifiers, then what are their respective signifieds? To address these quandaries, I will focus on the areas that contemporary scholarship in cultural studies has extensively explored: representation,

identity, text, and agency. My intent is not to reduce all recent critical literature in cultural studies to these areas, but rather to provide a defined framework from which to advance my study of Mizrahi cinema.

REPRESENTATION IN POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES: STEREOTYPES AND POWER

Representation poses a multi-faceted set of problems that range from well-defined questions of point of view to more elaborate issues concerning the discourse on alterity and power relations. Guided by Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1972), scholars have shifted their attention from the literal meaning of point of view to "focalization"—the structural and cognitive mode from which the story is told. Although, as Genette suggests, this term is less technical and defined than "point of view," it nevertheless facilitates the theoretical linkage between cinematic representation and discourse. Indeed, we may maintain that in film studies the critical questions are not only how the story is told and by whom, but just as importantly, whose story is told and for whose benefit. Clearly then, as Shohat and Stam (1994) maintain in their discussion of colonial representations, a film can be sympathetic to the colonized and place the Other at the center of the film narrative and still reinforce colonial systems of domination.

Postcolonial studies identify common characteristics in the colonial construction of the Other. Shohat and Stam (1994) suggest that heterogeneity and nuances among colonized people collapse in the depiction of those people by the colonizer. Various ethnic groups are often lumped together despite lingual, cultural, and at times even religious differences—a phenomenon which, according to Ernesto Laclau (in McRobbie,

1992), violates "the dignity of the specific," and which Albert Memmi (1967) calls "the mark of the plural." The portrayal of the Other as infantile or undeveloped provides the people in power with the moral right to speak for the Other, literally and figuratively. To apply this discourse to media studies, Stam (2001) identifies specific cinematic characteristics in the representation of the minority groups. He maintains that the practice of "blackfacing," "redfacing," "yellowfacing," etc., where actors of the privileged group are cast in the roles of the dominated group, is demeaning and offensive to the latter on three grounds. Regarding the subaltern group, these practices imply, "(a) you are unworthy of self-representation; (b) no one from your group is capable of representing you; and, (c) we, the producers of the film care little about your offended sensibilities" (479).

Importantly though, Shohat and Stam (1994) make two arguments to dissuade us from a critical overemphasis on representation as such. They caution us that the very focus on images as representations may inadvertently lead to essentialism by reducing the complex and multi-layered issue of representation to a limited set of formulaic reifications, and therefore, the critics are supposed to think that "behind every sexually attractive black actor (there is) the 'buck'; behind every corpulent or nurturing black female a 'mammy'" (199). Relatedly, they propose that a scholarly fixation on challenging the verisimilitude of images might divert the postcolonial focus away from the core issues it ought to explore—ideology and power:

> An obsession with 'realism' casts the question simply as one of 'errors' and 'distortions,' as if a 'truth' of the community were

> unproblematic, transparent, and easily accessible, and 'lies' about the community easily unmasked. (178)

In contrast to that reductionist realist approach, we should then acknowledge the constructed nature of representations. Yet, in line with their previous assertions, Shohat and Stam proffer, "[I]t is not enough to say that art is constructed. We have to ask: Constructed for whom? And in conjunction with what ideologies and discourses?" (180). In order to render a cogent and coherent film cinema must rely on the positioning of subjectivities (such as in point-of-view shots). These subjectivities are not discursively neutral; a film situates certain characters in positions of power (e.g., omniscient knowledge), while it denies others of this privilege. Once representation is understood in terms of power relations, we may propose that, ultimately, the colonizer has the privilege of avoiding any representation of the Other. Thus, a structuring absence—the conspicuous elision of a group (e.g., a jazz film without blacks) or what Althusser calls "the internal shadows of exclusion"—is a severe power the dominating group has over the dominated one.

One of the most charged issues pertaining to representation is the employment of stereotypes. Arguably, the need for the construction of stereotypes is closely related to the way in which humans categorize all their sensory stimuli. In order to process the ceaseless flow of information, the human brain recognizes the world by the very mechanism of marking differences and collating similarities. But even if we agree that stereotypes are a necessary evil, the more interesting question is whether all stereotypes are equally pernicious. Is the stereotyping of another group equally demeaning and

problematic irrespective of whether it is created by the empowered or the disempowered? Are stereotypes in which a group represents itself more benign (and, therefore, critics and audiences alike should be more forgiving of them) than stereotypes aimed at the representation of the Other? One only needs to be reminded here that, had the (stereotypical) portrayal of some Jews in Woody Allen's films been rendered by a non-Jewish filmmaker, the films would have likely been labeled anti-Semitic. Similarly, Spike Lee's filmic portrayal of black (and Hispanic) characters would have been much more incendiary had these cinematic portrayals been created by a "non-minority" film director. An extreme relativist approach to stereotypes is untenable not only because of its leveling effect, where all representations are equally warranted, but more importantly, because it elides the broader context in which presentations take place. To put it differently, the impact of the hegemonic group's negative self-stereotyping does not have the same effect and purpose as when the unprivileged or the colonized resorts to self-deprecation and self-incrimination.

Finally, we ought to examine not only what motivates stereotypes, but what their impacts are. Accordingly, when in his introduction to "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism" Bhabha (1996) offers that the analytical focus should shift from the "*identification* of images as positive or negative" to the "*process of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse" (88, original emphasis), he is primarily interested in the relations between representation and the construction of collective identities.

Underscoring the arbitrary, yet fluid and slippery nature of the signifier, and mainly the impossibility of reaching a closure in the signification process, poststructuralist and deconstructionist scholarship posits the embedded conceptual impossibility of the stereotype. Employing Derrida's concept of *différance*, which plays on difference as dissimilarity and difference as deferral of meaning and closure, Bhabha (1996) maintains that:

> The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference … constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in the significations of psychic and social relations. (98)

And yet, this is precisely what stereotypes attempt to accomplish—fixed relations between the components of the sign. So, for example, as indicated in the quotation above, a "successful" stereotype would be one in which the signifier "black" is always linked to violence, poor intelligence, and hyper-sexuality. Therefore, the apparent naturalness of the stereotype—due to repetition and the unchanged relations between the signifier and the signified—is the key to its effectiveness.

According to Bhabha, "The colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (1996:93). The Other is therefore denied any "authenticity" and its threat is contained within the familiar—hence the notion of "difference as sameness."[26] In this context, Bhabha's

[26] See for example Luce Irigaray (1974:27). This notion is also employed by other French feminists to suggest that a woman as an Other (or "lack") is constructed from within the man's

discussion of the stereotype is informed by psychoanalytic theory and the notion of the "fetish" in particular. According to Freud and Lacan, the fetish is the subject's creation predicated on disavowal and is intended to mask difference. More specifically, the boy's first reaction when realizing that his mother does not "have it" is disavowal (the threat of both castration and difference).[27] For Bhabha, this is precisely the mechanism involved in the creation of the stereotype—the recognition of difference, then disavowal, and finally the masking of this difference by affixing it to blood or skin. Similar to the child in the pre-Oedipal/pre-mirror Imaginary[28] who lives and desires an undifferentiated world (the outside as subsumed within the self), the colonizer also pines for purity—"a repetition of primal fantasy" (98) unperturbed by differences—"an ideal-ego that is white and whole" (99). And yet, the congruence between the sexual and the colonial fetish ends here; whereas the fetishist is bound to conceal his secret, the colonizer is compelled to flaunt the fetish/stereotype. It is precisely this conspicuous, "natural," and repetitive feature of the stereotype that endows it with its power.

Bhabha's (1996) daring assertion that "The stereotype is, in fact, an impossible object" (103) is informed, then, largely by the indeterminate play between fantasy (desire) and reality. In this context, Bhabha attends to the ambivalence embedded in the formation of the stereotype—the colonizer constructs the identity of (and for) the Other

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perspective; comparisons and differences pertaining to women in men's discourse are limited in the range they can offer and, therefore, are constituted on sameness.

[27] The fetishist male engages in a game of "presencing" the absence—he has to mask the lacking body with the fetish, (e.g., high heels or breasts) and thus displacing it and metonymically (spatially) phallicizing it; but these fetishes also allude to and expose the lack itself.

[28] When I refer to the Lacanian theory, I capitalize "Imaginary" and "Symbolic" to distinguish these terms from their everyday usage.

from a position of power, but this construction is a projection of the threatened self. Furthermore, like Frantz Fanon (1967), Bhabha (1996) maintains that the white colonizer's encounter with the black is not only an event where the former constructs the identity of the Other—"Look at the Negro"—but also a disturbance that frustrates the closure (purity and lack of differentiation) desired by the colonizer. In other words, we may claim that the stereotypical representation of the Other in the colonial discourse is always interrupted by the re-appearance of the colonized in the extra-discursive realm, and hence, again, its impossibility. It is on these grounds that Bhabha critiques Edward Said's (1978) work for eliding the ambivalent nature of the stereotype—a critique inspired by Foucault's articulation of power as dispersed and uncontained. Specifically, for Bhabha (1996), the shortcoming of Said's *Orientalism* (1978) derives from its author's conviction that "colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer" (95). In Bhabha's (1996) conceptualization, the stereotype is a dual fantasy, at once suggesting desire and fear, co-optation (the Other as "reformable") and separation, mastery and defense.

In his introduction to Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1967), Jean Paul Sartre proposes that, in order for the colonizers to maximize their efficacy in controlling and supervising the colonized, a measure of trust in the colonized is warranted: "No one can treat a man like a dog without first regarding him as a man" (xxvii). In an ironic inversion, the colonizers restore in the colonized the humanity of which they are driven to deny themselves by the very same practice of domination. Finally, the casting of the stereotype as simply a device to perpetuate power is further

undermined if one considers Bhabha's (1996:104) suggestion that the stereotyped subject is endowed, paradoxically, with a position of (relative) mastery over the colonizer—the former is presumed to have certain qualities or features that the latter lacks and often desires.[29] The Other occupies that space onto which the colonizers project their ecstatic libidinal fantasies precisely because it is marked by the exoticized body (and thereby the frequent references to food, dress, look, and physicality), while the colonizer is (un)marked by the unfettered mind.

VOICE: THE POWER TO REPRESENT

A critical issue regarding the representation of the Other is the discourse around "speaking for." The very act of artistic or media-related representation requires a position of epistemic and mimetic distance. Therefore, any representation (including a positive one) is predicated on alterity and objectification. However, this system of representation is never a free play in which all social and political groups can equally participate. The empowered have the ideological and political clout as well as the economic means to both set the sociopolitical agenda and determine its specific features.

Most feminists of the radical strand, including global feminist Trinh Minh-ha (1989), take the proposition offered here to its extreme conclusion. They reject all discourses that are constructed by the empowered group (men) in its representation of the unprivileged since they deem all these representations a systematic (though not always

[29] The Other as the site of the fantasy onto which the hegemonic group projects its lack is a theme that Israeli scholar Nurith Gertz (1993) has addressed in the context of the representation of the Arab in Israeli literature and cinema of the last three decades.

conscious) practice that perpetuates hegemonic control. This approach, inescapably, smacks of essentialism—there are defined entities and identities and only members of these groups should represent themselves.[30] In contemporary postcolonial thought, the original question posed by Spivak (1988)—"can the subaltern speak?"—has been taken up to actually advance related quandaries: can the act of "speaking for" ever be morally sound or, alternatively, is it even discursively possible?[31] In "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (1991/92), Linda Alcoff attempts to avoid sweeping generalizations about this issue. She is first interested in demystifying and even critiquing the notion of "speaking only for myself." Her attack on proponents of this "solipsist" position is threefold: (1) "[I]t assumes that one can retreat into one's discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly based on that location that do not range over others, that one *can* disentangle oneself from the implicating networks between one's discursive practices and others' locations, situations, and practices" (20); (2) "The declaration that I 'speak only for myself' has the sole effect of allowing me to avoid responsibility and accountability for my effects on others" (ibid.); (3) All speech acts involve the subject-object relations, and therefore, in this sense, speaking for the Other and speaking for one's self are merely two aspects of the same discursive mechanism. (This last critique is clearly informed by Bakhtin's theory, which I discussed earlier.)

Furthermore, in accordance with Spivak's affirmation of the "speaking for" act, Alcoff (1991/92) challenges its detractors for their assumption that "the oppressed can

[30] I will return to this problem later in this chapter in my discussion of the relations between essentialist stands and the question of agency.
[31] See discussion in Shohat and Stam (1994:341-347).

transparently represent their own true interests" (22). Alcoff, therefore, maintains that "It is not *always* the case that when others unlike me speak for me I have ended up worse off, or that when we speak for others they end up worse off" (29). Semantically, Alcoff concurs with Spivak that it is preferable to supplant "speaking for" with "speaking with" or "speaking to." Subsequently, in the last section of her article, Alcoff sets out to delineate a guideline of sorts to determine when speaking on behalf of the subaltern is not only feasible but also desirable.

Alcoff (1991/92:23) suggests that her theory diverges from Spivak's in that Spivak grounds her assertions on the content of the message alone, whereas for Alcoff, even when there is no guarantee that the content of the oppressed person's speech is liberatory, the actual act of utterance as representation has an inherently empowering value. If this last articulation is rather extreme and doubtful, its agenda is rather modest—to encourage any speech act by those who have traditionally been silenced or denied the power to represent. Indeed, Alcoff makes it clear throughout her article that her main concern is practice and accomplishments rather than theoretical tenets:

> [T]he importance of the source of view, and the importance of doing genealogy, should be subsumed within an overall analysis of effects, making the central question what the effects are of the view on material and discursive practices through which it traverses and the particular configuration of power relations emergent from these. (28)

Finally, equally important is "the language of silence" which should be understood vis-à-vis the common practice in colonial settings to deprive the colonized of

any speech; their silencing amounts to marginalization and "symbolic annihilation." For this study, it is more edifying to expound silence (or, more broadly, the omission of the hegemonic language) as the language the oppressed *chooses* to "speak" itself and deems the only viable means of self-expression. To fully appreciate this position one needs to concur with assertions made by Said, Foucault, Barthes, Hall, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan, to mention a few, that language, far from being a mere reflection of an extra-discursive reality, codifies knowledge and is even constitutive of it. Consequently, the very use of a language implies quiescence to complicity with the oppressive sociopolitical forces and, conversely, to avoid these constructions of knowledge (a task that most of the aforementioned theorists would claim is never possible), one has to resort to "non-language" or, at least, to a drastically different one. To borrow Minh-ha's (1989) feminist stance, "Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right" (83). In this case, ostracizing the hegemonic language surpasses protestation, disengagement, or a strategic maneuver; it amounts to a subversion of power relations constituted and reified by language.

IDENTITY: ALTERITY, DIFFERENCE, AND HYBRIDITY

In contrast to the modernist and rationalist order that render distinct, well-defined, and cohesive subjects who, with the power of their cognition, can assess, learn, and depict (represent) the objective world "outside," postmodernist and deconstructionist positions propose that both subjects/subjectivity and objects can be constructed only within language and discourse. According to these theories, since the chain of

signification does not ultimately lead us to the "objective" or stable referent and because there is always a deference of meaning, subjects and the world they inhabit are contingent and fluid.

Consequently, postcolonial theories often point to the following paradox: while the conceptual formation of the self/other dyad is merely a discursive construct (i.e., it has no foundation in biology or history), it nonetheless has far-reaching implications for the (neo)colonizer and the colonized.[32] Applying Barthes' (1957/1972:137-142) analysis of the bourgeoisie's discourse to colonial or ethnic differentiations, it is the unmarked (ex-nominated) social function (read praxis) which creates a myth of "naturalness" whereby the colonizer (self) is often deemed normative (unmarked), while the other is always marked, e.g., constructed as "black," "ethnic," etc.[33] Racialization is one of Fanon's main themes in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). In the introduction to his book, Fanon ventures, "I will say that the black is not a man," only to explain it later, "[T]he black is a black man" (8) and is always marked as such. Stam's (2001) address of race and identity captures another facet of the abovementioned paradox; in accordance with the claim that there is no race, only racism, Stam (2001) maintains "there is no other, but

[32] Similarly, the division East vs. West often elides geographical realities and responds to what Said (1978) terms a "topos"—the referential and ideological construction of territorial boundaries. And yet, it is precisely the discourse about what the construction of East vs. West putatively represents that is most pernicious.

[33] In his discussion of whiteness, media theorist John Fiske (1996) elaborates on Barthes' term: "Exnomination is the means by which whiteness avoids being named and thus keeps itself out of the field of interrogation and therefore off the agenda for change…. One practice of exnomination is the avoidance of self-recognition and self-definition. Defining, for whites, is a process that is always directed outward upon multiple 'others,' but never inward upon the definer. Drawing definitional lines around the identities of 'others' constructs for whiteness the powerful and naturalizing status of being, simply, not the other" (42). For more on whiteness as exnomination, see *Patricia Williams*'s *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (1997), and specifically the chapter "The Emperor's New Clothes."

only processes of otherization" (477). The dominating group's subjectification/objectification of its Other operates in both the discursive and the real spheres. It is in this context that Fanon (1967) succinctly maintains, "I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*" (116, original emphasis).[34] Consequently, in *Toward the African Revolution* (1969), Fanon points to a process in which the colonized people are then forced into procrustean positions, where they have to be constantly on the defensive to prove their affinity to the group in power. According to Fanon, this process leads to shame, guilt, and self-recrimination. (We are reminded here of Malcolm X's dictum that the white's man worst crime was to make the black man hate himself.)

The subjugated groups thus internalize the (negative) images as constructed by the dominating power and, even when they rebel against their oppressor (the ultimate stage according to Fanon), they are still acting in response to the imposed authority of the hegemonic group:

> [T]hey have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, and they live in fear that their acts will respond to this stereotype…. We may say that their conduct is perpetually overdetermined from the inside. (Sartre, qtd. in Fanon, 1967:115)[35]

[34] Also, "[T]he Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start…. It is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew." (Sartre, qtd. in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967:93.)
[35] Sartre's reference here is to Jews.

For Memmi (1967), this "overdetermination from the inside" is unwarranted not only because the colonized people are forced to adopt the identity constructed for them by the colonizer, but because, in turn, they essentialize those who have essentialized them. Memmi terms this response "defensive racism." In revolting against the European ruler, "[T]he colonized reacts by rejecting all the colonizers *en bloc*…. In the eyes of the colonized, all Europeans in the colonies are *de facto* colonizers…. They are supporters or at least unconscious accomplices of that great collective aggression of Europe" (130). Paradoxically, then, Sartre suggests in his introduction to Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1967) that, "Colonialism creates the patriotism of the colonized" (xxviii); national sentiments develop precisely where colonialism intervenes.

The conceptual hurdle here is that when postcolonial critique resorts to a discourse marked by polarities of self and Other (colonizer and colonized), it is allowing essentialist articulations a reentry through the back door. As I implied in my previous discussion of Bhabha's postcolonial stance, whereas he clearly concurs with Fanon's insightful analysis regarding the power the colonizer has over the construction of the Other's identity, Bhabha deems this construction unstable and contingent. Similarly cognizant of the impossibility of these constructions, in her analysis of Anglo-Indian narratives generated by British colonialism Sara Suleri (1992) maintains, "The stories of colonialism … offer nuances of trauma that cannot be neatly partitioned between colonizer and colonized" (5). Such articulations imply that the fates of the colonizer and the colonized are intertwined. In this context, Bhabha (1994c) introduces his concept of colonial mimicry—the attempt to construct and reform the Other precisely because of its

equivocal positionality. Similar to his view of colonial stereotyping, Bhabha proposes that the "discourse of mimicry is constructed around *ambivalence*; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference … (and) is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy" (86). In his *Lawrence of Arabia*, Steven Caton (1999) maintains that Bhabha's analysis can be taken even further if one is to employ Freud's concept of the "double" as discussed in "The 'Uncanny'" (1919/2003) and other essays. Caton proposes, "Not only is the double a supremely ambivalent sign in Freud's formulation of the uncanny; it is also what Freud calls the ego's 'conscience,' and … the ego ideal or the super-ego" (10). (Caton therefore claims that, in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, Sherif Ali turns from a fetishized object constructed by the whims of Lawrence into the latter's conscience.) Where can the boundaries be drawn if the self and the Other contain/contaminate each other, thus frustrating notions of purity and originality? Whereas psychoanalysis is interested in the formation of the individual's identity, postcolonial studies set out to explore similar issues, but in the context of national, religious, racial, and ethnic identities.

How can these postcolonial articulations about the nature of identity construction inform scholarship on liminality, intersectionality, and hybridity? Can we establish corollary relations between marginality and the subversion of and challenge to the socially constructed identities? The scholarly works of Bhabha (1985, 1990a, 1994a,b,c, &d), Naficy (1999 and 2001), Shohat and Stam (1994), Jesús Martín-Barbero (1993), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Nira Yuval-Davis (1997), Loshitzky (2001), and Nissim Calderon (1998) often set out to examine precisely these areas. While later in this

chapter I will address the issue of change and agency, here I am interested in exploring the articulations of marginality in postcolonial discourse as it pertains to identity and alterity.

In his essays "DissemiNation" (1990a) and "Of Mimicry and Man" (1994c) Bhabha implies that the hybrid's "natural" place in modern society is indeed at its margins—"the site of interdiction" (89). The liminal migrant, the exiled, and the ethnic/religious "bastard" are situated in the nation's geographic and psychic periphery, thus allowing the correct distance—not at the center, yet not fully outside—which facilitates the construction of the subject as the object of desire and dejection. In accordance with Bhabha's (1990a) analysis of alterity, I would like to propose that it is primarily in this suture, this twilight zone, that the colonial discourse is torn at its seams and reveals its impossible, contradictory, and hypocritical nature as it attempts to accommodate and contain positions it otherwise deems irreconcilable. It is precisely here that the initiator of the discourse of difference is confronted with the subject who is *almost the same, but not quite* (or, alternatively, very different, but not the opposite), the epitome of which is the hybrid.

The emergence of all encompassing globalization trends and new realities regarding (im)migration, population transfers, and exile, which set late modernity apart from any previous period in human history, often permeate contemporary discourse of multiculturalism. Yuval-Davis (1997) identifies a potential problem in postcolonial articulations, including Homi Bhabha's and Trinh Minh-ha's, if emphasis is placed on discrete and homogenized collectives from which, supposedly, the hybrid subject can

emerge, "thus replacing the mythical image of society as a *melting-pot* with the mythical image of the society as a '*mixed salad*'" (59, original emphasis). According to Yuval-Davis, the hybrid subject may look for authentic pre-colonial identities and origin/originality; an attempt that often suffers from the exact same impossibility as the notion of a European's pure race, and is therefore just as untenable.

Implicit in the official Zionist discourse following the establishment of the State of Israel is the problem it faced in its articulation of those hybrid others (e.g., the Mizrahim) who are nevertheless not *the* Other (the Arabs).[36] The hybrid is not excluded outright, but rather allotted a space at the margins. In the case of Mizrahi Jews, their "impossibility" or anomalous hybridity—having Arab culture, but also Jewish ethnicity and religion—was translated in the 1950s to consigning them to live in the margins of mainstream Israeli society, both figuratively and literally. Large numbers of these immigrants, in contrast to their fellow Ashkenazim, were settled away from Israel's social and cultural centers in "development towns" often located by the borders with neighboring Arab countries. In this work, and mainly in Chapter 4, I will employ the abovementioned articulations in order to qualify the postmodernist play that is often

[36] Throughout this work I will be using terms such as Zionist/hegemonic discourse. It bears noting that these are used for didactic and practical purposes rather than argumentative ones that may suggest a monolithic or cohesive Zionist discourse. Importantly, some detractors of post-Zionism challenge this movement precisely on the grounds of its oversimplified reading of Zionism. See, for example, Friling's (2003, particularly, pg. 31) argument about different historiographies of/within the Zionist movement already in the pre-1948 era and Lissak's (2003, mainly pp. 93-95) discussion of conflicting ideologies and strategies that characterize the movement from its inception. Yet, although "Zionist discourses" may historically be more accurate than its single form, based on numerous references to the Zionist endeavor in this work, I would defend the position that we can discern a dominant discourse and agenda within the Zionist movement. Hence, the usage of "Zionist/hegemonic discourse," while too broad, is certainly not misleading.

associated with hybridity and, more importantly, to suggest that the construction and positionality of the Mizrahi hybrid attest to rupture and emaciation rather than to enrichment and exchange.

THE TEXT

For a study that relies on textual analysis, one of the key issues is the relationship between text and meaning. Barthes (1970) eschews the view that considers the text a self-sufficient, static, and monosemic system. For Barthes, the only meaningful reading is re-reading: "those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere" (16). Barthes is quick to note that even what is usually referred to as a first reading—naïve and centering on chronology—is merely an illusion. (Re)reading always "multiplies it (the text) in its variety and its plurality" and renders it "same and new" (ibid.). Indeed, one of the staples of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories is their shift of the scholarly interest from "work" to "text" (or alternatively, from "text" to "reading") in what amounts to a difference between a closure in meaning and polysemy.[37]

In cinema, we can identify the origins of these queries in the work of Christian Metz, who laid the groundwork in the field of film semiotics. Metz was initially interested in structural and meta-linguistic models to explore how the cinematic text can even yield meaning. In his *Film Language* (1962) he sets out to explore whether cinema has a language system (*langue*). Metz concludes that because cinema has no double

[37] See Bhabha, "The Other Question," (1996:89).

articulation and because it is an open system, it has no *langue*.[38] He then has to take up the obvious question: if cinema has no language system how do we understand films? In order to answer this, Metz makes a distinction between meaning and signification; as in human and artificial languages, only the latter involves arbitrary (versus natural), strict, and well-defined relations between the signifier and the signified to form the sign. Cinema therefore has a *langage*, the capability to create meaning and to be understood, but not to signify.

In his late writing, Metz, whose theory became increasingly influenced by Lacan's work, modified his earlier position and posited a new set of questions about the cinema and language; to an extent, as we shall see here, this inquiry broaches dilemmas about the relations between text (language) and subjectivity. In *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), Metz's main interest is what makes cinema unique. Informed by psychoanalytical articulations and terminology, one of Metz's interventions is the concept of absence-presence of the cinematic image—"I must perceive the photographed object as absence, its photograph as present, and the presence of this absence as signifying" (57). In other words, the presence of the image is prescribed by absence and displacement, a mechanism that yields signification. This dialectic is congruent with the Symbolic in Lacan's theory, and particularly with his articulation that "the unconscious is structured like a language." Both are predicated on displacement (metonymy) and

[38] Double-articulation refers to the separation between the signifier and the signified. According to Metz, the cinematic image has direct and natural relations to its signified – the object in the "real" world, the second articulation. Furthermore, Metz claims that cinema does not even have the first articulation—the equivalent of the phoneme in human languages, and hence does not engage in the signs of a language system.

metaphor (syntagmatic relations). The confluence between the unconscious and the cinematic text is furthered by Metz's assertion that "film is like a mirror." Similar to Lacan's mirror, the screen is the source of (mis)identification (the actor as me/not me, the self as Other), fetishism (the characters as displaced and fetishized objects), voyeurism (the people on the screen cannot see me seeing them), and disavowal (I know it is a fiction and, yet, I don't disengage).[39]

What then can set the cinematic text apart, not only from other signifying systems, but from other art forms? The combination of sound and moving (motion) picture renders cinema more complex than most media/art forms. The cinematic picture itself entails "mimetic surplus" and, therefore, it "suffers" from excess and irreducibility to a larger extent than theater, painting, and sculpture. Generally, the camera captures more than is needed to tell a story or present a character. Similarly, in contrast to Kracauer's (1947) view that the "collective effort" and the "team work" in cinema have the effect of compromising, mitigating between, and toning down conflicting and extreme views (a dynamics which for him provides one explanation for why films are representative of their nations), it is just as plausible that each of the main team members leaves his/her imprint, and then, by extension, renders a discourse that is not fully reconcilable with that of fellow team members.

Furthermore, the film narrative is more than its fabula and, as Stephen Heath (1975) suggests, the film embodies a constant tension between narrative and discourse as

[39] See Lacan's "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious" (1966) for a discussion of identification, metaphor, and metonymy.

these two elements refuse to be inscribed by each other and are, therefore, mutually subversive.[40] Put differently, a film is not only a heterogenic text, but is also a site of contestation between vying discourses, voices, and ideologies. In my film analyses in this work, I will be as interested in identifying the discursive tensions embedded in a film as in what the film supposedly "says"; indeed, inspired by the scholarship discussed in this section, I would argue that the internal dynamics, gaps, and strains *are* what the film "says."

Yet, this hermeneutic play does not operate in a sociopolitical vacuum or power-free realm. Significantly, it is precisely the excess, redundancy, and seeming openness of the filmic text that allow us to identify the conspicuous structuring absences. Accordingly, the editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1972) asked that the critic make the films

> say what they have to say within what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks; these are neither faults in the work … nor a deception on the part of the author …; they are structuring absences, always displaced.… In short, to use Althusser's expression—'the internal shadows of exclusion.' (496)

The work of Hall and other members of the Centre provides the intellectual and theoretical impetus for contemporary reception theories which attribute an important role to the reader/viewer/consumer in the creation of the text's meaning. This implies a reconsideration of the relations between base and superstructure and raises the further

[40] I am using "fabula" as a reference to the reconstructed story in a chronological and synopsis-like form.

possibility that culture may in turn affect the base. Hall's (1980b) encoding/decoding media model suggests precisely that:

> Circulation and reception are, indeed, 'moments' of the production process in television and are reinforced … into the production process itself. The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also itself a 'moment' of the production process in its larger sense. (130)

Consumption of culture, according to Hall, cannot take place without meaning, which, consequently, assumes a subject/agency. Arguably then, miscommunication—the breach between the intent of the sender/producer and the interpretation by the consumer—is, paradoxically, exactly what provides for the "relative autonomy" of culture.

Hall (1980b) identifies three positions or codes according to which a televisual text can be constructed: dominant hegemonic position, negotiated position, and oppositional position. This last code, in which media consumers give the text a meaning opposite to the producer's intention and, more importantly, also in contrast to the preferred reading, is predicated on poststructuralist/deconstructionist precepts and is pivotal in contemporary scholarship in cultural studies and feminist theories.[41] Likewise, the oppositional code is closely related to the emergence of active reading/reception theories where meaning is not assumed to be inherent in the text, but is formed out of the interplay between the author's intentions, the text, and the reader/viewer.

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[41] Jane Gaines' (1989) and Andrea Weiss's (1993) studies of early Hollywood films, such as *Queen Christina* (1933) and *Morocco* (1930), and Janet Staiger's (1993) work on *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) render cinematic pleasure an elusive phenomenon in which men and women of different sexual orientations read the text differently to maximize their pleasure.

Hall (1980b, 1995, 1996a&b) concurs with the abovementioned views of the polysemic nature of the text; for him, meanings are fluid and contingent. Likewise, any textual interpretations and codifications (including those on which Barthes' reading of *Sarrasine* is based) germane to particular social meanings and practices can be studied only in light of specific social and historical context. However, should we then infer that, since meanings are always relative, they are all as valid? Similarly, should we resign ourselves to the notion that relativism entails equal importance and affective/effective power of all interpretations? Unlike Saussure's or Lévi-Strauss's theories in which the lingual/mythical units have equal weight and meaning is uniform, Hall (1980b) argues that dominant meanings and preferred readings are more compelling than others. This is so precisely because of the naturalness conferred on certain (preferred/dominant) textual interpretations within a given system of power. Indeed, as I indicated above, for Hall meaning is closely related to power. Even when Hall employs Foucault, he recognizes that his ancillary view of power does not necessarily entail a leveling effect where power hierarchies are obliterated.

AGENCY, CHANGE, AND THE PROBLEM OF ESSENTIALISM

Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's (1944/1993) analysis of the "culture industry" as well as Althusser's (1971) Marxist-structuralist analysis of Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses postulate a hermetically-sealed system in which the dominant group perpetuates its hegemonic control. Conversely, the subalterns' identities are interpellated by the systems that they not only have been "brainwashed" into accepting but that they reinforce by the practices of production, reproduction (of children,

goods, and discourse, according to Althusser), and consumption. Given these conceptualizations, how can counter-ideologies rise and effect change in that monolithic order of power? Is not that monolithic paradigm of power relations where the subaltern is always-already a victim of a "top-down" social-political coercion render any articulation of change and agency problematic, if not untenable?

Adorno's attempt to resolve this embedded difficulty in orthodox Marxism is discursively insightful, but wanting in its articulations of possible courses of action and the emergence of counter-narratives to bring about a change. In his essay "On Popular Music" (1941), Adorno attacks capitalism's culture industry for its standardization and uniformity of culture and for its emphasis on effects where even "aesthetic pleasure" has to be structured. The refuge and only possible challenge to these dehumanizing forces is the power of negativity. For Adorno, negativity is more than simply an attempt to replace mass culture with "high culture" (a term he rejects), but a philosophical and ethical stand to resist political truism and normative cultural tastes. Indeed, Adorno renders a theory of dialectical change that, unlike Hegel's, is defined by negation rather than by a positive progression where synthesis, albeit temporary, is an advancement from the forces on which it is based—thesis and antithesis. Adorno argues that art is precisely this force which allows negativity and protest. However, how can we reconcile this assertion with his overall view that "the disproportion between the strength of the individual and the concentrated social structure brought to bear upon him destroys his resistance and at the same time adds a bad conscience for his will to resist at all" (44)? Is not the problem of promoting negativity and resistance on the one hand, but capitulating

to "false consciousness," "pseudo-individualism," and the power of ideological coercion on the other tantamount to having one's cake and eating it too?[42] What does resistance amount to if not a failed attempt after which the artist/rebel/subaltern remains with "a bad conscience"? The individuals' only victory or, rather, solace is then that their "resistance does not wholly disappear" but "is driven into deeper and deeper strata of the psychological structure" (ibid.). The crux of this dilemma is identified in Patrick Brantlinger's (1983) critique of the Frankfurt School, and particularly of Adorno's work:

> Adorno appears to place his faith in the historical efficacy of 'negativity,' but without a clear historical agent such negativity seems to be little more than the capacity for radical criticism inherent in the philosophical tradition. (225)

Similarly to Adorno, Althusser (1971) attempts to negotiate between these seemingly non-reconcilable positions—on the one hand, a recognition of the pervasive power of hegemonic systems and, on the other, an articulation of the emergence and sustainability of counter-ideologies. Althusser suggests that "Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the *stake*, but also the *site* of class struggle" (147), and in the footnotes he adds that this is feasible because class struggle (and hence a possible change) "is rooted elsewhere than in ideology; in the infrastructure" (ibid.). However, this explanation is far from being fully satisfactory because the specifics of this possibility are never articulated; particularly, if indeed the struggle is rooted in the

[42] My critique in this discussion is based on the specific works cited here. It is beyond the scope of this study to assess various developments in the scholarship of Adorno. However, it is noteworthy that his "Veblen's Attack on Culture" (1967/1981) renders a more complex and optimistic view of dialectical negativity. See for example his discussion on pp. 87-88.

base/infrastructure (actual relations of production), where do we identify the subject's volition and challenge?

Gramsci's (1971) work, and, specifically, his articulations of the organic intellectual and hegemony as fluid and multi-directional, amount to a cogent theory which attempts to find a defined historical agent for the possible advent of a genuine group resistance. Gramsci rejects orthodox Marxism's economism and, thereby, the derivation of culture from infrastructure. Likewise, he is careful not to identify the hegemonic power with the ruling class; he recognizes that modern civil societies are complex systems in which various groups can vie for power and challenge the power of the state. Gramsci explores how in civil societies, social groups can assume counter-hegemonic power to wield social, political, and cultural authority. Thus, Gramsci's theory carves out a space for consciousness that is neither false nor passive.

Foucault's conceptualization of power has greatly inspired postcolonial scholarship. Here, I am interested in relating Foucault's articulations of power to the topic at hand, namely agency and change. The work of Foucault poses a unique challenge to all scholars interested in it; not only does he offer a theory that eschews simple constructions of truth, discourse, and power, but his scholarship also evolved significantly over the years. Contrary to orthodox Marxists and to most members of the Frankfurt School, Foucault rejects articulations of power as fixed and affixed to only the dominating group(s). In his *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (1990), Foucault proposes that, "By power, I do not mean 'Power' as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state" (92). Foucault

maintains that the discursive practices of power are dispersed and to be found in all human practices and institutions, including sex and law. Likewise, power is always generative, never restrictive or "poor in sources, sparing of its methods … incapable of invention, and seemingly doomed always to repeat itself" (85), as commonly thought.

According to Foucault, "Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled" (1990:94). Ostensibly then, Foucault's theory is empowering—all human beings have a share in this inexhaustible resource. One of the challenges Foucault is facing here is, to a degree, an inversion of the problem evident in the works of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Althusser, who see only unitary power. Considering Foucault's premise that power is relative (everyone has it and every human experience is imbued with it), how can he account for the reality of oppressors and oppressed, elite and proletariat, rulers and subalterns? I would like to follow here Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's (1991) insightful assertion that this dilemma can be resolved when a distinction is made between power as omnipresent (which Foucault does affirm) and power as omnipotent (which he challenges). Indeed, power is dispersed and locally produced, but subsequently, it is appropriated by the state or ruling class where it is being congealed and solidified.

Relatedly, Foucault's view of subjectivity is a far cry from the classical rationalistic notion of a free and discrete subject. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1984), Foucault purports to disabuse us of notions of cohesive and unified identities; rather, "it is plural; countless spirits dispute its possession; numerous systems intersect and compete" (94). Furthermore, in Foucault's theory resistance is emptied of its

liberating connotations and its subject is devoid of a meaningful volition: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1990:95). Opposition to power is always contained within the system and “great radical ruptures” are only occasionally possible. It seems, then, that whereas the Frankfurt School is consigned to the notion of subjects (individuals) without power, Foucault only finds power without subjects. Accordingly, “a historical event is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the (temporary) usurpation of power” (1984:88), and he later proposes that genealogy (effective history) “knows only one kingdom … where there is only ‘the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice box of chance’” (88-89).

Bhabha, who adapts Foucault’s notion of dispersed power in his analysis of colonial power, reaches a more redeeming and liberating conclusion. For Bhabha (1985) these heterogeneous sites of power and the positioning of the hybrid in the national and societal margins are precisely what render the impossibility of colonial power,

> For the unitary voice of command is interrupted by questions that arise from these heterogeneous sites and circuits of power which, though momentarily ‘fixed’ in the authoritative alignment of subjects, must continually be re-presented in the production of terror and fear—the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/Other, inside/outside. (158)

According to Shohat and Stam "To insist that essentialism is always and everywhere reactionary is indirectly to buy into essentialism, to 'act as if essentialism has an essence'" (1994:346).[43] Throughout this chapter I skirted around one of the most significant issues regarding identity, agency, and change—the problem of essentialism. The modernist project has been subjected to a sustained attack because it is predicated on notions of origins and essential selves. In this setting, colonizer and colonized, Westerners and Easterners, men and women—each has distinct features that set it apart from its opposite group and define its essence. Postmodernist/poststructuralist theory eschews these articulations since they often assume the naturalness of social, racial, and gender divisions, rather than articulate these differences as socially constructed and, therefore, as merely discursive truths. As we have seen, the postmodernist/poststructuralist project deems unified, cohesive, and discrete identities—both individual and communal—merely a fiction. Accordingly, Judith Butler's (1993) pivotal notion of performativity purports to eradicate the conceptualization of "self" and "identity"; an individual or a group should be articulated not for what they supposedly are, but by their conduct and preferences. However, the collapse of discernable identities problematizes and possibly aborts any coherent discourse—positive or negative—about a given group. To put it bluntly and relate it to our study, if "Mizrahi" is a fictitious construct, what does it mean then to promote "Mizrahi" causes? Furthermore, how can social, political, and economic changes be expected if there is no *subject* to desire these changes? Do we indeed have to resign ourselves to Foucault's "dice box of chance"?

[43] Inside quotation from Diana Fuss' *Essentially Speaking* (1989).

To provide for the possibility of empowering subaltern groups, contemporary scholarship in cultural studies has to articulate power while it denies subjectivity based on distinct and unified identities. We may begin our inquiry by reiterating that whereas the Other might not be "real" in the extra-discursive world, merely the profusion of articulations about the Other—from common speech to scholarly discourses—grants this Other an actual presence. To underscore the importance of these articulations is not simply an academic musing or luxury; time and time again, real people have suffered real afflictions precisely because of their perceived collective and personal identities. Indeed, one of this study's primary premises is that "imagined communities" (or, for this matter, imagined individual selves) have real ontological presence and they color our understanding of the world we experience. In accordance with Hall's (1996a&b) theory of alterity, my position in this study of the Other in Israeli cinema is to de-essentialize "essentialism"; to unabashedly employ "identity" (again, both individual and collective); and to acknowledge that this does not entail resigning to biologism or determinism. In other words, my position in this study is that, notwithstanding the contingent and unstable nature of identities and the impossibility of unambiguously identifying them in the extra-discursive realm, the Other should neither be bracketed in quotation marks nor considered a fiction.

To articulate difference, one necessarily has to assume at least a minimal coherence and consistency in the elements (e.g., ethnic groups) compared and found different. Hall (1996b), therefore, does not discard a politics of identity that is based on difference: "I believe it is an immensely important gain when one recognizes that all

identity is constructed across difference and begins to live with the politics of difference" (117). This "qualified essentialism" I adapt here is compatible with articulations regarding the contingent, fluid, and slippery nature of all identities. Hall's "arbitrary closure" of the moment (which he describes as the provisional necessity to offer meaning, like a period at the end of a sentence begs us to do before a new one ensues) is tantamount to the contingent self that enunciates, "This is what I mean; this is who I am" (ibid.).

Indeed, even a poststructuralist critic like Spivak can appreciate, albeit provisionally, the value in essentializing identity groups. She proposes that essentialism can and should be strategically employed to pursue political and social goals, and hence she coined the term "strategic essentialism." Although Yuval-Davis (1997) is suspicious of "strategic essentialism" and "identity politics" (politics of difference) due to the possibility that "for political mobilization, these categories become reified via practices of social movements and state policies" (119), she nevertheless offers a (feminist) course of action that is predicated on differences. Yuval-Davis' "transversal politics" implies that "co-operation and solidarity among feminists positioned differently in different societies and in the same society should be informed by these differences" (125). But again, whether we choose to employ "identification" or "solidarity" in facilitating activism and change, one still has to assume difference and epistemic distance between subjects. The Other is, therefore, implied and persists even when postmodern theory intends to deconstruct it.

Whereas Shohat and Stam (1994) maintain, somewhat apologetically, "That identity and experience are mediated, narrated, constructed, caught up in the spiral of representation and intertextuality does not mean that all struggle comes to an end" (346), my position takes a more affirmative turn. I would argue that it is precisely the contingency of all identities that provides the necessary discursive space to explicate and even facilitate struggle and change. The instability of "identity" and "self" is most definite, palpable, and indisputable in the experiences and lives of (im)migrants, exiles, and often, minority groups. Likewise, based on my previous discussion and in accordance with Bhabha's "DissemiNation" (1990a), change and struggle are very likely to originate from those geographical and discursive sites inhabited by hybrid populations. Bhabha adds that the consignment of the hybrid to the margins paradoxically facilitates both the formation of its cultural identification and a revision of the hegemonic national narrative: "[A] mediation on the disposition of space and time from which the narrative of the nation must *begin*" (306). The dialectic of marginality—power and absence—which will guide my discussion in Chapter 5, is succinctly captured in the opening of "Minimal Selves" (1996b), (an intended notarikon play on "liminal" selves?) where Hall relays his own tale of a migrant living in the U.K.:

> Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be *the* representative modern experience! This is coming home with a vengeance! (114)

The Mizrahi Problem: Critical Overview[44]

Following the first Zionist Congress of 1897, a national narrative accreted momentum in terms of both ideology and practice, eventually calling for a homeland in Palestine for the Jewish people. Early Zionism was a modernist project predicated on socialist, egalitarian, and democratic creeds. The imbrication of national aspirations and secular socialist doctrine—specifically, the tenet of non-exploitative economic relations—is evident in the widespread slogans, such as *dat ha'avoda* ("religion of labor"), *avoda ivrit* ("Hebrew labor"), and *avoda atzmit* ("non-hired labor"). The predicament of the Diaspora Jew was attributed to the principle of a nation without land, people who have been the eternal wanderers. The remedy for "people without land" was a "land without people"—Palestine—a solution clearly based on an immense nescience regarding Palestine's native inhabitants, mostly Arab, but also Jewish. For Zionist leaders, such as Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, the soon-to-be-state was imagined as an island of an enlightened and just society at the heart of a pre-modern world. Ben-Gurion's maxim envisioning Israel as the "Switzerland of the Middle East" attests to this belief in modernization (as defined by Europeans), progress, and Western orientation and values.[45]

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[44] Following Chetrit's (2004b) observation, the title of this section was chosen to suggest that the so-called "Mizrahi problem" is actually an Ashkenazi problem, just as in feminism the problem is not the woman; in all these cases, "the root of the problem is the powerful, dominating, hegemonic, oppressive [group], which obsessively engages in maintaining its power and status."
[45] Likewise, regarding even the father of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, his vision and plan were meant for Ashkenazi Jews and only those Sephardi Jews having European citizenship, such as French Algerian Jews. (See Chetrit, 2004a:44.)

However, the crystallization of Arab Palestinian nationalism since the 1920s, the Holocaust in Europe, and the Jewish mass immigration from Europe and the Middle East to Israel in the first years following its establishment[46] severely challenged the implementation of Zionist ideology into practice and exposed its delicate seams. The horror of the Holocaust registered as a warning—"never again!"—and a strong Jewish state was sought as the only assurance against such future atrocities.[47] The flood of impoverished European (mainly Holocaust refugees) and Mizrahi immigrants brought the Israeli economy to the brink of collapse and, to find a housing solution for these newcomers, the government settled many of them in what had previously been Arab villages and towns. These new realities dictated shifts in Zionist ideology and practice vis-à-vis both the Arab and the Mizrahi.

But a harsher view of the Zionist enterprise, heavily advanced by the works of Israeli new historians/post-Zionists, and, particularly by the "new Mizrahim,[48] would dismiss these causal relations between "circumstances" and the changes the Zionist movement has undergone. Indeed, such a critique maintains that, from the outset, Zionism was a colonial movement where lofty ideology merely obfuscated its pernicious agenda and practice, and that its very modernist project was predicated on and made

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[46] Between 1948 and 1951, Israel's population more than doubled, predominantly due to immigration waves. Through the early 1970s, first-generation immigrants comprised the majority of Israel's Jewish population. (See Ben-Rafael, 1982:3.)

[47] As Amos Elon (1971) suggests in *The Israelis: Founders and Sons*, the aftermath of the Holocaust and the Arab/Israeli conflict nourished a new breed of young Israelis. This new generation often eschewed some of early Zionism's sublime ideals in favor of pragmatism, which translated into the creation of the formidable Israeli who would fight to the end.

[48] "New Mizrahim," a designation coined by Chetrit (2004a), refers to scholars and intellectuals, mostly second-generation immigrants from the Arab/Muslim Middle East. Most "New Mizrahim" are members of Hakeshet (The Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow).

possible by labor exploitation, discrimination, and oppression. For Elazar (1988), Chetrit (2004a), and Shenhav (2003) the predicament of Mizrahi Jews derived from a systematic, deliberate, and cynical exploitation of these Jews in their communities even before their arrival in Israel. The immigration of Yemenite Jews in 1882 (coinciding with what is known as *Aliya Rishona*—the first Zionist Wave of immigration from Eastern Europe) and then again in 1910 was a windfall for the leaders of the Zionist movement in Palestine—they saw the opportunity to exploit these Yemenite immigrants in farming, thus freeing the new Ashkenazi landowners from their dependency on Arab laborers.[49] Shenhav addresses the means by which Zionist leaders instigated the Jewish population in Iraq against their Arab neighbors in order to motivate them to immigrate to Israel, which needed them for its nation-building project.[50] In short, for the Ashkenazi hegemonic group, these Mizrahi Jews constituted what Marx terms the "reserved army of labor"—an expendable and manipulable workforce. A Malthusian-like policy was enacted when a large number of immigrants started arriving in Israel from North Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. The selection process, where cultural and economic criteria were employed by Zionist agents to determine who would be permitted to immigrate,[51] reveals

[49] See a detailed discussion, including a study of Zionist press at that period, in Chetrit (2004a). The Yemenite Jews were considered fit for menial and agricultural labor the Ashkenazim deemed either degrading or too intensive.

[50] Zionist agents in Iraq were accused and sentenced to death by hanging for their alleged involvement in throwing grenades and planting bombs in Jewish public places, including a synagogue, causing the death of a Jewish mother and daughter. The official Zionist version denies any link to these attacks on Jews. However, a suspicion that Zionist agents were indeed responsible for these attacks has been circulating for years. Proponents of this allegation claim that these acts were carried out to instill fear among members of the Jewish community and to hasten them to leave Iraq. Most recent studies, including Shenhav's (2003), can neither affirm nor dismiss this accusation.

[51] See Haim Malka's study (in Chetrit, 2004a).

Zionism's cynical abuse of the its own ethos calling for "Hebrew Labor." The selection process was meant to preserve the Ashkenazi hegemony while, at the same time, alleviating the workforce crises.

Swirski's (1981/1989) critique attempts to unmask the fallacy of the modernity/co-optation/assimilationist model in Israeli social studies, which suggests that an established modern Ashkenazi society was faced with the pre-modern Mizrahim and that, in accordance with the Zionist decree of *Am Echad* (One People) and *Kibbutz Galu'yot* (The Ingathering of Exiles), Mizrahim had to be co-opted and goaded into an era of enlightenment.[52] Swirski maintains that the reality in the late 1940s and early 1950s in Palestine/Israel was that the population there was by all measures still in a pre-modern stage. "Modernity," then, was possible precisely because of the exploitation of the Mizrahi Jews; it was not a pre-given state Mizrahim could adopt.

Furthermore, various studies, including Swirski's (1981/1989) and Shohat's (1997b), maintain that, if anything, Mizrahi immigrants were, to a large extent, economically and professionally better off upon their arrival in Israel than their Ashkenazi counterparts and, therefore,

> unlike the classical paradigm where immigration is linked to a desire for individual, familial, and community improvement, in Israel this process, for Sephardim, was largely reversed. What for Ashkenazi immigrants from Russia or Poland was a social *aliya* (literally "ascent") was for Sephardi immigrants from Iraq or Egypt a *yerida* (a descent). (Shohat, 55)

[52] For a discussion of the theory and its critique, see Sammy Smooha (2004). Like Swirski, Smooha critiques the assimilationist model on similar grounds.

And yet, as was alluded to earlier, the Mizrahim were hired as unskilled labor whereas many professionally unskilled Ashkenazim came to occupy high administrative positions.

On one level then, one finds a discrepancy between the Zionist social oration and the actual practice—the discrimination against Mizrahim in housing policies, employment, and education furthered their cultural displacement and political oppression.[53] On another level, the contradictions and tensions are to be found within the Zionist discourse itself—*Am Echad* and *Kibbutz Galu'yot* coincide problematically with articulations expressing fear and anxiety about the "Levantization" of Israel by the increasing size of its Mizrahi immigrant population.[54] What could Zionism offer, discursively and practically, when, to use Chetrit's (2004b) pithy phrasing, it wanted to swallow but also spew its Mizrahi immigrants? Over the years the Zionist movement developed two strategies to cope with this ambivalence between fear and desire toward the Mizrahi Other. The solutions evolved around the need to ensure that the Mizrahi, while not a full member of Israeli society, is nevertheless not utterly rejected as the Arab enemy is.

In his book *The Arab-Jews: Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (2003), Shenhav develops a daring thesis claiming that the Zionist movement's leaders had to establish the

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[53] See Chetrit's (2004a) discussion of Israeli governments' brutal treatment of past Mizrahi upheavals and their undermining of Mizrahi attempts to exert political power.

[54] See, for example, Smooha's (1978) references to Ben-Gurion, who stated, "[W]e do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant" (88). Similar references and arguments can also be found in Yitzhaki (2003, specifically, Chapters 3 and 6) and Chetrit (2004a, mainly Chapters 1 and 2). Also, see Elazar's (1989, mainly pp. 5-7) discussion of the Israeli Left's abhorrence of what it understood to be the "Levantization" of Israel as reflected in the results of the 1977 election which brought the Likud to power. The victory was attributed to the sweeping Mizrahi support of Begin's right-wing party.

"religization"[55] of the Mizrahi in order to find an area of resemblance and commonality—religion—with these Arab-Jews whose cultural and historical affinity to the ultimate Other—the Arab—was otherwise markedly stronger. It is no wonder then that Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion could unabashedly call in the Israeli parliament in 1951 for turning Yemenite immigrants from Yemenites to Jews.[56] As Shenhav proposes, this religization was fraught with double irony. First, unlike other national movements, Zionism, which was propagating a secular socialist agenda, resorted to religion in the desperate desire to be able to "swallow" the Mizrahi.[57] Second, most Mizrahi Jews, and specifically the Yemenites, were traditionally observant of Jewish law and, therefore, did not need the "savior's" extended hand to become Jews.

Another strategy Zionism resorted to vis-à-vis the "other within" involved an effort by the leadership to "elevate" the Mizrahi into the putatively progressive habitant of the Ashkenazi. To distinguish them from the Arab enemy and make this Mizrahi community worthy of the Zionist enterprise the community was coerced to eradicate its cultural Arab/Middle Eastern past.

In Chapter 3, I will expand on the construction of Mizrahi identity as being largely predicated on the estrangement of these immigrants from their own Arab/Middle Eastern history, tradition, and language. But it is worth mentioning here that, gradually, many of the immigrants realized that the promised land of their forefathers turned out to

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[55] The Hebrew term Shenhav uses is *hadata*. See also Shenhav (1999).
[56] See Chetrit (2004a:65).
[57] I am clearly not claiming here that Ashkenazi Zionism was interested in adopting religion for itself; only that, based on religion, it could mark the Mizrahi as a Jew.

be, culturally speaking, a new exile. Relatedly, American scholar Nancy Berg titles her book on Israeli writers from Iraq *Exile from Exile* (1996) and Shohat (2000b) concludes her article "Ruptured Identities: Reflections of Arab-Jewish Woman" with the disillusionment of Iraqi immigrants to Israel: "[B]y the rivers of Zion we sat and wept when we remembered Babylon"—an intended inversion of the biblical verse in Psalms 137:1, where Zion is the object of longing for the Jewish Babylonian exiles. At the risk of over-generalizing, we can suggest that the Mizrahi immigration was a move inside one geographical space (the Middle East) to a new cultural space, whereas the Ashkenazim moved into a new geographical space but brought and attempted to maintain the culture of a different space—Europe.

However, as is often pointed out, did the Ashkenazim not suffer upon their arrival in Israel as much as their Mizrahim counterparts did? Were the Ashkenazi immigrants not subjected to a similar coercive force to shed their putatively diasporic traits and procure the features of the independent, assertive, strong, healthy *sabra*—a native-born Israeli who was the paragon of the Zionist desire? Indeed, the formation of Israeli culture that has evolved over the years has little in common with the heritage those European immigrants were accustomed to in their countries of origin. Is not the emerging hybrid Israeli identity then alien to (or, alternatively, incorporating) both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi traditions?

To expound on these queries we first need to qualify the notion that hybridity in the Israeli context truly entails equality—a process in which all groups participate in a cultural exchange to form a genuine multicultural society. Four aspects of Israeli

multiculturalism deserve our attention here. (1) The Mizrahim joined the "melting pot" society from a position of economic, social, and cultural inferiority. Again, what I suggest here is clearly not any objective benchmark for this "inferiority"; rather, my point is that the hegemonic Zionist discourse deemed the Mizrahi culture insufficient, and its people as those "having fallen into an historical coma."[58] In practice then, as Chetrit (2004b) proposes, "'the cultural melting pot' is a process in which those with the cultural reign liquefy their cultural subordinates and mold them anew according to the changing needs of the hegemony" (2004b). (2) The Mizrahi semblance to the Arab had a price those immigrants had to pay, whereas the Ashkenazim were exempt from this burden. According to the dominant Zionist discourse, demanding that the Mizrahim eradicate their past is but one element in the socialization process; in order not to be suspected as Arab enemy allies, the Mizrahim had to proclaim their faithfulness by being Arab-haters. Therefore, as Chetrit points out in this context, a distinction needs to be made between those who enter multiculturalism by coercion and those who join it voluntarily. It is not enough, then—in fact, it is even misleading—to point out, as a number of media studies have done, that most Mizrahim now prefer a Western over an Oriental culture.[59] One needs to search for the reasons leading to this preference and, thereby, to contextualize this trend. (3) Even if Ashkenazim had to make cultural adjustments upon their immigration, these were miniscule in comparison to the sacrifices made by Mizrahim, considering that, from the outset, Zionism promoted a fierce Western orientation. (4)

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[58] The quote is from an Israeli history book cited in Henriette Dahan-Kalev's *You're So Pretty—You Don't Look Moroccan*" (2001), where she reminisces on the oppression she suffered due to her Moroccan background.
[59] See for example Katz's *The Beracha Report* (1999:82).

Unlike "Mizrahi," "Ashkenazi" casts the unmarked Israeliness. This is most conspicuous when we consider that the *sabra*, despite the term's supposed reference to any native Israeli, is depicted in literature and the performing arts as a young, light-skinned Ashkenazi male, not a Mizrahi.[60]

The discussion thus far has focused on the Mizrahi predicament in past years. Since my study focuses on contemporary Mizrahi cinema, it is necessary to address the questions posed in the introduction—to what extent is the Mizrahi issue passé and how relevant is the past to the fast-changing Israeli society? I will limit my discussion here to aspects of contemporary Israeli society and culture directly pertaining to the films addressed in the following chapters.

For the most part, Israeli social scholarship up to the late 1970s affirmed the existence of economic, educational, and occupational disparities between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi in favor of the first, but did not attempt to identify an ideological or institutional design. An increasing number of scholars in the late 1970s and 1980s who studied Israeli society concurred that the unrelenting thrust of the Zionist narrative and the power imbalance embedded in it had dire consequences for all minority groups, and mainly Mizrahim and Israeli Arabs (Palestinians of Israel).[61] However, some of these studies, and mainly the earlier ones, often projected a process in which the second and

[60] See, for example, Oz Almog's *The Sabra – A Profile*, (2004). See also the opening of Moshe Shamir's novel *With His Own Hands* (1970). The portrayal of the *sabra* in this heroic tale is reminiscent of the archetypical Aryan (super)man.
[61] See Dominguez (1989), Smooha (1978), Daniel (1989), Hazleton (1977), Shohat (1989, 1997b, 1999b, 2001b), and Ben-Rafael (1982).

third generation of Mizrahi immigrants will live in a society where, even if gaps exist, they would not be along ethnic lines.[62]

But then, more recent studies in the fields of sociology, criminology, and education have questioned this proposition and sought to reveal the links between past wrongdoings and present ethnic and social maladies. Shenhav (2003) and Chetrit (2004a), in his references to recent studies by Yinon Cohen and Yoav Peled, reveal that ethnic gaps in contemporary Israel have not been narrowed. The most troubling aspect of these findings is that while the first generation of Mizrahi immigrants now witnesses some improvement in the economic disparity between them and their Ashkenazi counterparts, the hope that these immigrants' children and grandchildren will not be subjected to the same injustice has been shattered. Indeed, at least in some areas, the gaps between the second and third generations of Mizrahi immigrants and their Ashkenazi peers have widened compared to the gaps from which the first generation of Mizrahi immigrants had suffered. For example, Mizrahi immigrants have comprised a proportionally larger section of the college student body than their children have,[63] and Mizrahim are still heavily underrepresented in non-elected positions, including executives, judges, and media ownership, but they predominantly constitute the Jewish prison population.[64] The expectation for narrowing the gaps often revolved around the notion that in a melting pot society intermarriages would increase over time. However,

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[62] See for example one of Smooha's earlier studies (1978), Ben-Rafael (1982), and Ben-Zadok (1993).
[63] See Chetrit (2004:218-219).
[64] In Israel, judges are appointed, not elected. The Israeli parliament, whose members are directly elected by all voters, is very likely the only prominent institution where Mizrahim are represented in numbers somewhat close to their presence in the overall population.

once again, the 20-25% of all marriages that occur between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim is a percentage that has been sustained for several decades, and some scholars even find that this proportion has decreased recently.[65]

Swirski (1981/1989) is interested in investigating the structural mechanisms that perpetuate the socioethnic disparity and, accordingly, his response to the position that the ethnic gaps are closing is inspired by Marxist analysis.

> This view ignores the fact that the very process that created the ethnic division of labour in the fifties and sixties also created mechanisms of reproduction which have been maintaining that division of labour—obviously, with variations—to this day, and are presently operating to reproduce it in the foreseeable future as well. (21)[66]

Some of the key features of this division of labor that Swirski pursues in his study are the consigning (at times, the forcing) of a large numbers of Mizrahim to Israel's geographical periphery—the so-called development towns; the dependence of these development towns' residents in many cases on a single source of employment, usually a textile or food processing factory; the scarcity of occupations requiring highly skilled employees;

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[65] See Swirski (1989:23-24) for his discussion of the slowing down of the rate of increase in intermarriages between 1952 and 1975 and of the increasing rate of marriages between members of various Oriental/Mizrahi groups, a trend also noticeable in regard to marriages in the Ashkenazi community. Importantly, Swirski's key argument is that the very focus on intermarriages is encoded in a racist position—the "hope" to save the Mizrahim from their inferiority and deficiency. For more recent studies of "bloc" marriages (within the Mizrahi or Ashkenazi community) and the decline of endogamous ones see Okun (2001) and Smooha (2004). The latter two scholars employ these findings to suggest that, at least when it comes to marriages, the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi split is even more prominent at the present.

[66] Although this book was originally published in 1981, Swirski's more recent publications and activist work in the field of education attest to his adherence to the critical position quoted here.

and, therefore, extremely limited opportunities for social mobility.[67] The educational system has been a significant force maintaining this division of labor. In development town and slums ("neighborhoods in distress"), populated mostly by Mizrahim, there have often been only the poorly regarded vocational schools at the high school level, a reality impeding aspiring young students from pursuing professional or academic careers that require college degrees.

Eli Avraham's work on contemporary Israeli media (primarily the press) reveals that they are plagued by a systematically biased, stereotypical, and offensive treatment of the periphery and its mostly Mizrahi population.[68] In *The Media in Israel* (2000) Avraham identifies the following thematic characteristics and foci in the portrayal of the periphery in the press: (1) violence, crime, and social unrest; (2) neglect and filth; (3) people's lack of control over their future; (4) decontextualization and lack of specificity, and yet, the likelihood that the story covered will indicate the ethnic identity of criminals if they are Mizrahim; (5) doubts cast as to whether the people of the periphery can be like "us"; and (6) primitivism.

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[67] For the disproportionally high percentage of Mizrahi residents in development towns and its detrimental implications see Swirski (1989, particularly, Chapter 2), Ben-Zadok (1993, Chapter 4), and Smooha (2004).

[68] Avraham's studies to which I refer here engage mostly the geographical periphery. However, his findings are applicable to the study of Mizrahim for the following reasons: As indicated above, the periphery is rarely populated by people of Ashkenazi origin. (Nowadays however, in addition to Mizrahim, many immigrants from the former Soviet Union reside there.) Also, Avraham indeed makes constant references to the Mizrahi issue. Even when the Mizrahi is not explicitly mentioned, the references to the overlap between geographical and socioeconomic margins (see 2000:16) and between Israel's geographical center and the dominant ideology (2003:96-98) suggest that his findings and critique engage in societal aspects pertaining to the conflation between geography, class, and ethnicity.

Although one should be skeptical about the verisimilitude and fairness pertaining to this coverage (for example, as Avraham [1993/2000] points out, considering the crime rates in the periphery and the center, the former will be covered in disproportionately higher frequency in the context of crime than the latter) the alarming aspects of this treatment of the people in the periphery go well beyond that. The framing of the stories betrays a slanted perspective and ideological bent which, at one end, reinscribe negative stereotypes about the Other and, at the other end, perpetuate the hegemonic power the center occupies. Avraham provides various examples where the media's portrayal of crime, neglect, lack of education, or poverty is framed by certain preconceived notions about the periphery. Even when the media tell a success story, the reporter may begin with a clause such as, "X, known as a high-crime town, is …."[69] Accordingly, when "disorder news" pertains to the periphery it tends to suggest a paradigmatic quality, whereas similar stories about the center allude to the particularistic nature of the incident. Avraham employs Shanto Iyengar (1991) to propose that the failure of the Israeli media to provide the broader socioeconomic context in their stories results in "episodic news," where blame is deflected from government officials and others in centers of power onto the subjects about which the negative stories are told.

Thus far, this section has focused on the process by which the Ashkenazi establishment has managed to maintain its hegemonic power by social coercion and how it has strived to propagate a Western way of life among its "Eastern" population. It may seem as though the Mizrahi has been an empty vessel into which values and ideas have

[69] See Avraham (2003:101).

been poured. Furthermore, ostensibly, the Zionist ideology and practice have successfully accomplished the goals they set—as indicated above, most Mizrahim prefer non-Mizrahi culture (Ashkenazi or Western)—and the phenomenon of ethnic self-hatred, or the internalization of their putative inferiority, has been well documented in Israeli literature and scholarship. However, this work, and specifically Chapter 5, is most interested in the articulations of counter-discourses, in films subverting hegemonic creeds, and in works that attest to the dynamic nature of power relations, political struggles, and social interactions. We are reminded here of Raymond Williams' (1977/1985) delineation of three cultural modalities—dominant, residual, and emergent—where he contends that *"no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention*" (125, original emphasis).

The scholarship in postcolonialism and ethnic studies that I discussed earlier and, specifically, Bhabha's conceptualizations of colonial ambivalence about the Other, lend themselves as a suitable framework for the analysis of the Mizrahi predicament in Israeli society and media. Most noticeably, the power relations are marked not only by the gross imbalance between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim and the exploitation of the first by the latter, but also by the hegemonic group's ambivalent construction of the Mizrahim as both the Other (being part of the Orient) and the self (being Jewish). The exoticization of Mizrahi culture in Israeli folklore and the cannibalization of Mizrahi culinary and musical traditions in the last few decades (ironically, often by Mizrahim themselves) both attest to

the limited and lopsided cultural exchange between the two Israeli ethnic groups and to the duality of fear and desire in the treatment of the other—folklore is acceptable, even warranted, but "real" culture is not. However, although all these features resonate well with the scholarly work I outlined above, this section will conclude with a cautionary note about the applicability of a postcolonial model or a minority theory to the study of ethnic relations in Israel.

Postcolonialism has set out to (critically) articulate the nature of colonialism and its legacy even after colonized people achieved sovereignty. Granted, the various modalities of colonialism, which may range from political or religious coercion to voluntary miscegenation, defy overarching articulations about its character. And yet, broadly speaking, a colonial power is often associated with a nation-state extending its control to territories beyond its borders. The grounds for this expansion are often economic (e.g., cheap labor, the wealth of natural resources), and political, and it may also be motivated by religious, cultural, and ideological beliefs (e.g., the advancement of the natives into modernity). Early Zionism certainly cannot be equated with imperialist aspirations to expand into additional territories; as we have discussed, Zionism was envisioned as the solution for the "people without land," people who are dispersed all over the world.[70] Similarly, early Zionism was motivated largely by sheer ideology; the European immigrants at the turn of the last century did not leave their countries of origin

[70] See Shohat's (2004) discussion of this issue and, in particular, Zionism's lack of a "mother country."

behind for the economic betterment of their lives, and if they did, they were soon disillusioned.[71]

Similarly, we should consider the difficulty in applying an ethnic/minority theoretical model to the study of the Mizrahim. At the time of the first immigration waves in the history of modern Zionism beginning in 1882, there were far more Sephardim than Ashkenazim in Palestine. Later, after decades of constituting a minority group, in 1970 Mizrahim became the majority group of Israel's population. (1984 was the first year Mizrahim had the electoral majority.) Waves of immigration from Russia and the former Soviet Republics in the 1990s tipped the balance again, and Ashkenazim constitute a slight majority—55%—in the Jewish population of Israel today.[72] This high percentage rate of the Mizrahi population clearly eschews simple comparisons with the presence, status, and clout of African Americans or Hispanics in the U.S., where each group constitutes around 13% of the overall population. Also, to reiterate what has already been discussed in various parts of this work, the rapid demographic, cultural, and political changes that Israel has witnessed complicate a simple articulation of power disparities along sweeping postcolonial and ethnic theorizations. For this work to embark on the study of Mizrahim in Israeli cinema it needs to be vigilant in its application of these world theories by way of assessing them from within the local Israeli contextual framework.

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[71] See also Friling (2003, mainly pp. 43-45) and Lissak (2003:99) for a discussion about the shortcomings of theorizations applying the colonialist model to the Zionist movement. It is noteworthy that Friling's and Lissak's views are diametrically opposite those of Edward Said (1979); in his comprehensive essay "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims," Said critiques Zionism on the grounds of its unequivocal colonial/imperialist positions.
[72] See Smooha (2004:49).

Historical Review of Periods and Genres in Israeli Cinema

The following section will address the main cinematic trends in Israeli cinema through the early 1990s and the theoretical and critical frameworks employed by media scholars and films reviewers in their analyses of Israeli cinema. Although the emphasis will be on genres and trends pertaining directly to the Mizrahi issue, references to other trends will instruct us to expound on the exclusions and oversights in the treatment of the ethnic issue in Israeli cinema.

Indeed, the most striking feature regarding the Mizrahim in early Israeli cinema is their absence and marginalization. Oftentimes, Ashkenazi actors, including Haim Topol, Gila Almagor, and Shaike Ofir, played the role of Mizrahi characters. Irrespective of who plays the roles of the Mizrahi, in the few films in which the Mizrahim are present, their characterization is demeaning and their roles are designed mostly to constitute the counter-figures of the Ashkenazim. For example, in *Dan Quixote and Sa'adia Panza,* (*Dan Kishot u'Se'adia Panza*, 1956) the main Mizrahi character—an unsophisticated dimwit—is in the service of the Ashkenazi master.[73]

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the rise and demise of two competing genres in Israeli cinema—the Bourekas and Personal Cinema.[74] The term "Bourekas" was coined in the mid-1970s and derived from the popular and cheap Bourekas pastry. Bourekas

[73] See Shohat (1989:119-120).
[74] This genre is also referred to as "The Israeli New Wave" and "The Cinema of the Stranger and the Deviant" (Gertz, 1993). Judd Ne'eman's (1998 and 1999) coinage of "New Sensibility Cinema" is gaining ground and is used as the title of the recently published book by Ariel Schweitzer (2003) on that genre. Shohat (1989) employs the term Personal Cinema, and since my discussion here is informed by her work, I will retain this term.

Cinema, consisting primarily of comedies or social (melo)dramas, foregrounds mostly Mizrahi characters. In Bourekas films such as *Katz and Karaso* (*Katz ve'Karaso*, 1971) the comedic effect derives from placing at the center of the narrative two incompatible characters—Mizrahi and Ashkenazi. "Bourekas" has been used mostly as a derogatory term to signify low-budget productions and recycled narratives aimed at the lowest common denominator of audiences and, therefore, was mapped out by film critics as "low" culture. By contrast, Personal Cinema was marked as an exquisite "high culture." The incorporation by Personal Cinema of new cinematic trends of that time in Europe (especially the French New Wave) and Brazil (Cinema Nôvo) and its championing of the *auteur* theory augmented Personal Cinema's reputation as "high culture."[75] The genre employs narratives characterized by minor and subtle undertones, and it often addressed universal rather than local Israeli themes. In their discourse about Israeli cinema, film critics, as well as film professors of the time, reaffirmed the binary opposition between the Bourekas and Personal Cinema and, as will be shown here, facilitated the construction of the binary categories of Ashkenazi (associated with high culture) versus Mizrahi (associated with low culture).

The Mizrahi character in most Bourekas films lacks depth, complexity, or agreeable traits. The Mizrahi is often portrayed as irrational, emotional, over-sexed, traditional, primitive, chauvinist, patriarchal, and manipulative. The language skills of the Mizrahim in Bourekas Cinema are limited and their pronunciation is grotesque. *Sallah*'s (*Sallah Shabbati*, Ephraim Kishon, 1964) titular character is a manipulative,

[75] See *We Were Together in the Army* (a symposium on Personal Cinema). In *Kolnowa*, Summer 1981:6-16.) Also, see Shohat (1989).

frenzied, lazy, primitive, rude, and sexist Mizrahi immigrant. He aspires to leave his residence in the *ma'abara* (transient camp) for a permanent housing in the *shikun* (a cheaply built and undistinguishable apartment complex), but he is unwilling to work (due to laziness) or to let his son earn an income (due to his reluctance to violate the family hierarchical structure and challenge traditional codes). Despite genre-related differences, the musical *Casablan* (1973) resorts to a similar cluster of stereotypes as *Sallah*. Like Sallah, Casa, the hero of the film's title, is traditional, brutish, physical, and emotive. He lives in the old city of Jaffa in a mixed neighborhood of immigrants from various countries of origin. Casa leads a (quite benign) gang of young men and, in accordance with genre conventions, they sing and dance but never seem to work. Finally, Charlie of the comedy *Charlie and a Half* (*Charlie va'Hetzi*, 1974) is a petty criminal who lives in a slum. He is vulgar, manipulative, and does not hesitate to recruit a young neighborhood boy as his "apprentice."

To more fully assess the formulaic representation of the Mizrahi in the Bourekas and in films where the genre left its marks, we should attend to the contrasting positioning of the Mizrahi vis-à-vis its *sabra* counterpart and, relatedly, expound the effeminization of the Mizrahi man in many of those films. To contextualize my discussion, it bears noting that, oftentimes, postcolonial works point to the problematic gendering of national discourse; women and men are designated different, if not opposite, roles in the formation of nationhood.[76] As Lesley Hazleton (1977) suggests, in Zionist

[76] See, for example, Yuval-Davis's *Gender and Nation* (1997) and, specifically, her discussions of wars and eugenicist and Malthusian discourses. Also, see Shohat (1989 and 1993) for her discussion of the cinematic exploitative construction of women as national allegories.

discourse, the language employed to depict the settling of the Land of Israel is suffused with sexual or gender-related imageries (e.g., impregnating or conquering the [barren/virgin] land).[77] Arguably, the masculine *sabra* epitomizes the male-oriented Zionist tale, which is prescribed by *telos* and a linear progression toward fulfillment/climax (statehood). All the groups that are considered outside the core of the Zionist enterprise or whose collective characteristics differ from those of the *sabra*—most clearly Mizrahim (Orientals) and Holocaust survivors—are "doomed" to be emplaced in the domain of the feminine where home (the private sphere), passivity (the lack of *telos*), or emotiveness take precedence, not in the public/national sphere where the *sabra* exhibits valor, determination, and cool.[78]

The effeminization of the Mizrahi, mainly in the Bourekas films, is often contrasted specifically with the Ashkenazi counterpart. The model of high culture versus mass culture that Tania Modleski (1986) proposes in reference to gender-based hierarchical categories is, at least partially, useful in identifying the Bourekas' construction of differences between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. The feminized Mizrahi is associated with leisure, laziness, emotion, and passivity, while the Ashkenazi is

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Oftentimes, within this context, the woman in classical Israeli cinema is portrayed either as superhuman ("Madonna") or subhuman (whore), rarely as a true partner of her male counterpart. In "Post-Third-Worldist Culture" (1997a), Shohat delineates alternative discourses where women filmmakers rebuke facile articulations of both postcolonial national sentiments and Eurocentric feminism.

[77] See, specifically, Chapters 3 ("The Cult of Fertility") and 4 ("Zionism and Manhood").

[78] For the general framework regarding the gendering of the East/West dyad see Shohat (2000a) and Shohat and Stam (1994). Their analyses pertain to the feminization of the Orient in imperial and colonial texts. See Gertz (2004) for her discussion of the effeminization of the Other—Holocaust survivors and even Arabs in Israeli literature and cinema. Also, see Shohat (1993) for a discussion of the construction of the diasporic (emasculated) Jew in binary opposite terms to those of the (masculinized) *Sabra*.

productive, active, and cerebral. Repeatedly, the Mizrahi in the Bourekas, and even in later films, has been portrayed as overtly "irrational" or frenzied (*Sallah*, *The Quarry* [1990], *Turn Left at the End of the World* [2004]), shown in the context of the private sphere (*Sallah*, *Bread* [1986], *Lovesick on Nana Street* [1995], *James' Journey to Jerusalem* [2003], *Bonjour, Monsieur Shlomi* [2003]) and has been marked by dependency (relying on the Ashkenazi savior) and lack of agency (to the extent that the Mizrahi man does act, it is plainly for his own or his family's benefit; never in those films does agency relate to the broader Zionist cause).[79] I would, therefore, argue that the paradigmatic emasculation of the Mizrahi men of all generations—grandfathers, fathers, and sons—in Bourekas cinema and in films that followed suit amounts to displacement in the context of the Zionist narrative.

Arguably, though, the inception of Bourekas cinema in the early 1960s can be rendered a refreshing positive development due to its "presencing" of the Mizrahi, a significant turn considering the structuring absence of the Mizrahi in early Israeli cinema. Situating the Mizrahim at the center of the narrative amounts to granting them a cinematic tangibility they otherwise lacked in the political, economic, and social arenas. It is noteworthy in this context that the Bourekas films not only focused on Mizrahi characters, but targeted mostly Mizrahi audiences.[80] Furthermore, the comedic nature of most Bourekas films provides a myriad of opportunities to poke fun not only at the

[79] For a discussion of the casting of the Mizrahi as a passive, dependent, and needy figure awaiting its reshaping and salvaging, see Shohat (1993, 1997b, 1999b, and 2001b).
[80] Although no definite data is available, Elihu Katz's findings in his *The Secularization of Leisure* (1976) clearly indicate that most moviegoers of the 1970s are of Mizrahi origin. His data analysis does not include a further breakdown, specifically indicating what types of films are watched by different groups.

Mizrahi character, but also at its Ashkenazi counterpart. Ostensibly then, the Bourekas genre renders a neutralizing and a de-hierarchical effect in placing the Mizrahi and the Ashkenazi on the same pedestal as objects of ridicule and mockery. In *Katz and Karaso*, *Casablan*, *Sallah*, and *Charlie and a Half*, Bourekas Cinema entertains the notion of Israel as a melting pot society where all immigrants, regardless of their origin, are subjected to a derisive treatment. According to this discourse, only genuine "Israeliness," accomplished after immigrants shed their diasporic marks, is desirable and worthy of the Zionist enterprise.

However, this seemingly equally stereotypical treatment of members of both camps is misleading and asymmetric. It is useful in this context to employ Stam's (2001) assertion that in the representational pairing of "oppositional" races/ethnicities, only the underdog and underrepresented group is raced and that,

> within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogeneous community.… Each negative image of an underrepresented group … becomes sorely overcharged with allegorical meaning. (479)

Indeed, the reductionist approach, undertaken by Bourekas filmmakers in their portrayal of the Mizrahi, attempts to create the quintessential Mizrahi character. This approach deceptively maintains that the epitomized Mizrahi has ingrained qualities transcending specific countries of origin, specific languages and dialects, and specific history, and that primitivism, ignorance, and "third worldness" are atemporal and embedded traits. Not surprisingly, then, the Mizrahi character often possesses traits that are an amalgam of an

Iraqi, Moroccan, and a Yemenite Jew.[81] Furthermore, Bourekas films, made mostly by Ashkenazi filmmakers, do not cast a model of mutual borrowing or a syncretist society where the *marginalized* can challenge the powerful establishment. Instead, Bourekas Cinema marvels at a utopian world where the Mizrahim are co-opted into mainstream modern-day society by denouncing their past.

Paradoxically, the Bourekas' overemphasis on and playfulness with ethnicity amounts to an elision of the ethnic problem. The formulaic narrative of the Bourekas' social comedy calls for a happy ending not by offering the Mizrahi a cathartic new understanding, but by demanding oblivion. Narratively, Sallah, Casa, and Charlie might have missed the train of modernism, but the younger generation is fully ready to be co-opted into a progressive Israeli society. Since Sallah's son and daughter are marrying Ashkenazim and the baby whom Casa godfathers was born to an Ashkenazi father and a Mizrahi mother, the world of enlightenment is awaiting these "Ashkenized" younger people. The films' seemingly benign discourse clearly suggests that the social, economic, and political power disparity is not structural and, therefore, is bound to disappear in the next generation. Accordingly, the children of the adult Mizrahi characters, unlike their parents, are promised to be an integral part of a modern, affluent, and egalitarian society. Moreover, the Bourekas narrative in which Mizrahi children (cultured, educated, and native Israelis fluent in Hebrew) are often pitted against their parents (primitive, illiterate, and diasporic) further dilutes the contentious problem of the ethnic gap by turning it into a generational gap issue.

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[81] See Shohat (1989:148).

In conclusion, the Bourekas films do not attempt to construct ethnic differences along class lines. It is precisely these differences that could have alluded to the shortcoming of the Zionist enterprise and to prolonged and deeply embedded disparities. Bourekas Cinema's stereotypical representation of the Mizrahi fails to explore the broader sociopolitical contexts that might construe its characters' predicament. Bourekas Cinema is reactionary not only in turning a grave sociopolitical reality into a "funny" matter, but also in its affirmation of the social status quo. The Ashkenazi film establishment had, therefore, the advantage of propagating images of itself and of the Other in order to solidify and justify this power imbalance. The false sense of democratization that Bourekas comedies, perhaps all comedies, evoke is instrumental in maintaining the power disparity and in providing a safety valve by "letting the steam out." This aspect of Bourekas Cinema is reminiscent of the poststructuralist conceptualization regarding the dissonance between the text's "message" and how the message is played out, the disassociation between its "constative" and "performative" dimensions.[82] Arguably, it is precisely this seemingly innocuous, carnivalesque façade that equips the Bourekas film with its pernicious discursive power.

Whereas in the Bourekas cinema the Mizrahi societal predicament is present—the films' narratives depict poverty, crime, and poorly educated characters—but the genre offers escapist solutions, Personal Cinema, from the outset, escapes into the lives of individual Ashkenazi (anti)heroes to ponder their private distress, and thus the genre

[82] See for example de Man's (1979) *Allegories of Reading*. In the context of the distinction between the constative and performative he contends, "[I]t seems that as soon as a text knows what it states, it can only act deceptively" (270).

elides the broader contextual socioeconomic setting. Yet the political and social reality in Israel of the 1960s and 1970s lurks in these films as they attribute the alienation the characters experience to the characters, disillusionment about Israeli society.

On balance, the elision of Mizrahi in Personal Cinema does not entail a disregard for the ethnic problem. Conversely, the sensitive and withdrawn individuals of Personal Cinema abhor what they deem the vulgarization (e.g., the conspicuous Mizrahi presence) of Israeli society, and, often out of their own volition, they become social misfits. Indeed, the need of the characters and, by implication, the filmmakers to distinguish themselves from the "masses" may be seen as a reaction to what was perceived as an increased visibility and clout of the Mizrahi community.[83] As indicated earlier, in 1970 Mizrahim for the first time outnumbered their Ashkenazi fellows and, following the 1967 War, the Mizrahim enjoyed a limited, yet new social mobility, which was due to the post-war economic boom and the employment of Palestinian laborers in menial jobs Mizrahim had previously occupied. The possibility of co-opting the Mizrahi community into "first Israel" was alarming to many who possessed the cultural and economic capital.[84] Furthermore, the 1977 election of a first ever right-wing party to lead the country has been attributed to a shift in the Mizrahi vote. Israeli filmmakers, who have traditionally been supporters of leftist parties, like their fellow writers and intellectuals, despaired this development and expressed anxiety and a sense of displacement regarding the

[83] I am cognizant of the problem involved in conferring onto the filmmakers the beliefs and positions their characters have. However, filmmakers of that period alluded to this affinity between them and the personas in their films. See Shohat (1989:215-216, 224-227).
[84] The term "first Israel" refers to the upper-middle class, which enjoys high financial and cultural status, while "second Israel" is often a reference to the Mizrahi community in general.

"levantization" of Israel (Shohat, 1989). It is in this context that the highbrow/lowbrow and Ashkenazi/Mizrahi categories are conflated with yet another binary paradigm of West versus East. Personal Cinema's abovementioned reliance on the prestigious European cinema attests to its Western orientation. Likewise, a common practice among Personal Cinema filmmakers was to include within their films specific references and homage to European filmmakers. These films' referentiality is, at least occasionally, to other fictitious texts rather than to the surrounding Israeli reality and, therefore, they are twice removed from the lives known to and lived by most Israeli audiences.

Some of the prominent directors of Personal Cinema, including Judd Ne'eman and Yiga'al Burstein, took part in the emergence of the new trend of the 1980s—Political Cinema/Palestinian Wave. The aftermath of the 1982 Lebanon War, mainly the massacre in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in which Israel was complicit and the Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) of 1987, defined the broad Arab-Israeli conflict, in more specific terms—a struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. The filmmakers of the 1980s responded then to this reality and the heightening of hostility between the two peoples by making films that were critical of the right-wing Israeli government's handling of the political situation. Burstein reminisced in 1981[85] on the genre he had previously engaged in—Personal Cinema—stating that then, "It was a political act to be apolitical," but now, with the emergence of Political Cinema, these new films, while lamenting the current situation, promoted and hoped for a peaceful co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis.

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[85] "We Were Together," in *Kolnowa*.

Arguably, this political consciousness attests also to a growing social sensitivity, mainly in regards to the Mizrahi. Indeed, in films such as *Beyond the Walls* (*me'Ahore ha'Soragim*, 1984), *Night Movie* (*Seret Laila*, 1986), *The Smile of the Lamb* (*Hi'yukh ha'Gdi*, 1985), and *Cup Final* (*Gmar Gavi'ya* 1991), it is the Mizrahi character who establishes the bond with the Palestinian, be it a political prisoner ("terrorist"), an illegal juvenile worker, an old hermit who lives in a cave, or a PLO fighter. However, this seemingly enlightened leftist-humanistic stand is just as problematic in its treatment of the Mizrahi. Shohat (1989) has already pointed to these films' failure to fully contextualize the relations between the Palestinian and the Mizrahi in what, in her view, amounts to a "structuring absence": "this discourse compartmentalizes one problem as 'political' and 'foreign' and the other as 'social' and 'internal'; that the two issues are implicated on each other is rarely acknowledged" (267). I will further this argument by suggesting that in the abovementioned films the overture the Mizrahi enacts in his relations with the Palestinian is not based on the Mizrahi heightened political consciousness; rather, these films assume a semblance between the two people which is predicated on shared customs and values alone. The emphasis, then, on performance, emotions, and the traditions of the Mizrahim and not on their mental capabilities and moral and political convictions, reverberates back from the Bourekas era.

Through the late 1980s, Israeli theory and criticism in the field of cinema engaged mostly in issues pertaining to film aesthetics. Israeli publications such as *Kolnowa* and *Close-Up* featured mostly the idols of European and American art cinema. Indeed, some

of the filmmakers then were also film critics and film professors, creating an impervious system that left little room for competing critical and theoretical trends. Shohat's (1989) seminal work *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* marks a watershed in the academic discourse about Israeli films; guided by postcolonial thought, she set out to investigate the relations between ideology and representation. In her book, Shohat posits a daring thesis no other author had previously proposed, namely, that a parallel can be drawn between the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi and Jewish-Arab divisions, where the latter in each pair is stereotyped, victimized, and marginalized both in cinematic discourses and without. The book was considered rather radical in Israel and stirred controversy even among intellectuals who identify with the political Left.[86] The shift in Israeli film criticism from a focus on aesthetics (mostly in the context of creativity and authorship) to an articulation of how aesthetics relates to ideology, discourse, and power is Shohat's legacy to future scholarship in this field.

In 1998, Nurith Gertz, Orly Lubin, and Judd Ne'eman published the anthology *Fictive Looks on Israeli Cinema*. In their introduction, the editors convey their statement of purpose:

> With the exception of a small number of books and articles that have been published in the last few years, the theoretical writing about cinema takes place mostly in the press, and often, without any dialogue with the broader aspects of culture. This anthology manifests the desire to develop and expand the theoretical and conceptual work on Israeli cinema by employing a critical

[86] For more on the responses to her book, see "There Was no Space for this Discourse" (Shohat, 2001c). The media's response in Israel—belittling Shohat and her work—is captured well also in the film *Forget Baghdad* (2002), which was made by the Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker Samir.

> scholarship connected to both cultural studies in general and film theories in particular, and relating them to the study of Israel's history and culture. (7)[87]

One of the noteworthy developments evident in this anthology is that a significant number of the book's nearly 30 articles address specific identity groups or themes which, hitherto, were rarely addressed in Israeli film theory. The critical study of the cinematic treatment of minority groups—women, Palestinians, gays/lesbians, Orthodox Jews, and Holocaust survivors—resonates with the trends in British cultural studies I have discussed earlier. But in the context of Israeli scholarship it has an added significance—it steers away from sweeping generalization about Israeli society to investigate how different identity groups have been affected and responded to the oppressive Zionist master narrative. Clearly then, these essays challenge the notion of a melting pot unison and, instead, they identify power imbalances and struggle, displacement, and rupture in the Israeli social and cultural arenas.

Theory and Criticism, which in 2001 dedicated its 18th issue to Israeli cinema, and Loshitzky's (2001) *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* follow this critical trend. They conceptualize their positions by addressing issues of liminality, hybridity, and syncretism to examine the unique space those identity groups occupy and the modalities of their cinematic identities. Also, Nurith Gertz's *Motion Fiction: Israeli Fiction in Film* (1993), Nitzan Ben-Shaul's *Mythical Expressions of Siege in Israeli Films* (1997), and Moshe

[87] Unless otherwise indicated, in this work the translation from the Hebrew is mine.

Zimerman's *Hole in the Camera: Gazes of Israeli Cinema* (2003) critically explore the representation of gender, ethnic, or national issues in Israeli films.

The following is a cursory review of recent articles that directly pertain to this study of the Mizrahi in Israeli cinema. Orly Lubin's article "Body and Territory: Women in Israeli Cinema" (1999a) is of special relevance to my analysis in Chapter 4 of the space occupied by the Mizrahi, and her thesis that "the margins are where ethnicity can find a home, can create a home" (175) will be further explored in this work. Also, her implication that the designated empty cultural space (margins) can also be empowering coincides with my articulations in Chapter 5 about the dialectics of power and absence. Likewise, Lubin's (1999b) essay on the film *Sh'hur* (1994) addresses the construction of female Mizrahi identity that defies the center/periphery model. Her arguments will be assessed in my analysis of representation (Chapter 2) and intersectionality (Chapter 6). A comparative review (Yonah, 2001) of two recent Israeli films—*Kippur* (2000) and *Dream Square* (aka *Desperado Square*, 2000)—engages in the cinematic reconstruction of collective subgroups (post-Zionists in the former and Mizrahim in the latter) and sets out to inquire how these collectives are implicated by the sociopolitical challenge they launch. Sigal Eshed's *City of Refuge* (*Ir Miklat*, 2002) casts the question "where *are* the Mizrahim?"; it is a study not of geographical truths but of psychic doubts about belonging and alienation. Indeed, this article, which addresses some of the films I would discuss in detail in this work, attempts to delineate the cinematic "exile from exile." In *Orientalism as Alterity in Israeli Cinema* (2001), Dorit Naaman challenges Shohat's (1989) argument regarding the diffusion of coherent critique in the Bourekas films due to

its carnivalesque features; Naaman maintains that a subversive reading of the text in the Bourekas genre "offers the marginalized … a view of the other from within the other's shoes," and, accordingly, that "the Mizrahim see themselves from outside the position designated for them by the Ashkenazi establishment" (44). Again, this thesis coincides with my contentions about the dialectic of power (Chapter 5) and the inquiry there of how margins may affect empowerment.

Conclusion: Goals and Contribution

This chapter has addressed various global and local Israeli postcolonial articulations on ethnicity and explored scholarship in film studies germane to this work. At the end of the first section—"Theoretical Framework"—I stated the position this study will take regarding identity, subjectivity, and change. Similarly, I seek to conclude this section on Israeli scholarship by pointing to what I consider my intervention. Following then the discussion I had in this section about Israeli filmic literature, I now wish to recap my theoretical precepts and underscore the features of this study that, at least to an extent, distinguish it from other scholarly works on Israeli cinema.

Methodologically, this study incorporates ethnographic work with textual and contextual analysis. As I have discussed in the introduction, I deem the inclusion of extensive interviews with members of the film community a staple of this work. Additionally, the corpus of my study includes fiction and non-fiction films. Lastly,

considering that this study engages a particular and relatively narrow period of time, the remaining chapters focus on synchronic paradigms rather than diachronic permutations.

Theoretically, in contrast to the common trend in Israeli film reviews and critical Israeli scholarship, this study will only selectively employ the film realist approach advanced by Kracauer. We need not resort to semiotic and deconstructionist theories to challenge this oversimplification of the relations between reality and its representation. It is sufficient to mention that Israeli filmmakers have traditionally been affiliated with the (radical) political left, and thereby, Israeli films serve as much as a mirror reflecting the positions of their filmmakers as an undistorted view of Israeli society at large. Relatedly, this study renders problematic a critique that relies on a unitary interpretation of a text and which, thereby, disregards the contingency of meaning based on context, time, and gender. While fully cognizant of the "preferred reading" truism, I would also attend to the hermeneutic differences, gaps, and tensions between the analyses filmmakers offer of their films, the analyses provided by film critics, and, at times, my own reading. My intention is not to relativize the various interpretations by suggesting that they all have equal weight and are equally cogent, but to attest to competing discourses in our understanding of Mizrahi cinema. Again, I would argue that the discursive tensions within and about a film are more than available hermeneutic devices to decipher what the text tells us; broadly speaking, they are what the film says.

Finally, this study eschews analyses based on Manichean "top-down" conceptualizations. Although my work fully recognizes the unprivileged position of the Mizrahi, both within Israeli cinema and without, it strives to challenge one-dimensional

articulations of power; as we have already seen, such a critique is untenable when one considers the specifics of struggle over power in Israel's sociopolitical life and the multiplicity of "alterities." In relation to the previous point, I deem a scholarly focus on victimization as intellectually wanting and politically dangerous. Therefore, whereas the "culture of complaint" alone hinders the impetus to bring about political and social changes, it is one of this work's main goals to re-engage victimhood, consciousness, and agency as interrelated facets in the filmic discourse about the Mizrahi in Israeli cinema.

Chapter 2

The Problematics of Representation

I am going from one film to another and I can't run away from the incessant repetition of the Mizrahi stereotype; no role model, no simple heroes who can tell my children that the sky is the only limit…. I watch movies, and again I see the wretched and superficial imitation of all those I care about…. The Ashkenazi hegemony is a beast kicking us and using us in order to define, perpetuate, and clone itself, and is even awarded for that by sweeping the Israeli Oscars. I am taking time-off from Israeli films. The psychical blows against the Mizrahim are much harsher than the physical blows.[88]

Iris Mizrahi (Israeli essayist and social activist)

For me, Mizrahiyut is neither a theme nor style, it is not a dramatic or a narrational choice, it is simply there as part of the [film's] human landscape, my organic environment. I find no reason to flaunt the fact I have hands and legs and that I breathe air…. Someone once critiqued [my film] Passover Fever *claiming that one of the film's problems is that 'it doesn't provide an account of its ethnic elements.'*[89] *I'm terribly sorry I was unsuccessful in satisfying this critic's need for my ethnic statements. I realize that in his view, if I'm a Mizrahi Israeli, I must furnish him with these accounts to cater, time and again, to his outsider's, perhaps even condescending look. I realize he expects me to provide him with the trite representational clichés he*

[88] Mizrahi, 10/22/2004.

[89] *Passover Fever* will be discussed at length in Chapter 4. The filmic context for this debate is that although the film features a Mizrahi family it leaves out most ethnic markers and elides ethnic dilemmas.

knows so well so that he could click his tongue snugly and feel very 'human' and 'socially conscious.' The only problem is, I'm not willing to fill the role somebody else designates to me without asking me first.[90]

Shemi Zarhin (Israeli filmmaker)

In Chapter 1, I outlined in broad strokes some of the central issues that pertain to representation, namely, stereotyping, the construction of "otherness," and the problematics of "speaking for," and I pointed to their imbrication with ideological positions and power relations which encode the filmic text. In this chapter, rather than simply applying my findings to the analysis of particular films, I intend to articulate the primary parameters and queries pertaining to Mizrahi representation in contemporary Israeli films and in the discourse about them. Even if the accrual effect of this discussion does not provide definite answers to the question broached, it nonetheless delineates the context and the direction we should pursue in articulating the problematics of representation. Indeed, all subsequent chapters will revisit issues of representations and their relations to identity, power, and subversion. The first section of this chapter tends to a set of "meta-critical" quandaries germane to writing about ethnicities in Israel. From the dilemmas of critiquing, the chapter proceeds to the "burden of representation," which expounds the hurdles filmmakers encounter in their portrayal (or elision) of the Mizrahi and which, in turn, shapes the filmic text and discourse.

[90] Zarhin (2004).

The Parameters of Critiquing Mizrahi Representation in Israeli Films

The mundane question that arises in writing about the Mizrahi in Israeli cinema—how to identify characters' ethnicity—is more than a practical one; as we shall see, the possible answers given are often permeated by one's ideological stand on the issue at hand. In numerous films, most noticeably in the popular Bourekas comedies of the 1960s and 1970s, the genre paradigm itself is constituted on the Ashkenazi/Mizrahi ethnic dyad, and, thereby, these films easily betray the characters' ethnic identities. Even with the absence of a direct mention, in most Bourekas films, an affluent, arrogant, and intellectual character signifies Ashkenazi, while the poor, illiterate, hot-tempered character is recognized as Mizrahi. However, the difficult task of identifying a Mizrahi character emerges when neither the genre nor the film narrative offers us this knowledge.

In light of genealogical considerations concerning Jewish history and life in the Diaspora in the past 2,000 years and the phenomenon of intermarriages between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, it might be a difficult task to identify characters as Mizrahim when one applies criteria based on appearances, physiognomy, and accent. For example, many North African, Kurdish, and Balkan Mizrahi Jews have fair complexions while some Eastern European Jews may have a darker skin tone. Likewise, with the exception of the elder Mizrahim, most Israeli Jews, regardless of origin, do not use the emphatic guttural consonants, which in the past used to mark one of the distinctions between the Mizrahi and the Ashkenazi pronunciations. People's last names used to be a viable indication of their origins. However, again, due to intermarriages (and, mainly, considering that women often take their husbands' last names) and a common practice

among many Mizrahi (and Ashkenazi) new immigrants to Hebraize their last names, people's names are hardly a measure we can use to identify Mizrahi characters on the screen.

This problem is compounded when consideration is given to casting. How should we treat an actor of one ethnic group (Ashkenazi) in the role of a character belonging to a different group (Mizrahi)? As I suggested earlier, beyond the problem that these casting choices defy neat categorizations of the characters' ethnic identities, they also reveal the problematics of writing about ethnicity. A case in point is when, failing to read the ethnic identity from the film diegesis, we may rely on the actor's origins for our discussion of ethnic representation. By resorting to this option we fall into the trap to which Shohat (1995) points in her discussion of racial/ethnic representations. Her critique of casting choices that are based on "blood definition"[91] may just as well apply to a critique which engages in the same practice. We may therefore suggest that referring to a character as Mizrahi when this identification is based solely on the actor's origin (again, due to the absence of any diegetic allusions or explicit markers regarding the actor's ethnic identity) smacks of racism, or, at least, betrays a problematic essentialist stand.

On the other end of the dilemmas associated with critiquing Mizrahi cinema are films that flaunt the Mizrahi issue by making ethnic belonging explicit and, specifically, by playfully redeploying stereotypes. Expectedly, the Bourekas provides a well of stereotypical representations these films employ. In films like *Lovesick on Nana Street*,

[91] Shohat addresses an issue tangential to my discussion here, namely, the casting choices when the actor (rather than the persona) is of mixed racial origins. "Given the 'blood' definition of 'black' versus 'white' in Euro-American racist discourse, one drop of black blood was sufficient to disqualify an actress like Horne (a mulatta, y.s.) from representing white women" (1995:171).

which I will discuss in Chapter 4, and *James' Journey to Jerusalem*, the referencing of the Bourekas offers a hermeneutic framework.[92] And yet, it is precisely the films' play that defies a monosemic reading: Are we to censure the filmmakers for re-inscribing ethnic stereotypes or, alternatively, should we commend them for the liberty they take in revisiting trite stereotypes and charging them with new, even subversive, values?

James' Journey to Jerusalem
(*Mas'ot James be'Eretz ha'Kodesh*, Ra'anan Alexandrowicz, 2003)

In *James' Journey*, Israeli society and, more specifically, the film's Mizrahi characters are revealed through the eyes of the "ultimate other," James, a devout young Christian whose African community sends him on a pilgrimage mission to the Holy Land. Upon his arrival at the airport, he is mistaken for being an illegal laborer seeking employment in Israel and is hauled off to jail. In a shady deal between the jailer and Shimi, a Mizrahi businessman (played by the Palestinian actor Salim Daw) who hires out illegal foreign workers, James is bailed out. But James is now at the mercy of Shimi, who keeps his passport away and, therefore, James has no choice but to join the herd of other laborers exploited by Shimi. One day James is sent to work at the house of Shimi's father—Sallah—and the two form such a close friendship that, to Shimi's chagrin, he finds it difficult to separate the two men and assign James back to other jobs. Sallah teaches James all the ins and outs of the Israeli version of "how to beat the system." James, now more sober and pragmatic, successfully applies the lessons Sallah has taught

[92] Both Gabizon (interview, 6/9/2005 and a phone interview, 7/3/2004) and Alexandrowicz (interview, 6/8/2005) underscored in our conversations the centrality of the dialogue their films have with the Bourekas.

him and turns out to be a successful, manipulative, illegal subcontractor who hires out his fellow immigrants.

James' Journey is replete with citational references to the Bourekas' formative film and its exemplar—*Sallah*. Like the titular character of the latter, Sallah of *James' Journey* is a scheming, dishonest, dependent, and lazy Mizrahi. For both Sallahs, their love of backgammon has its financial incentives and rewards; they beat their fellow players (often neighbors and friends) and bankrupt them. (Interestingly, whereas the "old" Sallah relies simply on his good luck to win the game, our contemporary Sallah has to rely on James' [black?] magic throw to bring him, time and again, the best possible dice combination.)

However, it is blatantly obvious that the film is not meant to comply with the generic codes of the Bourekas but, in a jiu-jitsu-like fashion, to use the genre against itself. The film can then be read as an ironic and critical fable on Zionism from the standpoint of a contemporary Sallah. As filmmaker Alexandrowicz put it,[93] his Sallah becomes the lone figure who can point to Israel's social maladies and the film, thereby, critically revisits these (and other) ailments—substandard work ethics, the exploitation of laborers, and widespread racism. If Zionist ideology elevates work to the sphere of the sublime ("the religion of labor") and spurns hired labor, then in *James' Journey* the only labor presented is one that engages Israelis' exploitation of needy and desperate illegal laborers. Whereas one of Zionism's most prominent missions was the blossoming of the desert (allusions to which are found in *Sallah*), Sallah makes his own small

[93] Interview, 6/8/2005.

desert/deserted yard bloom, but only by coercing James to steal flowers from a neighboring garden and plant them in his. Finally, if in *Sallah* the *shikkun* is the desired way of living for the *ma'abara* residents and for people in the extra-filmic reality of that time, our contemporary Sallah lives in what resembles a *ma'abara* dwelling and refuses to move to a high-rise apartment complex (a modern-day *shikkun*). His love of his lot—a small house "close to earth" surrounded by these high-rise buildings—is constructed in *James' Journey* as a challenge to Israel's tasteless craze for urban life. Sallah's insistence on staying is all the more significant considering the handsome compensation he would receive if he agreed to leave.

Alexandrowicz conceives of this filmic play with the Bourekas ethnic characterizations as an artistic liberty that the passing of time affords him.[94] In this filmic fable, according the Alexandrowicz, he is not interested in the issue of empowered versus subaltern groups; instead, his film is a mockery of Zionism as a whole. Similarly, in his reference to casting choices, he admits that filmmakers are now privileged for not having to be terribly concerned with "ethnic matching" (e.g., Daw as a Palestinian in a Mizrahi role).[95] Returning then to our main inquiry in this section, we may wonder how a critique should approach that filmic "freedom" where what initially and primarily seems to be a commentary on ethnicity becomes secondary to a performative play, as is the case in films such as *James' Journey*, *Lovesick on Nana Street*, and *Bayit*. Put differently, does

[94] Ibid.
[95] Unlike other films I will discuss in this work, mainly in Chapter 6, where the filmmakers intended to proffer a political statement by "mis-casting" a Palestinian actor in a Mizrahi role, Alexandrowicz indicated in our interview that he chose Daw because he was simply the right actor for the role of Sallah.

the playful (re)enactment of stereotypical representations attest to acquiescence or subversion?

In the previous chapter, I employed Shohat and Stam's (1994) assertion that a film can be sympathetic to the colonized yet perpetuate power imbalances. Returning to the this chapter's first epigraph, we may similarly pose the following question: Even granting that not all sympathetic and even positive representations of the subaltern Mizrahi are called for, can we also argue that not all unsympathetic representations/stereotypes of the Mizrahi should be avoided? Put differently, should critics unequivocally eschew any negative representation of the Mizrahi, as it seems Iris Mizrahi (2004) does in her analysis of recent Israeli films? Mizrahi's essay, from which the epigraph was extracted, critiques the stereotypical oversexed Mizrahi male in Joseph Cedar's *Campfire* (*Medurat ha'Shevet*, 2004), the criminal Mizrahim in Gidi Dar's *Ushpizin* (*ha'Ushpizin*, 2004), and the folkloristic portrayal of Mizrahi communities in Avi Nesher's *Turn Left at the End of the World* (*Sof ha'Olam Smolah*, 2004). I will elaborate on Nesher's film in the coming chapters, but a brief discussion of the two other films mentioned here will engage the dilemmas involved in writing about negative representations.

The main character in *Ushpizin* is a "born-again" figure; after spending years in prison, Moshe is now making an Orthodox Jewish home for himself and his wife but can barely provide for this childless family. The righteous path he is now seeking is put to a test when two fugitives, one of them a long-time friend of Moshe, pay a surprise visit to him. How are we to treat the film's employment of these three (apparently) Mizrahi

criminals, considering that in reality the large majority of the Jewish prison population indeed consists of Mizrahim? Does *Ushpizin* malevolently perpetuate stereotypes as Iris Mizrahi implies, or does it simply mirror the extra-filmic world? (Can it not do both—provide an accurate representation but, concurrently, reinscribe stereotypes problematically?) Similarly, it is plausible that a film presenting a social malady (in our case, Mizrahi criminals, but for that matter any act of violence) is meant as a critique and defiance of, not an acquiescence to those wrongs. We may be reminded of my previous claim that it is not the depiction of the Mizrahi as criminal or poor that in itself is most problematic; rather, it is the lack of contextualization of these conditions, e.g., references to the scarce career opportunities and limited social mobility available to the Mizrahim. But then, how much contextualization, background, or information should a critic expect from a fictional artistic endeavor such as a single film?

I employ Iris Mizrahi's critique of Cedar's *Campfire* to explore yet another aspect of the difficulties one confronts in assessing ethnic representations. The film is set on the eve of Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1981. It features forty-two-year-old widow Rahel—a political and religious conservative—and her two daughters Esti and Tami. This Ashkenazi family lives in Jerusalem, but, motivated by ideological and personal considerations, Rahel decides they should move to a new Jewish settlement in the West Bank. However, Esti's blatant disapproval of the possible move and Rahel's own falling in love with a caring and sensitive single man prove to have more clout, and she eventually declines the invitation of the new settlers to join them. Most conspicuous in this otherwise slowly paced film inhabited by mostly sympathetic characters is a

disturbing scene in which the fifteen-year-old daughter Tami is sexually assaulted by a young man while his friends stand by. In a subsequent scene, a fellow in her religious youth movement intimates to Tami that rumors have it she "put out" with a young man (her attacker). Sensing that he has some leverage now, this fellow starts molesting Tami before she shakes him off contemptuously.

For the sake of the discussion here I will accept Iris Mizrahi's (2004) highly doubtful premise that the attacker is a Mizrahi.[96] According to her own admission, the film attempts to attenuate its racist stance by also including negative Ashkenazi characters and a redeeming Mizrahi fellow who enchants Rahel. Along these lines, we may claim that the film counterposes a Mizrahi assaulter/rapist with an undoubtedly Ashkenazi molester, and that, therefore, we should qualify our reproach. (Similarly, should we, as critics, be "forgiving" of Assi Dayan's scathing and demeaning portrayal of Mizrahi characters in *Life According to Agfa* [*ha'Hayim al-pi Agfa*, 1992] and *An Electric Blanket* [*Smikha Hashmalit*, 1994], considering that the films undertake a nihilistic and absurdist position toward various other groups and institutions and that the filmmaker does not hesitate to slay some of Israel's "sacred cows" in his works?) If, indeed, we find these heterogeneous characterizations along both sides of the ethnic division, does *Campfire* not exhibit what we often wish all films would pursue, namely, the normalizing of the Other? Are "the mark of the plural" and the violation of "the dignity of the specific" where differences are elided not the targets of postcolonial critique? We may well contend then that *Campfire* should be applauded for revealing a

[96] Neither the accent and look of the attacker nor the actor's last name (Zehavi) suggests that he is a Mizrahi.

wide range of characters belonging to the unprivileged group—loving and cold-hearted, hard-working people and idlers, old and young.

The purpose of my analysis of Mizrahi's (2004) critique of *Campfire* is didactic rather than interpretive. In our commitment to social causes and justice and our zeal to identify cultural artifacts that hinder a desired change, do we not, at least at times, impose on the text that which it is not? This is not meant to challenge the merits of polysemic readings; I wish, instead, to shift our focus from the film to the interpreter. If, indeed, as Berg (2002:30) maintains, "stereotypes reveal nothing about the stereotyped and everything about the stereotyper"[97] (e.g., the representer's fears, dilemmas, and desires), then should we not venture that the critique of stereotypes in cinema tells us at least as much about the critic as about the film critiqued?

A final quandary I wish to raise here in the context of analyzing the representation of the Mizrahi in contemporary cinema pertains to considerations about the maker of the film. As indicated in Chapter 1, this work steers away from conceptualizations of the New Criticism ilk which maintain that the text alone is sufficient for its proper interpretation. And yet, should our reading of a film on Mizrahim be contingent on the filmmaker's ethnic origin and his/her extra-textual position (e.g., as expressed in interviews, social activism, etc.) vis-à-vis the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi issue? If this suggestion might seem somewhat far-fetched, then my research proves otherwise; time and again, I noticed that my interviewees—mostly filmmakers and critics—indeed resorted to ethnic origins in their articulations about Mizrahi cinema. At times this was

[97] Berg's analysis here of the motivations for stereotypical representation is guided by Robin Wood's and Sander Gilman's conceptualizations of cultural and psychic otherization.

puzzling; some of the films highly praised by my interviewees (e.g., *Desperado Square*, which I will later analyze) appear to reinforce negative representations of Mizrahim. When I broached this dilemma with some who have trumpeted the film, it became clear from their responses that, at least to an extent, their assessment would have been different, indeed critical, had the filmmaker been a non-Mizrahi who was indifferent to the "Mizrahi agenda."[98] Again, we may contend that there is an embedded value in the sheer practice where members of the subaltern group engage in self-representation, rather than being represented by the hegemonic group. However, there is more at hand than the issue already discussed in the previous chapter, namely, of whether one should be more forgiving of stereotypical representations when they come from members of one's own ethnic/racial group. The main dilemma we, as critics, face in this context is what to make of "problematic" representations of the Mizrahi group when rendered by highly socially conscious Mizrahi filmmakers. Are we to read them merely as critiques of the system rather than critiques of the people—Mizrahim—inhabiting the film? Put differently, how much of our intertextual and contextual knowledge should we incorporate into our critique and allow to influence what we claim the text says?

So far the questions raised here regarding the representation of the ethnic issue in Israeli cinema have involved the "how" of critical writing. To conclude this section I want to pose an even more basic query—should we write about Mizrahi ethnicity, and if so, when? What do we make of films where ethnicity is only tangentially present and is

[98] For example, the relevance of the filmmaker's origin and his/her sociopolitical agenda to the interpretation of the film became blatantly clear in a conversation I conducted with Sami Shalom Chetrit (3/9/2005) about his unequivocal enthusiastic review of *Desperado Square* in "Beni Torati's Mizrahi Neo-Realism" (2001).

subsumed within other social dilemmas on which the films focus, including class (*White Gold/Black Labor*), center versus periphery (in Eitan Green's films), and gaps between old-timers and new immigrants (according to Nesher's interpretation of his *Turn Left at the End of the World*)?[99] Similarly, should *Ushpizin*, a film dwelling on one social phenomenon—the lives of the Orthodox community—be expected to also attend to other social dilemmas such as gender, class, and ethnicity? Is it not imprudently binding, even intellectually wanting, to expect critics to unearth or broach the ethnic issue even when filmmakers, fully cognizant of their choices, prefer to leave it aside? Conversely, when should we not acquiesce to a haphazard treatment of the Ashkenazi/Mizrahi division and, instead, point to the film's "structuring absence" of ethnicity? Should it not be a critic's concern that the freedom Alexandrowicz and other filmmakers attest to in overlooking the problematics of the ethnic issue is a privilege that Mizrahi filmmakers from the periphery, as well as Mizrahi viewers, are not likely to enjoy, making it an issue worth discussing?

Ultimately, the question is whether we can draw clear boundaries between a film that suppresses the problematic issue of ethnicity, in which case the critic is obliged to identify that film's structuring absence, and one whose maker, who may be highly conscious of these dilemmas, is interested in exploring other issues, in which case,

[99] The films mentioned here will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Green (interview, 6/5/2005) indicated to me that, notwithstanding his inclusion of Mizrahi characters and actors in main roles in most of his recent films, "the dialectics I am interested in is not ethnic." Similarly, Nesher (interview, 6/30/2004 and a Q&A session following the screening of his film 3/7/2005, in conjunction with the conference "The Mizrahi in Israeli Literature and Cinema" at the University of Texas at Austin) attested that, for him, the social gaps in Israel stem from citizenry seniority (i.e., old-timers vs. new immigrants) and should not be attributed to ethnicity as such.

critiquing the film on the grounds of its elisions amounts to the critic's imposition on the film. I suggest here that this is precisely the distinction between simply an absence and a structuring absence; as I alluded to in earlier discussions, only the latter suggests omissions, conscious or not, where the text begs for the inclusion and presence of the issue at hand but the discourse forces its suppression.

We have established that representations are not value-free. We may be unable to always assess their actual valuation—bluntly put, whether they are positive or negative—but the least we as critics should strive for is to evaluate a given representation by contextualizing it both within and without the film diegesis and to examine how it is related to struggles over power. Representations are, among other things, means their creators employ (consciously or not) to further their sociopolitical agendas or beliefs and their own social and financial capital. It should not surprise us then that the issue is often so highly debated; different groups and individuals wish to advance different, at times contradictory, causes, and accordingly, one group's benefit from certain representations may be the source of another group's outrage. Finally, we may also attempt to look at a film concurrently from the distanced, outside position of the critic and from a more humble and empathetic position alongside the filmmaker—"a view from within," so to speak.

If this section focused on the "burden of critiquing," the following one attends to the "burden of representation." Clearly, critiquing *is* a form of representation. But the more direct link between the two sections becomes evident if, to re-employ our previous

assertion, we think of the filmmaker not only as a figure immersed in the craft of filming, but, just as importantly, as a conscious person whose mimetic work also prescribes a distance from that which he/she creates—the distance of a critic.

The Burden of Representation

Kobena Mercer (1990a) coined the term "burden of representation" to propose that artists featuring their own subaltern ethnic or racial group are subjected to an array of moral and ideological quandaries from which their counterparts from the hegemonic group are often spared.[100] Mercer points to two different denotations of "representation," both of which entail a burden. Employed as a synonym of "speaking for"—the onus of publicly promoting issues concerning the whole community to which the artist belongs and depicting this community in a complementary fashion—"representation" makes an exacting demand.[101] "Representation," understood as "standing for," involves the burdening expectation that a single representation by a member of the subaltern group has the power to signify for its consumers more than a particular referent or a private case presented in the artwork, and thus, this work accretes allegorical representational dimensions pertaining to the group as a whole. Clearly, this can be stifling to artists who wish their work to stand on its own rather than be judged as representative of the works or the lives of others from their subaltern groups.

[100] In this essay, Mercer employs "The Other Story" exhibition of Afro-Asian artists in Britain as a case study to identify the forces involved in the burden imposed on black artists who represent their own group in their works.
[101] A discussion of "representation" as "speaking for" appears also in Mercer's "Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics" (1990b).

One of the key arguments Mercer (1990a) employs to eschew claims that a single work of art can be representative of the artist's culture or ethnic group is encoded in the questioning of groups' homogeneity. To broach issues of representativeness—how one artist or one work of art exemplifies all others belonging to the same group—heterogeneity and differentiation must collapse. The acknowledgment that even a group of artists who might be of the same ethnicity or race is also non-uniform further complicates simple articulations about "speaking for" and "speaking with" and sheds additional light on our quandary about the burden of representation.

According to Mercer, "If the problem is posed in terms of structure and agency it seems to me that the 'burden of representation' is constructed as an effect of the hierarchy of access to the institutional spaces of cultural production in the visual arts" (1990a:65). Power disparities inscribe the scarcity of self representation within the subaltern group, which, in turn, renders each work of art created by a member of this group (and about it) representative of all other works. Similarly, in their discussion of the burden of representation, Shohat and Stam (1994) propose, "The sensitivity around stereotypes and distortions largely arises … from the powerlessness of historically marginalized groups to control their own representation" (184). Finally, in his assessment of the consequences of the "burden of representation" in exilic/diasporic cinema, Naficy (2001) suggests that the pressure exerted by the community on individual filmmakers stems from the need to offer counter-representations to the negative ones propagated by the hegemonic groups.

Taken with Mercer's (1990a) assertion that the artists of subaltern groups are "burdened with the role of making present what had been rendered absent" (62), these articulations not only re-affirm the imbrication of representation on power relations, but reveal how the burden of representation is implicated both from within the group to which the artist belongs and from without by the empowered group. Put differently, the debilitating force imposed on the dominated group (e.g., the demeaning portrayal and interpellation by the hegemonic group) sets the parameters for the ways members of the subaltern group can represent themselves. Whether artists of the dominated group comply with their representation by the other or attempt to invert it (positive representation to replace negative ones), the representation propagated by the center is their reference point and, thereby, oftentimes it delimits these artists' range of possible representations.

For Mercer (1990a), acknowledging the lack of representativeness regarding the work of art and, thereby, placing it back in the private domain are liberatory and morally mandatory acts: "[O]nce you 'speak from' the specificity of your experience you can recognise the violence entailed in 'speaking for' others" (70). However, we can contend that this position may inadvertently depoliticize the artwork precisely by relegating it to an insular private sphere. We are reminded here of Linda Alcoff's (1991/92) critique of "speaking only for myself" which, she claims, is tantamount to one's disregard for the material and discursive consequences of his/her articulations. Far from dismissing the merits of "speaking for" and advancing an act of speaking exclusively from the specificity of one's experience (perhaps an impossible undertaking according to Bakhtin,

Bhabha, and Alcoff), this section will address how the "burden of representation" is negotiated within the filmic texts and in the public discourse about them.

Importantly, the positionality of Mizrahim (and Mizrahi cinema) in the margins of, but not fully outside the core "Israeliness" casts the burden of representation in unique terms. The Mizrahi filmmakers are doubly bound; as outsiders, they are burdened by the "obligation" to their group as delineated above and, as insiders—members of the "Jewish state"—they share the burden all Israeli artists and writers are subjected to, namely, the compulsion among Israeli literary and film critics to read *all* texts as social or political allegories.[102] As we shall see, filmmakers often use precisely this argument to deflect criticism and to ease the "burden of representation"; they desire their films to be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities and unique stories.

Clearly, those Mizrahi filmmakers who operate mostly from the geographical and socioeconomic center of Israeli society are susceptible to different burdens in their representations of the marginal Mizrahi compared to filmmakers whose life and status are more definitely associated with Israel's periphery. Although I wish to avoid categorical distinctions between filmmakers from the center and those from the periphery,

[102] In his analysis of five recent Israeli films (and their original screenplays) Kobi Niv (1999) offers his critique of the widespread or even exclusive reading of Israeli filmic texts: "An Israeli film—according to the monolithic school of film critics—is always an allegory about Israeli society, societal allegory and nothing else" (16). Similarly, Gover (1994) states in the introduction to his study of Israeli literature, "a 'close' critical reading of Israeli texts is essentially intertextual and interdiscursive, and only secondarily textual" (2). For Gover, the texts themselves, not only the critiques as Niv has it, render meaning that "is always outside of itself … in the sense of being a feature or a moment of a greater manifest center of meaning, not merely in the sense of reflecting an unstated idea" (9).

distinctions that smack of "insiderism," it is clear that those from the center are more vulnerable to accusations of misrepresentations or looking down at their Mizrahi subjects. Earlier, I stated that all representational art is predicated on the epistemic and mimetic distance between the representer and represented; this gap is somewhat widened when artists portray a group to which they do not (or no longer) fully belong. In my interviews, I found that oftentimes, Mizrahi filmmakers who are positioned at the center were rather apologetic about portraying fellow Mizrahim of the periphery and lack the resources they have. In what I deem as these centrally positioned filmmakers' need to deflect accusations of misrepresentation and, accordingly, to unburden themselves, they often employed expressions such as "reaching out to them [destitute Mizrahim in development towns] out of love" or "filmmaking at eye level" in their references to the act of "speaking for."[103] Conversely, in my interviews with Mizrahi filmmakers whose biographies or residence is associated with Israel's periphery, not one of them resorted to that kind of justification about their portrayal of other Mizrahim.[104] Congruently, based on my research and interviews, it is clear that active proponents of the Mizrahi cause (e.g., Chetrit) are markedly less critical of filmmakers who operate from within the periphery than of those who have gained a status that situates them closer to the center.[105]

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[103] Most direct references to "non-condescending" filmmaking were made by Azulai-Hasfari (interview on 6/2/2004), and Savi Gabizon (phone interview on 7/3/2004). Also, Ashkenazi filmmaker Avi Nesher (interview on 6/24/2004) expressed similar sentiments in discussing his *Turn Left at the End of the World*.

[104] For example, interviews with Eli Hamo (6/2/2004), Ronen Amar (6/20/2004), and with Yamin Messika and Yarmi Kadoshi (6/24/2004).

[105] This discussion is related to the argument in Chapter 1 that Woody Allen and Spike Lee are less susceptible to accusations about stereotypical representations of their own minority group and thereby have more leeway than non-minority filmmakers might have in representing these same groups.

I would argue then that, within the community of Mizrahi filmmakers, the "burden of representation" is most onerous for the latter group.

Sh'hur
(A Film by Hannah Azulai-Hasfari, 1994)[106]

The overall critical acclaim *Sh'hur* enjoyed—the film was the winner of six prizes in the Israeli Academy Awards (the Israeli Oscar)—and the expansive discussions in the press over its representation of Azulai-Hasfari's Moroccan community make this film an exemplar in the study of the burden of representation. The extensive employment of autobiographical elements in the film provides an added dimension to the debate; generally, categorizing the film as a personal story has different implications regarding its "mandate" or potential to represent the community than those that emanate from its reading as a fictitious allegory.

The film gets its name from what might be considered a ritual of black magic or sorcery (reminiscent of exorcism) practiced by some North African Jews. The mother of the family portrayed in the film performs *sh'hur* to protect her children from potential risks involved in their encounters with the outside world (such as the evil eye or the daughters' loss of virginity before marriage) and to heal the ones who suffer from marital, sexual, or physical inflictions.

In the opening of the film, set in the present time, Heli (played by Azulai-Hasfari) is in a studio starring in her television show. Her occupation, demeanor with fellow workers, and, later, her luxurious apartment signify power and professional success.

[106] The film is officially considered Azulai-Hasfari's. She wrote the screenplay and her husband, Shmuel Hasfari, directed it.

Heli's live-show is interrupted when she receives a phone call from her elder brother telling her that their ailing father has just passed away. On her way to the funeral, Heli picks up her autistic daughter and her sister Pnina, who has been in a mental institution for twenty years. Heli's anxiety about meeting her sister again after all these years derives from the fear that such an encounter would bring back disturbing memories and spark her repulsion toward her from the period they lived in the same household in the squalid development town. (We later learn that Heli, or the name she went by in her childhood, Rahel, spurred her family to hospitalize Pnina by making up a vindictive story about her.) *Sh'hur* is structured around episodic returns to the heroine's childhood in the 1970s. These scenes reveal Rahel's strained and tumultuous relations with her blind father, superstitious mother, and siblings. That period constitutes the larger part of the film and ends when Rahel goes to a prestigious boarding school away from home.

In her analysis of *Sh'hur*, Loshitzky (2001) expands on the reading of this film as an allegory. "[The film] transcends the boundaries of personal memory and becomes an allegory for a collective search by second-generation Moroccan youth for their lost identity" (88). Loshitzky furthers her argument by quoting Minh-ha to suggest that what ethnic and exilic writers "chose to recount no longer belongs to them as individuals. Writing from a representative space that is always politically marked … they do not so much remember for themselves as they remember in order to tell" (qtd. in Loshitzky, 88).

Most of the film reviews and articles about *Sh'hur* focus on its representation of the ethnic issue with little regard to the film's other themes or qualities. In "The Double Identity of Azulai-Hasfari" (Kadosh, 1995), one of the more elaborate articles about the

film, the discussion revolves around the authenticity of the film and juxtaposes photographs of the real family members with pictures of their filmic personas. Beyond this question of the film's verisimilitude, the majority of the articles address the uncomplimentary filmic depiction of the place and its people, and they often cite in this context Rahel's decrepit neighborhood, the blind and abusive father, and the rampant superstitions the young heroine witnesses. These articles and critiques often attempt to assess the significance and implications of what the writers perceive as Azulai-Hasfari's damning portrayal of the Moroccan community. The high-brow daily *Ha'aretz* ("*Sh'hur*: The Second Generation," 2/3/1995) dedicated a large section of its weekend supplement to exploring exactly this aspect of the film. It featured five Mizrahi professionals (apparently the editors consider Mizrahi professionals to be most suitable to comment on another Mizrahi who chose a professional career—Heli/Azulai-Hasfari) and students in the Mizrahi-oriented school Kedma to express their views on the film's representativeness and its discourse.

Sociologist Sammy Smooha (1995) casts a scathing analysis of this film. He finds it alarming that *Sh'hur*, as well as other cinematic and literary creations of the same ilk, "affirm the beliefs and views rampant among the consumers of these works. The testimony about the Mizrahi cultural backwardness is handed to them on a silver plate by the elite of the Mizrahi community" (62). Interestingly, Smooha employs the film in the broadest allegorical sense—his focus is not on the representational problematics of the Moroccan community only, but on that of the Mizrahim at large. Yet, Smooha's main

concern and critique revolve around the discursive and ideological sediments *Sh'hur* leaves behind:

> What kind of message are we left with? We learn that cultural backwardness is a burden the Mizrahim have been carrying with them from their countries of origin but are fortunate to rid themselves of in modern Israel.… In this discourse there are no culprits, there is no injustice or room for protest, no power struggles or (competition) over resources, and the Ashkenazim are no longer part of this story.… The dominant tone in this discourse is that the ethnic problem is over.… People get what they deserve, based on their skills and accomplishments…. (ibid.)

In *The Ashkenazi Revolution is Dead* (1999), Moroccan-born scholar and social radical Chetrit is equally critical of the film, suggesting that *Sh'hur* perpetuates the Ashkenazi legend about their rescue of the Mizrahi:

> [The film] had a good opportunity to be once and for all a Mizrahi internal story, with no need for the Ashkenazi background…. Ostensibly, there are really no Ashkenazim in the film. But they are there. All the time. From the moment we see the blue shirt parade in this small town … it becomes obvious that, never mind what happened to Rahel in her terrible past, in the future she is already a TV personality and drives a new car with a cellular phone. The Ashkenazim have rescued her from backwardness. (81)[107]

[107] The blue shirt parade to which Chetrit refers here is a marker of an Ashkenazi-Zionist youth movement.

Significantly, critics Amnon Lord and Dov Alfon fully concur with the view that the film portrays the Moroccan/Mizrahi community negatively, but they deem it the film's crowning achievement. Lord (1995) proposes that the "message is educational: Help yourself. You can. Even against all odds" (46). These odds, he later proffers, pertain to anyone who grew up in Israel and, therefore, the message is universal. Lord asks us to disburden this film of the narrow sociopolitical charges heaped on it by mostly Mizrahi critics. Similarly, Alfon (in "*Sh'hur*: The Second Generation," 1995), himself a North African immigrant, asserts, "[T]he greatest obstacle for the advancement of the second-generation of North Africans is not one racist Ashkenazi or another. The big obstacle is the fatalistic defeatism of the Mizrahim themselves" (62). Accordingly, he praises the film on the grounds that,

> [I]t desecrates [lit. slaughters] all that is sacred to the Mizrahi parents' generation.… Azulai-Hasfari rips the hypocrisy veil that cloaks the North-Africans' self-image and disparages all the widespread views about the Moroccan family—the human warmth, the convivial hospitality, its sexual Puritanism, the religious tradition, and the communal support, even the food is not great.... (60)

The references both Lord and Alfon are making to those Mizrahi intellectuals who are (or might be) critical of Azulai-Hasfari's depiction of the Moroccan community are most relevant to this discussion about the burden of representation. Lord and Alfon allude to a disciplinary power Azulai-Hasfari's critics cast against those who deviate from their putatively Mizrahi doctrine. Importantly, in the argot these two critics employ,

the "Mizrahi doctrine" is associated with coercion perpetrated by dictatorial regimes. Lord fuses the word "commissariat" (in its reference to the former Soviet Union) with the Hebrew word "saris," which connotes castration[108] and comes up with the coinage "commissarism" to address the debilitating power of the Mizrahi "culture police." Similarly, Alfon expects the Mizrahi "moral squad" to admonish Azulai-Hasfari "for violating the rule of thumb of the Mizrahi artistic work so far: to always blame the Ashkenazim" (60).

Azulai-Hasfari (1995) felt obliged to respond to the abovementioned "*Sh'hur*: The Second Generation" article in *Ha'aretz* because of the failure of Smooha, Alfon, and others to understand what she believes the film states. Heli's story is actually not a story of success, says Azulai-Hasfari:

> Heli—the TV star and second-generation immigrant, the one who according to the participants [in the discussion in *Ha'aretz*] deserves all the compliments for rebelling against her forefathers' yoke, went against them and succeeded—is actually pathetic; she is pitiable in her spiritual and cultural impoverishment, much more than her primitive family is.… (1995:32)

Based on her response in *Ha'aretz* and the interview I conducted with her (2/6/2004), I would argue that Azulai-Hasfari comes up with a two-pronged strategy to deflect criticism aimed at her and, specifically, to unburden herself of the moral and representational duties expected of people who portray their own subaltern group. One direction her argument takes is to wrench the issue out of the ethnic debate and turn it

[108] Literally, "saris" stands for a servant in royal residency or for a eunuch.

into a quandary about Israeli identity at large. In my interview with her she indicated that, for years, her film had been screened on the eve of the Jewish-Moroccan celebration of the *Mimuna*.[109] Outraged, at some point she demanded that the broadcaster either show it as an all-Israeli film (therefore, not on this festival day) or, otherwise, take it off the screen. Similarly, Azulai-Hasfari's (1995) counter-attack against her critics stems from the conviction that the discourse about films like hers should move beyond judgmental and overbearing articulations about representations of ethnic groups, namely, whether a group is portrayed positively or not, and be transposed into the broader domain of debate about the "new Israeli."

> My film is not meant to condemn the Moroccan culture or to criticize it. It is not meant to blame or exonerate the Ashkenazim.… It is hard for you to accept a definition of a new Israeli.… It is hard for Dov Alfon to accept the fact the Heli Ben-Shushan with her Mizrahi past, is not Mizrahi but Israeli.… In contrast to what people think, I don't define myself a Mizrahi. I wish I could. [But] I am an Israeli. The new Israeli, who is oftentimes a second-generation immigrant.... (32)

The explicit and unproblematic connection Azulai-Hasfari makes between herself and her film persona paves the way for the second challenge she poses to her critics. Here, rather than universalizing the story or turning it into an all-Israeli tale, she strives to personalize it in a manner that verges on private confession. In an interview in the daily *Ma'ariv* (Kadosh, 2/3/1995), Azulai-Hasfari reveals that despite her seemingly perfect

[109] The *Mimuna* festival on the last day of Passover was originally celebrated by North African Jews, but over the years many Israelis, mostly Mizrahim, have taken part in the celebrations.

life ("the most splendid husband, wonderful children, career … money") prior to writing the screenplay for *Sh'hur*, she was unhappy and felt that something fundamental was missing in her life. The making of the film became a therapeutic process of sorts; it enabled her to connect with that part of her past and identity that she was forced to eradicate once she moved to a society hostile to her own traditions. In Azulai-Hasfari's own words, "only the making of *Sh'hur* brought [my] two identities closer, welded them" (48).

Indeed, the film itself attests to the same dynamics. Heli somewhat becomes a whole person only when she reconciles with her other "selves," represented by her daughter Ruth and sister Pnina. In the opening scenes of the frame story the autistic daughter Ruth does not respond to or connect with her mother Heli. She draws her mother's face, but leaves out all facial features. Later in the film, Ruth communicates with Pnina, as if to suggest that whereas Heli's two impaired family members can connect and express mutual empathy, Heli herself, who made it her profession to communicate, is unable to do so with her own daughter and sister. (In one scene, the three are in a restaurant where the TV is on. Ruth and Pnina magically change the TV channels by quick eye movements. Befuddled, Heli stays outside of this "psychic game.") But the frame story ends with a measure of reconciliation between Heli and her "others." In the film's last shot, Heli is holding the amulet her sister used to have prior to her hospitalization and in voice-over she relays a conversation she had with Pnina where she offered to give her sister back the amulet that has been in Rahel's/Heli's possession (she actually kept it away from Pnina) all these years. This last shot reveals the daughter

drawing her mother, only this time with a human face. The element of coming to terms with one's self is further accentuated in light of Pnina's repeated bewitching call to her sister "each person has a twin soul among the genies"; whereas Rahel/Heli has rejected abhorrently her sister's allusion to a magical bond between them, the film's conclusion implies that now she subscribes to that prophetic call. As Niv (1999) suggests, the film's finale is symbolic of Heli's coming to terms with her past (represented by the sister) and future (her daughter).

Involving her family in the making of the film is yet another indication that, for Azulai-Hasfari, *Sh'hur* was meant to be read as a personal or familial affair. As Orna Kadosh (1995) tells it, Azulai-Hasfari's siblings were familiar with the story of *Sh'hur* for years before it went into production. One of the brothers tells Kadosh, "Hannah [Azulai-Hasfari] showed us the text and told us we have the right to veto it" (51). The family gathered and after elaborate discussion approved it. In conclusion, whereas I fully concur with Loshitzky that *Sh'hur* lends itself to an allegorical reading about ethnicity, I am just as interested in the tension between this reading and the filmmaker's own intentions. Azulai-Hasfari (1995) explicitly states that "my first intention was to tell about myself—about my own private pain. It just happened that I ended up touching many people's soft spots" (32). In other words, within the context of the "burden of representation," unlike most of those who wrote about the film and saw it as an allegory

and, thereby, appropriated a private story into the public domain, Azulai-Hasfari attempts to re-own her personal story, indeed, to domesticate it.[110]

Finally, in his discussion of the burden of representation, Naficy (2001) maintains that the sensitivity of ethnic communities to films made by the members of their group amounts to a "pressure for each film to contain all of the best that the 'original' or the 'authentic culture' is perceived to possess" (65). Naficy's allusion to the connection between notions about origins and authenticity and the problematics of representation merits further discussion. In the next chapter—"The Cinematic Construction of Mizrahi Identity"—I will elaborate on the search by filmmakers of second-generation Mizrahi immigrants for cultural roots and origins. In the context of our discussion here, I am interested in the dynamics where filmmakers deflect criticism of their portrayal of the community they belong to by suggesting that their films engage in authentic culture, traditions, and practices—an argument that often verges on claims for fixed cultural origins.

It is significant, then, that in a number of contemporary features (and even more so in documentaries) the films create a cinematic space practically devoid of Ashkenazim (or, for that matter, of any other ethnic and national group) in an effort to render a community supposedly unmarred by the intervention of "modern" life or "invasion" from

[110] It should be noted, though, that in an article Azulai-Hasfari wrote in *Iton Yerushalayim* on 9/25/98, over three years after the release of her film and the public debate about it (years in which she furthered her ethnic and social awareness and became an active member of Hakeshet Hademocratit Hamizrahit), she presents a somewhat different view. Her statement that "[I]f we don't tell [their] story and ours, no one will do it for us" (36) is more in accordance with Minh-ha's "they remember in order to tell," quoted earlier, than with Azulai-Hasfari's earlier stance.

the outside. Second-generation Iranian immigrant Beni Torati sets his film *Desperado Square* (*Kikar ha'Halomot*, 2001) exclusively in a Mizrahi community, chronotopically isolated from the adjacent fast-moving city of Tel Aviv. Likewise, Moroccan-born Ze'ev Revah's *A Bit of Luck* (*Tipat Mazal*, 1992) features father-and-daughter Moroccan immigrants who are first sent to the *ma'abara* (transient camp) and then settle in Atlit, a town nearby with a predominantly Mizrahi population. As we have seen, *Sh'hur'*s main story inside the frame narrative, takes place away from "first Israel," a point Azulai-Hasfari underscored in our interview (6/2/2004). But the construction of a distinct space (a concept to which I will return in subsequent chapters) is but one aspect of the Mizrahi filmmakers' attempt to reach into their past and engage a dialogue about authenticity and origins.

At the heart of Azulai-Hasfari's article "I Came Amongst You Emaciated and Hungry" (1995) is the sense of loss of her forefathers' culture "that could have been mine" but is not. Consequently, responding to Orly Levi[111] ("An Impossible Fantasy," in "*Sh'hur*: The Second generation," 1995) who critically maintains that "it is hard to believe that someone will go as far as to claim that this is the reality [the *sh'hur* ritual] in which people lived in the past; let alone in the 20th century" (68), Azulai-Hasfari (1995) maintains,

> Desperately, as a person starving for culture, I clung to my own sources, and tried to understand what I discarded twenty years ago. I tried to understand this culture, represented in an extreme fashion

[111] Orly Levi is a model and the daughter of David Levi—a well-known Moroccan-born former foreign minister and a member of parliament at the present.

> in the *sh'hur* rituals, and look at it anew. Most of the stories in the film are true. And even if it is hard for the beautiful and very young Orly Levi to believe me, I can't unburden her. I can't tell her that I made up these things to help her cloak herself again with a mask. Personally, I would suggest to her to shoot the word 'sh'hur' at her mother and see her reaction. Perhaps it would encourage Orly Levi to learn something about her forefathers' heritage…. (32)

Seemingly then, it is again a contention about the verisimilitude of the images depicted. Interestingly, though, Azulai-Hasfari does not employ here the strategy of "privatizing" this story of the film by asserting that the practice of the sh'hur sorcery is *her* true experience. Instead, she disparages Levi for not knowing that *Sh'hur* is a genuine *Moroccan* tradition.

In conclusion, the burden of representation was formulated here both as an imposition by the "unmarked" hegemony and as a moral obligation prescribed by members of the subaltern group for their artists to provide counter-hegemonic portrayals of the group. We have seen that the debate over the representativeness of images often betrays the various contenders' cathectic desire to identify or unearth "origins" and "authentic culture." But, as we have seen, there is clearly also a redeeming, if not liberatory, aspect to this desire. In a somewhat dialectical manner, these burdens may turn into an empowering force where filmmakers attempt to acquire a better sense of who they are by acknowledging their ethnic belongings and pursuing their cultural heritage. This ambivalence and duality in the filmic treatment of cultural origins will be evident in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

The Cinematic Construction of Mizrahi Identity

> *What is the nature of this profound search which drives the new forms of visual cinematic representation? Is it only a matter of unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed? Or is a quite different practice entailed—not the rediscovery but the* production *of identity. Not the identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the* re-telling *of the past?*[112]
>
> Stuart Hall

Beyond the Essentialist/Constructionist Dyad: Culture and Identity

Articulations of essentialism and constructivism tend to situate them on opposite ends of the identity continuum. Whereas an essentialist stance often focuses on ethnic/biological origins, a constructivist position would promote a definition of identity predicated on consciousness and choice. Correspondingly, the extra-filmic discourse about *Mizrahiyut*, such as in film reviews and scholarly critiques, often oscillates between these two possibilities. A (critical) Mizrahi essentialist stance would underline ethnic origins in its address of the meager and oppressive representation of Mizrahim on the Israeli screen. Often this approach, intentionally or otherwise, revolves around a sense of victimhood (a connection which I will further develop in Chapter 5). At the other end, a constructivist position would provide an inclusive and unfixed definition for

[112] "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990:224).

Mizrahiyut—a state of mind and critical stance open to all Israelis who wish to effect ethno-social change. Alternatively, this chapter focuses on culture as a constitutive element in Mizrahi identity. My conceptualization of "culture" is meant precisely to problematize the abovementioned dichotomous formulations.

Diana Fuss opens the introduction to her book *Essentially Speaking* (1989) with a rhetorical question: "Has essentialism received a bad rap? Few other words in the vocabulary of contemporary critical theory are so persistently maligned, so little interrogated, and so predictably summoned as a term of infallible critique" (xi). Beyond the obvious critique that extreme essentialist positions (e.g., those attesting to fixed or "natural" group identities) deny a space for agency and change, they facilitate the hegemonic group's control of others. Cultural studies scholars and, specifically, postcolonial theorists such as Memmi (1967), Fanon (1967), Sartre (1967),[113] Bhabha (1994d), and Naficy (2001), allude to this problem which is embedded in essentialist stances taken by colonized people.[114] The oppressed group, these theorists claim, is at risk of defining itself by its victimization and, just as importantly, this group complies with its own subjectification (interpellation) by the victimizer/colonizer; by resorting to essentialist models, the colonized people construct their identity vis-à-vis the perpetrator's and, thereby, they further enhance the victimizer's authority.

Guided by Fuss (1989) and Shohat and Stam (1994), I suggested in Chapter 1 a project of de-essentializing (indeed, deconstructing) essentialism. Fuss prefers to employ

[113] In introduction to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967).
[114] See discussion in Chapter 1.

essentialisms[115] to offer that essentialism itself contains difference, a term often used as a deconstructionist critique of essentialist models, and, similarly, one that needs to be contextualized.

> [I]n and of itself, essentialism is neither good nor bad, progressive nor reactionary, beneficial nor dangerous. The question we should be asking is not 'is this text essentialist (and therefore 'bad')?' but rather, 'if this text is essentialist, what motivates its deployment?' How does the sign 'essence' circulate in various contemporary critical debates? Where, how, and why is it invoked? What are its political and textual effects? (1989:xi)

Whereas Spivak (1988) deigns to employ essentialism for the value it might have despite itself—its worthiness for strategic purposes (a topic to which this work attends)—Fuss (1989) is interested in the signification and formation of the essentialist positions. She professes that an inquiry into "essence" as a sign or construct may enhance our understanding of groups' discourse and power relations. Understood as such, essentialism is rendered a necessary condition for any constructionist analysis—"indeed essentialism subtends the very idea of constructionism" (5).

Congruently, I proposed in Chapter 1 that, even if we accept that essentialist identities are "invented," their results are real, or, to employ Kimberle Crenshaw,[116]

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[115] See pg. xii.

[116] In her essay, Crenshaw critiques the dismissal of identity politics and, based on legal cases she studies, she sets out to prove the pernicious effects extreme anti-essentialist positions and practices have on women of color. Specifically, she investigates how violence (battering and rape) against women of color does not receive the attention and care it deserves because differences between these and other women are elided in the legal system and in various local agencies which are supposed to protect them.

> [T]o say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that the category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people—and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful—is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. (1991:1296-97)

Following Crenshaw's harsh critique of what she terms "vulgar constructionism"—an utter rejection of all aspects of essentialism—she prods us to divert our focus from "the existence of [essentialist] categories" to "the particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies" (1297).

Culture, as I choose to conceptualize it, provides us with a further challenge to the dichotomous distinctions between "essentialism" or "biologism," on the one hand, and "constructivism" or "performativity," on the other. My analysis here, and particularly its foregrounding of the Arab-Jew, will reveal the complex forces—ranging from ethnic origins, descent, or nativist relations on the one hand, to performative, constructivist, or contestatory factors, on the other—which are interwoven into the intricate tapestry of cultural identity/identities.[117] Consequently, notwithstanding the importance of artifacts and shared traditions and language(s) in the formation of one's identity, our attention ought to focus also on the performative/constructive nature of identities, the choices people make in self-designating their identity, and the values they attribute to these cultural identities.

[117] The terms "nativist" and "descent" vs. "contestatory" are employed by Naficy (2001:16) in his discussion of the cinematic rendering of hyphenated identities. I will return to his articulations later in this chapter.

I employ this open definition of culture precisely in order to avoid what Aleksandra Ålund (1995) deems the dangerous trend of the "culturalisation of social disparities" (317), or the "representing [of] ethnic relations exclusively in terms of culture …" (315).[118] But instead of appending or subordinating culture to social struggle as Ålund might have it, I heed her cautionary note by broadening what is signified under "culture"; throughout this work "cultural" will be contextualized by analyzing its socioeconomic and political dimensions. This open, unfixed definition fully concurs with Hall's (1990) conceptualization of cultural identities; once we avoid essentialist definitions of culture, we may tend to its fluid and evolving nature while still asserting some continuity, relative stability, and intra-ethnic commonalities. In Hall's words, if cultural identities are understood not as "an essence but a *positioning*," then (cultural) difference "persists in and alongside continuity" (226-227, original emphasis).

Sociological studies of Israeli society are fraught with debates over the relations between ethnicity and culture. Two recent works on the Mizrahi issue are of special relevance to my analysis. Similarly to Hall's abovementioned assertion, Shenhav (2003) eschews notions of *Mizrahiyut* as a stable definition/identity, a position stemming from the belief that Mizrahim, or for that matter, people of any ethnic group, have ingrained qualities they all share. Shenhav equally dismisses the opposed approach for its

[118] In her essay, Ålund uses the construction of "the stranger" in Sweden and in Europe in general to point to the detrimental effects of multiculturalism based on the designation/adoption of cultural roots to differentiate between ethnic groups. "The cultural has acquired an independent role. Cultural explanations in their bare and distorted form have colonized the social by means of culturalism. The social space has been reduced to a site for the production of identities or merely differentiated entities. But it is usually not acknowledged that the social struggle continues through the cultural" (1995:319).

suggestion that *Mizrahiyut* is strictly an imagined social construct, a position that ignores the group's cultural/historical commonalities.[119]

> The essentialist approach imposes on the Mizrahim cultural and a-historical identity and is oblivious to a whole set of intra-group differences, geographical spaces and historical chronologies that defy the unitary category of identity. On the other hand, the constructivist approach blatantly ignores the specific histories of the Arab-Jews and imposes on them total Israelization.… The first ignores the post-colonial reality within Israel; the second ignores the colonial history. (53)

Likewise, Chetrit (2004a) points to the shortcomings of the various theoretical trends within the critical approach in Israeli sociological studies; these models, he claims, are incapable of explaining the rise of the Orthodox-Mizrahi Shas party or the emergence of the "New Mizrahim" precisely because they overlook the cultural dimensions pertaining to group identities.[120]

Considering our broad definition of culture which challenges the identity essentialist/constructivist dyad, we need to attend to a pivotal element in the formation of Mizrahi identity—the shared experiences of and following the immigration of the Oriental Jews to Israel, such as life in the in the *ma'abara*, forced settlement in

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[119] See also "Epistemology of Mizrahiyut in Israel" in *Mizrahim in Israel* (2002).
[120] Chetrit refers here specifically to Swirski's dependence on the Marxist model and Smooha's early pluralistic approach. The former, discussed in Chapter 1, underscores class relations; the other proffers a co-optation model justified by the (putative) "erosion in the inhibitory forces" related to status (1978:41).

development towns, and limited work opportunities.[121] As we have seen, *Mizrahiyut* was formed in Israel, first by the government administration that designated "Edot ha'Mizrah" (again, using "*edot*," a plural form suggesting dispersion) and, later on, as a self-designated identity implying some cohesion and a sense of belonging. It is clear, then, that in the case of the Mizrahim, the identity marker—and, one would argue, by extension the actual emerging identity—defy unequivocal articulations of Mizrahi identity as predicated either on its origins in the Arab/Muslim world or as an invented construct. Indeed, time and again, immigrants from the Middle East have attested that in their countries of origin they were not considered Mizrahim or Sephardim, but simply Jews—a designation meant to distinguish between them and their mostly Arab and Muslim cohabitants of the Middle East.

The Dual Valuation of the Arab-Jewish Identity

This section focuses on Mizrahi films that explore the modalities of the hyphenated "Arab-Jew" identity. In "*An Accented Cinema*" (2001), Naficy addresses the "politics of the hyphen" to assess the problematics associated with the employment of the hyphen to construct ethnic identities. His articulations allude to both the liberating and the constraining qualities of the constructed hyphenated identities.[122] I am employing here the "politics of the hyphen" to articulate what I would term the "dual valuation" of

[121] For related arguments about the formation of Mizrahi collective identity based on post-immigration realities, see Chetrit (*The Mizrahi Struggle*, 2004a) and Shohat (2001b, specifically pg. 68).
[122] See discussion pp. 15-17.

the hyphen as both a connector and separator of identities; often even within one film one can encounter ambivalence about these two vectors of the hyphen. My intent, then, is not to reduce or fix the complex, multilayered, and fluid nature of identity construction into binary opposites (e.g., Arab vs. Jew), but, rather, to identify the tensions and fissures involved in the cinematic attempt to advance the Arab-Jewish hyphened identity.

Two methodological notes are called for to explicate my references to "Arab-Jew" in this chapter. First, the term is rarely employed in contemporary Mizrahi cinema. And yet, my rationale for employing and situating it at the center of my analysis is that, as we shall see, the films' characters and diegetic spaces as well as the discourse about Mizrahi cinema often allude to it. The second clarification pertains to the comment made in the introduction that not all Mizrahim are of Arab origin. My usage of "Arab-Jew" in this chapter, then, is meant not as a reference to an ontological reality but as a metonymic term signifying "Mizrahi" in general.

In accordance with Naficy's (2001) observation that, for example, in the American context, "identity cinema's adoption of the hyphen is seen as a marker of resistance to the homogenizing and the hegemonizing power of the American melting pot" (15), we may maintain that the coinage "Arab-Jew" is meant by its users not only as an identity marker, but as a challenge to the putatively hybrid and unmarked "Israeliness."[123] Even as the term Arab-Jew has been gaining recognition in the last two

[123] In the chapter "Oppositional and Insurgent Israeli Hebrew Literature," Gover (1994) makes a similar claim regarding certain trends in the writings of Mizrahi authors. Considering that "the term *Arab Jew* does not officially exist in Israel," the oppositional Mizrahi writing offers then a challenge to the widespread and dominant discourse where "the term *Ashkenazi* or *Ashkenazim* is synonymous with *Israeli*" (125-126).

decades and is now more often used in radical Mizrahi discourse, on balance, it is still often considered either an oxymoron or a most subversive term that directly eschews the tenets of Ashkenazi Zionism.[124]

In his film *We Are All Arab Jews in Israel* (1977), Igaal Niddam not only unabashedly juxtaposed "Arab" with "Jew," but he also dared to link the predicament of the two ostracized and oppressed groups of Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews.[125] The responses to the film and discourse reflected its incendiary power, the shock effect it had, and the unease with which it was received.[126] Since modern Zionism prescribes a national movement that advocates a homeland in Palestine/Israel for the Jewish people, is not the incorporation of "Arab" into the ethnic-cultural definition of the largest segment of the Israeli population a contradiction in terms? Likewise, if, as many believe, Israel's very existence has been in peril due to the constant threat imposed on it by its Arab enemies from inside and outside, is not the very usage of this coined phrase tantamount to an act of a moral, if not political, treason?[127] The discursive and political motivation for eschewing the term Arab-Jew becomes evident if one considers that other conjoined

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[124] "Ashkenazi Zionism" is employed by some Mizrahi scholars, such as Chetrit, who critique Ashkenazi hegemony, *inter alia*, due to its problematic positioning of the Mizrahi in the Zionist enterprise. Often the suggestion is not that there is a counterpart Mizrahi Zionism, but rather, that Zionism and *Mizrahiyut* are incompatible, a topic to which I will return in the next chapters.

[125] Despite my efforts on my two research trips to Israel, I could not obtain a copy of this film. My references are, therefore, based on secondary sources including Patricia Erens's (Niddam, 1979/80) "We Are All Arab Jews in Israel: An Interview with Igaal Niddam," "We Are All Arab Jews in Israel" (Union of Arab Jews, 1979/80), Stav's (1979) "A Bridge for Understanding with the Arabs," and Gross's (5/18/1979) "Orientation about the Orient."

[126] See the abovementioned citations and my discussion in Chapter 6.

[127] Interestingly, even Tunisian postcolonial Jewish theorist Memmi rejects already in 1974 the hyphenated identity marker "Arab-Jewish" (in Shenhav, 2003:172-173); see also Memmi's "Who Is an Arab Jew?" (1975). For Memmi, this juxtaposition of identities is a naïve and misleading attempt to color positively the lives of Jews in the Arab/Muslim world.

terms, such as American-Jew and European-Jew, have never been challenged. Nearly thirty years after the release of *We Are All Arab Jews in Israel*, a special screening of the film in Tel Aviv in May 2002, meant, among other things, to revisit these questions and to examine the validity and relevance of "Arab-Jewishness."[128]

Either by association and semblance or, paradoxically, by the Zionist call for a historical break-up, Mizrahi (Oriental Jewish) and Arab collectives have been intertwined in official discourse even before the creation of Israel. In *The Arab-Jews: Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (2003), Shenhav identifies several milestones in the history of the Zionist movement where the Mizrahi/Arab semblance has been cynically exploited by its leaders and agents. A case in point is the linkage established by the Israeli government of Ben-Gurion in the early 1950s between the confiscated property of the Palestinians who left or were expelled from the country during the 1948 War of Independence (*Nakba*—catastrophe—in terms used by the Palestinians) and that of the Iraqi-Jews whose property was frozen by the Iraqi government of Nuri Said in 1951, the time of major immigration of these Jewish exiles to Israel. To resist the pressure the U.N. and the Arab world had exerted on Israel to compensate Palestinian refugees for their dispossession—having their land and belongings confiscated in the aftermath of the War—the Israeli government posited a counter-argument that compensation would not take place as long as the Iraqi

[128] The showing of *We Are All Arab Jews in Israel* in spring 2002 was part of an initiative, *Sfat Em* ("Mother Tongue"), consisting of an exhibit, conference, and screenings of Mizrahi films. The purpose of this initiative was precisely to bring to the front stage that which has been repressed and marginalized in Mizrahi cultural identity. For more, see Nizri's (ed., 2004), "Eastern Appearance/Mother Tongue: A Present that Stirs in the Thickets of its Arab Past" which includes, *inter alia*, articles pertaining to the films and the exhibit.

government does not compensate for the Jewish property it had seized. Therefore, as Shenhav suggests, the Israeli government became a trustee of sorts, acting on behalf of both Iraqi-Jews and the Palestinians. The consignment of many Mizrahi Jews to Israel's border zone development towns and villages is, according to Shenhav, another indication of the linked destiny of Mizrahim and Arab refugees. Importantly, by making both groups hostages of the Zionist praxis, their fates became interdependent.[129]

Clearly, though, as I suggested earlier, this analogy between the groups effected rupture, not connection. For example, the Mizrahi immigrants were expected to defend the borders against the Arab Palestinian infiltrators (*fida'iyyun*) from Egypt and Jordan who often wanted to claim back the very villages now populated by the new immigrants. The association between the Mizrahi and the Arab was mostly predicated on inversion—one group's gain was the other's loss—and, thereby, it resulted in pitting the two against each other. As Chetrit (2004a) and others have maintained, the Mizrahi had to be, ultimately, an Arab-hater in order to belong and pass the Zionist crucible; the Arab-Jews had to flaunt their loyalty to Israel at the price of shedding their Arab cultural and traditional markers.[130]

Considering the scarcity of Arab culture in Israel during the years in which second-generation immigrant Mizrahi filmmakers forged their identity and the uneasiness with which their immigrant parents perceived their Arab past, it is not surprising that a

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[129] For more on this issue, see Shenhav (1999).
[130] See Chapter 4, "The Old Crown and the New Discourse: The Era of Radical Consciousness – 1981-2003" for Chetrit's (2004a) analysis of the connection between the increasing support of Mizrahim in Israeli right-wing parties and the political coercion to which they have been subjected to prove their loyalty, their "anti-Arabness."

large number of those contemporary fiction and documentary filmmakers must often pry into their families' pasts in the Arab and Muslim world to find traces of their heritage there. Naficy's (2001:19) coinage of "salvage filmmaking"—"making films that serve to preserve and recover cultural and ethnic heritage"—accurately captures this contemporary trend in Mizrahi cinema. In several recent Mizrahi films this effort to salvage the past takes a literal form, such as in Duki Dror's *Taqasim* (1999).[131] The filmmaker follows violinist Felix Mizrahi on a journey from Israel to his place of birth, Egypt, to trace musical recordings of his deceased, once renowned, brother. These recordings are unavailable in Israel, and although he is told they are kept in the Egyptian Radio archives, Mizrahi returns from his journey empty-handed. In order to assess this Mizrahi "salvage cinema" and later, to attend to its problematics, we need to scrutinize films which are inspired by their filmmakers' sense of urgency to preserve shreds of their characters' Arab culture and exilic past.

Bagdad Bandstand[132] (*Chalrie Baghdad*, Eyal Halfon, 2003) and *Café Noah* (Duki Dror, 1996)

The documentary *Bagdad Bandstand* provides a sentimental look at the Israel Broadcasting Authority's (IBA) orchestra, one of the only venues for Mizrahi music until it was dismantled in the 1980s. In a somewhat crude cinematic symbolism, the filmmaker cuts away several times during the course of the film to a clock whose hands are rapidly moving backward. (The overall nostalgic filmmaking approach is

[131] "Taqasim" is a Middle Eastern musical genre characterized by an instrumental improvisation on a melodic mode.
[132] In the film's title, the city's name is spelled "Bagdad" and I will maintain this spelling in mentions of the title.

unmistakable if we consider this film's thematic and formal affinity to *The Buena Vista Social Club*, 1999, a film about a Cuban band, hitherto mostly unknown in the West.) The sense that these musicians, now in their 80s, and their music are doomed to oblivion permeates even the pivotal event around which the film is structured—the reassembly of the band for one performance. In reference to this performance, the opening titles read "these musicians will be forgotten as if they've never been here.…"[133]

The film's interviews with the Mizrahi musicians offer us a glimpse at the dilemmas they faced upon their immigration. The female singer Iman (Suzan Shahrabani) reveals, "[W]hen one sings in Arabic it belongs to neither here nor there. Among Arabs I am a Jew and among Jews I sing in Arabic, it is not what they are looking for." The oud player, Yossef Shem-Tov, regrets immigrating to Israel, "I shouldn't have even come to Israel … over there I was a king, and here, what am I?" Bass and accordion player Naim Rajwan follows suit—he reminiscences that when he disembarked from the plane that brought him to Israel and tried to console himself, "[T]he situation will be better," he was rebuked by an immigrant of earlier years, "[N]o, it is not going to be better, but you will simply get used to it."

Café Noah at the outskirts of Tel Aviv was one place some of the same musicians could play their music in the past; their audiences were mostly Iraqi and Egyptian Jewish immigrants. Similarly to Halfon's film, Duki Dror's *Café Noah* also brings together some of the same the musicians for a performance initiated specifically for the film. However, the two represent conflicting positions toward their subjects. In *Bagdad*

[133] Also, the catchy video cover reads, "[The musicians] return to conquer the stage in a land that never recognized them."

Bandstand, the opening suggests, rather patronizingly, that the performers are gathering to play their music probably for the last time.[134] Although *Bagdad Bandstand* takes a detached ethnographic approach, the filmmaker's intervention is blatant—his overt symbolism and the opening titles divert the emphasis, to some extent, from the film's subjects to the maker of the film. Conversely, Dror's directorial hand is largely concealed, but the knowledge that his parents are from Iraq elicits the sense that the filmmaker is personally invested in tracing the music of which, we infer, he was deprived. In Dror's *My Fantasia* the personal connection to the story told features even more prominently; the filmmaker becomes an integral figure of the film's diegesis as he turns his camera at himself and his family.

My Fantasia (*Fantazya Sheli*, Duki Dror, 2001)
and *Mama Faiza* (Sigalit Banai, 2002)

My Fantasia spans a nine-year period and is set mostly in a *Menorah* (candelabrum) workshop called Fantasia ("fantasy") which is owned by Dror's father and two uncles. The central motivating force in the documentary is the filmmaker's persistent desire to persuade his father, Abudi/Oded, to reveal details about his imprisonment in Iraq at the time that most Jews left the country. The father and his siblings consistently refuse to divulge any information. The mother sides with her husband; she tells her son, "[Y]our father, he eradicated his past in Iraq. Do you understand what it means to eradicate?"

[134] Also, the distributor's web-site for the film states, "one moment before it is too late, they [the performers] return to the stage…" (http://www.third-ear.com/p_prod.aspx?id=24471).

However, after a disappointed Dror is about to admit that he is giving up the hope that his unrelenting father would ever talk about his past and to concede his failure to achieve either personal or cinematic closure (he exasperatedly says “the film doesn’t want to end”), the father finally unseals his lips. With the company of his fellow ex-prisoners who now meet regularly in Tel Aviv, the father, having a stoic expression, reminisces about his capture by Iraqi authorities. He imparts that his arrest was a result of an act of betrayal—an Israeli Zionist agent, for a reason not explained in the film, informed the Iraqis about the existence of his Zionist underground cell. What was even more devastating to the father than his five-year imprisonment was his sense of abandonment after all his family members (as well as most Jews) had already left Iraq for Israel.

This schizophrenic attitude toward Zionism—veneration, deference, and the courage to risk one’s life for its cause, on the one hand, and a sense of betrayal on the other—is beautifully captured in a scene in which the three brothers are in the workshop talking about their father (the filmmaker’s grandfather). As one of the brothers recalls that their father was a fierce anti-Zionist, the Israeli Memorial Day siren signaling the commemoration of the Israeli fallen soldiers goes off. (For the Jewish population of Israel, Memorial Day and next day, Independence Day, are the most revered holidays associated with the State of Israel and the entire Zionist enterprise.) The father and brothers meekly end their “unpatriotic” conversation and, as is customary, stand up silently for the duration of the siren’s wailing.

Mama Faiza (2002) offers another explicit undertaking to unearth the parents' past in the Arab world and then in their early years in Israel. Common to *Mama Faiza* and other films discussed in this section is that the inquiry into the past is meant to open a sliver of hope for both the filmmaker or artist and his/her parents to reconcile with it. Banai's camera follows actress Yaffa Tusia Cohen and her mother, Faiza Rushdi, an 80-year-old Egyptian Jewish diva of Arabic music who now lives in a nursing home. Yaffa confronts the painful mother-daughter relationships through her solo theater performance where she plays both roles. (The mother, now withdrawn and mostly forsaken, used to leave her young daughter days and nights by herself in the heydays of her musical career.) For her solo performance "I Am Faiza," Yaffa learns her mother's Arabic songs from old recordings.

Yaffa's reconciling with the mother in *Mama Faiza* is then tightly related to connecting with the past and the Arab-Jewish culture both mother and daughter are reliving now. Similarly, the implicit reconciliation between father and son in *My Fantasia* touches on the question of identity and the past in the Arab world. Dror's final voice-over, accompanying the shot of his parents silently watching the Independence Day fireworks from their apartment, captures it well: "Today, after father spoke, I want to hug him and say that although I was born here, I feel a bit like a stranger in this place just as he does. I don't say it. I keep silent and continue my filming."

The trigger for Dror to reconnect in his films with his parents' Iraqi past is the 1991 Gulf War. In the opening of *My Fantasia*, Dror lives with his Israeli girlfriend in Los Angeles. Studying cinema in Los Angeles, Dror cherishes life away from home; he

no longer wishes to realize his childhood dream to be a *Menorah*-maker like his father. But over the TV images of the air strikes targeting Baghdad, Dror comments ruefully, "Everything was fine until one day Saddam showed up. He brought back to me, Israel, home, and also Dad and Iraq."

To fully appreciate the weight of the propulsive power of those TV images we need to address the significance of the Gulf War for members of the Iraqi-Jewish community of Israel. The belligerency between Israel and Iraq, coupled with the scarce images Iraq has disseminated outside its borders, precluded for these second-generation Iraqi Jewish immigrants an immediate knowledge or experience of the country their parents had left. Therefore, it is striking that the first images of their family's homeland some of these descendants of the Iraqi Jewish immigrants saw were of its attack by Israel's ally. Another association between the Gulf War and the Iraqi community of Israel which is assumed within the film is the uncanny coincidence that the Israeli city of Ramat Gan, which was hit the hardest by scud missiles during the Gulf War, used to have a predominantly Jewish Iraqi population.[135]

Bayit
(David [Taufik] Ofek, 1994)

The Gulf War is also the narrational trigger, or motivation, for identity inquiries in Ofek's mockumentary/fictive documentary *Bayit* (meaning both "home" and "house"). The film employs the TV images of the war to explicitly explore how his parents' past in Iraq sheds light on their experiences of the war against Iraq. The father is watching

[135] A humorous take on the coincidence that Ramat Gan was hit the hardest suggested that Saddam Hussein was taking revenge on the Jews who had left his country four decades earlier.

television, and as he identifies his old family house on the screen's fuzzy, bluish picture taken from American warplanes targeting Baghdad, he excitedly summons his wife, mother, the filmmaker, and his half-Ashkenazi girlfriend to join him. As the picture is replayed several times, we follow the father's mixed reaction—to his chagrin, the Baghdadi neighborhood of his old house is being attacked, but the knowledge that the attack is against Israel's enemy exhilarates him. Indeed, even as the grandmother confesses in a mournful mood that she cried bitterly when the family had to leave their nice house in the hands of the Iraqis, the father's spirit is up: "Now the Americans are teaching them a lesson." The filmmaker's leftist, peace-seeking girlfriend retorts sarcastically, "they [the Iraqis] deserve it," and the father dismisses her cynicism, "[W]e know them. You don't know the Arabs." The father's statements about the Arabs in the mockumentary *Bayit* are reminiscent of a comment made in the documentary *My Fantasia* by one of the father's fellow ex-prisoners who suggests that Israel takes revenge on the Iraqis for what they had done to them in Iraq. Importantly then, in *Bayit* and *My Fantasia* the affirmation of the Zionist (Israeli) framework is explicated as resulting from the bitter experience Jews supposedly had in Iraq prior to their emigration. In turn, this affirmation problematizes any articulation of an Arab-Jewish identity.

Cinema Egypt
(*Cinema Mitzrayim*, Rami Kimchi, 2003)

Cinema Egypt offers one of the most conflicted and intricate feelings a filmic character has expressed about the Arab-Jewish identity. Filmmaker Kimchi interviews his Egyptian-Jewish mother about her life in Egypt and in Israel, he compiles old

photographs for the film, and he even renovates an old film house in Israel and screens there his mother's favorite Egyptian film, the nostalgic *Leila the Village Girl* (*Laila Bint el'Rif*, Togo Mizrahi, 1941). These filmic initiatives are meant to induce the mother, Henriette, to share her pain with her son, and, in Kimchi's words, "to take her back to the place of [her] childhood and love." But Henriette, who first attended a private French school in her hometown Mir-Ghamr, and then, at the age of seven, was sent to the vibrant cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, gradually distanced herself from "anything Arab," as the filmmaker suggests. The dilemma of multiple identities is best captured in the various languages the mother uses. She speaks Hebrew with the children, French with the grownups, Ladino as "the language of secrets" and "Arabic—a language never spoken at home, as an undercurrent is."[136]

The films discussed in this chapter, whether they probe into the Jewish experience in the Arab world or portray the Mizrahim in Israel, are often permeated by a sense of finality and loss. In *My Fantasia*, the melancholic background music and the realization that the Fantasia workshop is up for sale enhance the film's woeful feeling. Yair Dalal (whose parents are from Iraq), the musical director and organizer of the special performance documented in *Bagdad Bandstand*, is asked by one of the musicians in that film why he had taken upon himself the role of preserving their Mizrahi music. Dalal responds, "[Because] when you folks are gone, who will be here to pursue the endeavor

[136] The language issue is broached again in Kimchi's *My Travels with My Brother* (*Mas'otai im Ahi*, 1997), another documentary about his family. The filmmaker tells us that, in Egypt, his mother spoke Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) at home, Arabic outdoors, and French in social gatherings.

you were engaged in?" Similarly, the musicians in *Café Noah*, the parents and their friends and relatives in *My Fantasia*, Felix Mizrahi in *Taqasim*, and Iraqi-born writer Sami Michael, who admits in *Samir*[137] (David Benchetrit, 1997) that, after all the years he has been living in Israel, he can no longer consider himself an Iraqi, all bemoan an era that is coming to an end.

Death, loss, or missed opportunities germane to the issue of the Arab-Jewish identity are constitutive of the narratives of two newer documentaries—*Maktub Aleik: A Voice without a Face*[138] (*Maktub Aleik*, Assaf Basson, 2005) and *Grandfather* (*Saba*, Amram Jacoby, 2005). In *Maktub Aleik*, Basson attempts to trace his late father's mysterious life as a talented Jewish Iraqi singer in Israel who, due to his secretive work as an agent (likely a spy) for the Mosad,[139] was not allowed to perform in public (and hence the second part of the film's title). The events the film highlights—the father's frequent absences from home (other than his work as an agent and his Arabic music radio concerts, he had numerous love affairs that drew him further away from his family), his rapidly deteriorating health and ensuing death, and, later, Basson's sister unsuccessful fight against cancer—coupled with the filmmaker's personal, emotional statements and reactions on camera evince a strongly somber mood. A similar mood is evoked by the ninety-two-year-old Jewish-Iraqi grandfather Avraham Ezekiel who tells the story of his immigration to Palestine in 1929 and of his shattered hopes for an Arab/Israeli peaceful

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[137] Samir is Michael's nickname during the time he was a member in the Jewish-Communist underground in Iraq. The film will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and in Chapter 6.

[138] "Maktub Aleik" is an Arabic idiom meaning "it's written in your fate" or "that's your destiny."

[139] The Mosad is Israel's Intelligence Service, the equivalent of the American CIA.

coexistence in that land. The meditative quality the film has—it consists mostly of a series of the Grandfather's ruminations about the past, the meaning of life, and nature (the filmmaker is never heard in the film although the grandfather is addressing him almost throughout)—and the absence of music[140] enhance the film's austerity and solemnity. Unlike most other films discussed in this section, *Maktub Aleik* and *Saba* operate fully and unproblematically from within the Zionist framework in that they do not attempt to point to the State's policies and agenda as the causes for the losses they depict.[141] Yet, like other films analyzed here, the personal and historical cusp they attend to is fashioned, at least partially, by the characters' lost past in the Arab world.

As we have seen in the abovementioned films and literature on the emigration of Jews from the Arab/Muslim Middle East, the immigrants' arrival in Israel marks a rupture that might never be amended; many Mizrahi immigrants cannot return to their countries of origin and, even as they are nearing the end of their lives, conciliation with the past in their countries of origin is deemed impossible. However, this experience of loss and finality does not entail closure in the films discussed. On the contrary, Henriette of *Cinema Egypt*, Abudi/Oded of *My Fantasia*, and Sami Michael of *Samir*, all fail to reach a true closure regarding their past in the Arab world. Indeed, it keeps haunting these people in their new lives in Israel. In the opening scene of *Samir*, over an old

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[140] The only exception is a traditional Mizrahi hymn that is played over the closing credits.
[141] The closest *Saba* gets to critiquing Zionist ideology and the State is expressed in two comments the grandfather makes: in one, mentioned earlier, he conveys his sense of missed opportunity regarding a peaceful Arab/Israeli co-existence, and, in the second, he contends that the rich cultural tapestry Jews nourished in Iraq had to be discontinued upon their immigration to Palestine/Israel: "This is all gone now … as if there were no cultural wealth, it is all gone now. The Sephardim [Mizrahim] tried to emulate the Ashkenazim, they all 'Ashkenized'; we 'Ashkenized' and brought down our tradition."

black-and-white film of Baghdad, Michael recites his recurring nightmare: Sitting in a café by the bank of the Tigris, he leisurely drinks his coffee. To pay, he gets up and pulls from his pocket what he realizes, to his horror, are not Iraqi but Israeli coins. Suspected for his "Israeli connection," he is now chased by Iraqi police down the streets of Baghdad, somewhat like his real life experience when Iraqi police were hunting him for his activism in the Jewish communist underground cell. The film's conclusion seems to offer a sliver of hope and closure. Michael reveals that the first time he experienced belonging in Israel was on the day his first daughter was born; through her, he felt that he finally turned into an Israeli. However, in his rave review of the film, Chetrit (1996) has a more sober interpretation of the ending, by which he draws our attention not to that which was gained (Israeli identity) but to the lost past: "I apologize I have to spoil this sugary conclusion and offer this instead: [Sami Michael] realized on that day that he swore off his Arab-Jewish identity and entered a voyage to defend what remained of it" (49).

Thus far we have established that it is against this doom and loss that the filmmakers, often of Mizrahi origin themselves, strive to salvage shreds of the past. This effort, we have noticed, is marked by a recognition of the historical and cultural value of such preservation. However, to what extent is the sense of disconcertedness the films' subjects reveal the filmmakers' projection of their own sense of cultural displacement? In other words, a more critical reading of these films may suggest that these films only seemingly focus on the immigrant parents' generation and that they actually deal, implicitly, with the filmmakers' queries and dilemmas in their own search for identity.

Accordingly, the following section will expound on the ironic gap between, on the one hand, the stated intentions of Israeli-born Mizrahi filmmakers as evidenced in their films and interviews conducted with them, and, on the other hand, the films' diegetic materials that often undermine these articulations.

The Reconstruction of the Past: Origins, Irony, and Postmodernist Winks

It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home.

Theodor Adorno

In her seminal article *Postmemories in Exile* (1996), Marianne Hirsch coins the term "postmemory" to refer to the second-hand and mediated connections and "memories" the children of Holocaust survivors create to access what for their parents are traumatically vivid and direct experiences. Hirsch offers her postmemory/second-generation conceptualizations as a theoretical model applicable to the experiences of other collectives (662). In light of her suggestion, an analogy between second-generation Holocaust survivors and many second-generation Mizrahi immigrants seems felicitous—both groups have mostly only a secondary knowledge about their parents' inaccessible or even lost world.[142]

[142] Although the term "second-generation Mizrahi immigrants" can be supplanted with clearer terms, such as "first-generation Israeli-born Mizrahim," I prefer the former precisely in order to maintain its association with "second-generation Holocaust immigrants/survivors" and, thereby, its conceptualization in light of Hirsch's theory. As a shorthand, I will occasionally employ "second-generation Mizrahim."

One of Hirsch's (1996) pivotal arguments is that the parents' exile, trauma, and displacement are related to the second-generation's identity lacuna.[143]

> The children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora. 'Home' is always elsewhere…. This condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is characteristic of postmemory. (662)

We may, therefore, propose that the films of the second-generation Mizrahi immigrants can often be construed as an endeavor meant to provide a defined identity anchor to which these filmmakers want to cling in a society that used to deem their ethnicity either irrelevant (in accordance with the notion of Israel as a true melting pot) or, worse, dangerous to the Western-oriented Jewish state. In his discussion of "accented cinema"—a reference to ethnic, diasporic, and exilic films—Naficy (2001:5) argues that it is precisely because of the lack of roots that the accented films engage in rootedness. The following discussion is meant to take Hirsch's and Naficy's articulations a step further. It broaches the possibility that, in the films addressed in this chapter, the filmmakers make a concerted effort to confer unequivocally onto their Mizrahi subjects (i.e., the parents) a stronger connection to the Arab culture than those subjects are willing to accept. Indeed, as we shall see, at times the film becomes a stage where the subjects and the filmmaker are pulling in two different directions along the connective/separating axis of the Arab-Jewish hyphenated identity.

[143] Hirsch employs here Nadine's Fresco articulations about the relations between exile and identity (in Hirsch, 1996).

When Kimchi first introduces his mother in *Cinema Egypt*, he recounts that when he was younger he thought his mother's name was Orient, not Henriette. He explains that he made this mistake because, he surmised, if he is a *sabra* (native-born Israeli) having a Hebrew name, then his mother, who was born in Egypt, should have a name attesting to her origin—the Orient. If this mishearing seems initially merely amusing, we gradually realize that it is a part of a pattern within which Kimchi tries to place (or re-place) his mother in what amounts, from her standpoint, to a displacement.[144] Later in the film he concedes that for all the years since his mother became a grown up, she has refused anything Arab. Whereas Kimchi states that he wants to take her back, through conversations and the screening of her favorite Egyptian film, to the place of childhood and love—to Egypt—she persistently maintains a distance between the Arab world and hers; indeed, throughout this film she refers to the Arabs/Egyptians as "they," not once as "we."

Granted, we are tempted to rationalize the mother's detached attitude to her life in Egypt on grounds that the Zionist ethos spurred Henriette and many other immigrants from the Arab world to eschew their pasts. And yet, the possibility exists that when Kimchi's voice-over tells us "we are embarking on a voyage into the past," and then, after a pause adds "into her past," he indicates that in this journey the mother is actually a vehicle through which the filmmaker is trying to define his own identity. The film

[144] When the filmmaker refers to the mishearing/mispronunciation of his mother's name, he uses the Hebrew word "serasti," which means "I mispronounced" but also "I castrated," which, thereby, conjures up psychoanalytical articulations. In this context of my argument about displacement, we may suggest then that the word "serasti" can signify the filmmaker's fear and denial of what his mother really is (not)—her lack of the identity marker he wishes to find.

concludes with Kimchi's voice-over, "When mom watched Egyptian films on Israeli TV and asked for my opinion,[145] she revealed her most vulnerable side—her childhood passions she was forced to abandon—and thus she tried to recruit me to help her, to be free. I wanted to answer my mom's call. I wanted to free her." If freeing the mother involves a re-placement, for the filmmaker it would have the benefit of belonging and a defined identity.

To an extent, in *My Father and Other Rabbis* (*Avi ve'Rabanim Aherim*, work in progress)—another film in Kimchi's family trilogy—the filmmaker's journey with his father to Rhodes also betrays a sense that the journey is meant as an identity quest for himself more than for his father. Kimchi's choice to cast his family members in various roles (in still pictures, Kimchi appears as his own grandfather) goes beyond filmmaking prudence; it alludes to the interchangeability of the displaced subjects who seek the anchor of identity.

Loshitzky's study (2001) of recent developments in Israeli society and cinema points to a shift from a "politics of ideas" to a "politics of identity." Accordingly, in her discussion of Israeli second-generation (postmemory) Holocaust films, Loshitzky claims that "they privatize memory, rather than nationalize it, reflecting the current schism of Israeli society and its conflicts of identities" (27). But the analysis here of *Cinema Egypt* and other films by second-generation Mizrahi filmmakers intimates that "memory" has

[145] Kimchi was a film student then.

been ethnicized, not privatized.[146] The films discussed in this chapter clearly shun notions of postmodernist social atomization; on the contrary, they strive to articulate cultural commonalities. To further our discussion, we then need to explore the terms and inspirations, indeed, the modalities for the quest for these cultural identities.

In my interviews with Kimchi[147] he expounded on his choice of showing his mother a film in a renovated movie theater to connect her with her past. The medium of cinema, Kimchi maintained, is associated with modernism and colonialism (the heydays of modernism mark the birth of the film industry); both are formative of his mother's growing up in Egypt. However, ironically, in his search for a cultural harness, origin, and connection, Kimchi himself somewhat resorts to modernist articulations, whereas the mother actually ventures a somewhat postmodernist stance—her reflections (direct or relayed by Kimchi) regarding her identity and past are qualified and ambiguous.[148] We are reminded here of Walter Benjamin's distinction between memory and remembering: while the former implies the constant disintegration and restructuring of past impressions, the latter denotes the attempt to shield them.[149] At least to an extent, then, we may argue that Kimchi's and others' "salvage cinema" is tantamount to that attempt to reify the past

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[146] The quotation above is from the book's Chapter 2. In the following chapter Loshitzky acknowledges that the Holocaust postmemory impacts ethnic identifications. However, her argument focuses on ethnic identity formation, not the ethnicization of the private (the appropriation of the private into the ethnic collective which I explore here). Similarly, it is unclear how she reconciles her argument about privatizing the Holocaust "memory" with her articulation of the Holocaust "as a factor in ethnic identity formation" (67).

[147] 6/8 and 6/17/2004.

[148] In the interviews, Kimchi conceded that the film suggests his failure to reach the past through its recreation with his mother (in conversations and the screening of her favorite Egyptian film). This, in turn, supports the two arguments I made here: the impossibility of connecting to the Arab past and that it is primarily the filmmaker, not the mother, who desires marked and defined identity.

[149] In Marks (1994) pg. 258.

(albeit, for the most part, only indirectly known to them), whereas their parents re-examine and reformulate the past in light of their new experiences in Israel. This interpretation is congruent with Naficy's (2001) conceptualization that "postmodernist playfulness, indeterminacy, and intertextuality have little place in exilic politics and cinema" (27).[150]

Dror's interest in his father's Iraqi past in *My Fantasia* has some of the same qualities as Kimchi's interest in his mother's Egyptian past. Again, the ostensible focus on the parent's story is revealed to be a vehicle through which the filmmaker attempts to emplace himself. This is most noticeable in a conversation Dror is having with his mother—he asks her whether she and his father wanted to be "integrated" (read: rendered unmarked) into Israeli society. She answers positively and Dror protests: "I don't want to be integrated. I first want to know [your] past because no one talked to me about it, it has been concealed from me."

The irony that emerges when we consider the filmmaker's desire to come close to the parents' experience in the Arab world becomes all the more patent in reference to the Arabic language. When Dror asks semi-accusingly why the family does not want to talk about the past, the uncle dismisses him, "How come you were never interested in learning Arabic?" This rhetorical question might be only anecdotal within the film's text, however, it accretes significance when we consider that one of the key definitions for

[150] Although Naficy's focus here is on exilic films, his observation is germane to my analysis of ethnic cinema—another type of accented cinema. It should be noted here that this quotation is only part of the complete argument Naficy makes. He maintains that under certain circumstances, e.g., the impossibility of returning home, a postmodernist stance becomes more dominant and sets the tone of exilic films.

"Arabness" refers to the Arabic language. It is therefore all the more ironic that most second-generation Mizrahi filmmakers, including those discussed above, who wish to connect to their parents' Arab world, have, at best, only rudimentary knowledge of the Arabic spoken by their parents. Furthermore, Arabic is rarely spoken in any of the Mizrahi films, not even in those whose content engages in the Arab homelands. Indeed, in the following discussion I will suggest that the connection these filmmakers wish for is often predicated on displacements, substitutes, and virtual elements rather than on the "actual" materials known to the parents from their lives in Arab countries.

Hirsch (1996) claims that, having not experienced the original traumatic event, the second-generation memory is connected to that event "through an imaginative investment and creation" (662). Mediation, virtual representations, and abstractions are pivotal in Hirsch's definition of postmemory. In a relatively substantial number of Mizrahi films the connection to the (often Arab) past is constructed through the creation of a mimetic or performative art—a film or a play—within the film diegesis itself. The features *Desperado Square* and *The Barbecue People* as well as the documentary *Cinema Egypt*[151] contain scenes of opening (or reopening) a movie-house for screenings of old films in order to stimulate their personas (again, the parents' and grandparents' generation) to relive the past. In *Mama Faiza* it is a stage performance that is employed to bridge into the past. As I have already discussed, the actress/daughter in this film attempts to access and better understand her mother's personal and cultural background

[151] The film has certain aspects that challenge its classification as a documentary, including sequences that are fully invented for the making of the film and scenes shot in fast motion in the style of the silent film era.

through the solo performance she is producing. More broadly, films such as *Cinema Egypt*, *My Fantasia*, *Bayit*, *Lovesick on Nana Street*, and *The Barbecue People* employ "secondary" materials—archival footage, television programs, etc.—as mediatory elements to approximate reality and reconstruct the past. If cinema as a mimetic art is one step removed from "reality," then the films or plays within the films are even one step further removed, a construction on top of another construction, a fabrication on top of a fabrication.

Naturally, films, and mainly documentaries, often include archival footage and video documentations. Likewise, the aesthetic and epistemic distance discussed here is characteristic of all art forms and, specifically in the Mizrahi case, it is necessitated by the impossibility of going back in an unmediated way to the Arab-Jewish regions of the past. And yet, I would suggest that the elongated aesthetic-epistemic distance implied by the use of "secondary" and virtual materials by second-generation Mizrahi filmmakers lends itself to an ironic reading of their search for an identity based on their parents' past. A critical analysis of contemporary Mizrahi films will reveal that even more importantly than the films' actual employment of "secondary" or mediated materials are the manner in which these materials are employed and the implications of such usage.

Unlike most films that include secondary materials—mainly archival footage—for the benefit of enriching or educating the viewer, in a few of the Mizrahi films discussed here, secondary materials are used for the benefit of the characters within the film diegesis, often in order for them to reconstruct or reconcile with the past. However, possibly in spite of the filmmakers' intent, these materials incorporated into the films'

diegesis actually bespeak the futility involved in the attempt to reconnect with the past the filmmakers pursue in their identity quest. Even in documentaries, including *My Fantasia* and *Cinema Egypt*, the inclusion of old films or archival footage does not imply a bridge into the past; on the contrary, as I intimated earlier, it signifies the filmmakers' failure to reconstruct their parents' lives in the Arab world. In *My Fantasia*, the pictures of the Gulf War the filmmaker sees on television while in Los Angeles might temporarily bring him back to Israel and trigger the pressure he exerts on his father to talk about his past in Iraq, but not even once do the parents consider or refer to their birthplace as home or homeland. Ironically, then, the bombing and destruction of Baghdadi neighborhoods coincide with the erasure of Iraq from the father's memory—indeed, a suggestion broached by the mother. Similarly, in *Cinema Egypt*, despite the central place the film within the film takes and Kimchi's (the son/filmmaker) wish to instigate the past by the screening of the old Egyptian film *Laila Bint el'Rif,* Henriette, as we have seen, resists her son's attempt to create an uncomplicated connection with her Arabness.

Importantly, though, *Cinema Egypt* offers yet another level of intricate construction of identities. Out of production constraints the screening of the film within the film was shot in Israel, not Egypt.[152] This necessity turned out to force a creative and more complex position: the filmmaker and the viewers no longer look for the mother in Egypt, but in the cinematic/virtual artificial space, and her place is then marked as the in-betweeness of the cultural slipzone. Therefore, despite the filmmaker's desire to fix his

[152] Interviews with Kimchi, 6/8 and 6/17, 2004.

mother past, *Cinema Egypt* reinscribes a sense of doubt about cultural origins and identity.

Whereas films such as *Cinema Egypt* and *My Fantasia* end up conceding the impossibility of their modern stance, e.g., the search for origins and the emplacement (in terms of culture) of the parents' generation back where they came from, this acknowledgment—this postmodernist slipzone—is the basis for and the starting point from which Ofek's *Bayit* and *The Barbecue People* (co-directed with Yossi Madmony) spring. First, I will elaborate on *Bayit* in the context of my assertion here and, later, I will employ *The Barbecue People* as a case study for the various arguments made in this chapter about the construction of the Arab-Jewish cultural identity.

In *Bayit*, television/video images of the American warplanes' attack on Baghdad are pivotal to the construction, aesthetics, and discourse of this mockumentary. Unlike Dror's rather solemn treatment of the television images, Ofek employs the same materials with a postmodernist wink; his film celebrates the slippery nature of home, identity, and origins.[153] Naficy's (2001) analysis of Atom Egoyan's *Speaking Parts* could have just as well been written about *Bayit*. Naficy proposes that the inclusion of video materials in Egoyan's accented film offers more than an aesthetic embellishment:

[153] This discussion employs Sigal Eshed's (2002) analysis of *Bayit* and *My Fantasia*, specifically her references to the manner in which television images of the Gulf War instigate in these films a query about the Arab vs. Israeli/Jewish identity and the connection between the elusive nature of the virtual images and the futility of the attempt to define/identify "home." Although I concur with Eshed's assertion that the two films eschew simple answers to the last query, my discussion here points mainly to two rather different modes and positions the two films take.

> [V]ideo is integral to the film's structure of deception and guardedness.… It instigates unverifiable identities, slippery relations, and absence—all because of the performativity that it encourages and the slippage it induces between self and other, here and there, and now and then. (139)

Bayit takes place entirely indoors. Conversely, the confining television screen provides the only depiction of the outside, the "real" world. But how can those fuzzy, bluish, and grainy images taken from the air stand as an indexical signifier for a real place and a real war? Indeed, the meaning of the television broadcast of the air strike on Baghdad keeps changing during the course of the film. When the father first notices the images of the air attack on the screen and summons everyone to join him, the son/filmmaker responds nonchalantly "ah, no big deal." Then, as all family members are glued to the screen, a discussion ensues between the grandmother, father, and mother whether they can identify their Iraqi house. But as they debate it, their Baghdadi neighborhood is bombed by American warplanes, and the images of the family's house that were supposed to be mnemonic in unearthing the past turn in a flash to signify absence.

Attending to the works of the second-generation Holocaust artists and, specifically, their employment of mediated materials in the complex construction of postmemory, Hirsch (1996) examines the photography of Christian Boltanski. Her analysis of this French artist's early work finds his photographic images to be emphatically manipulative—the photograph as a document is rephotographed and altered in his art. Hirsch concludes that "many of his images are, in fact, icons masquerading as

indices or, more radically, symbols masquerading as icons and indices" (675). Similarly, the visual abstraction of the television images in *Bayit* results in their alteration from indexical and denotive signifiers for "house" to symbols connoting the referent "home"—a play that is captured well in the double referentiality of "bayit," meaning both a house, an emotionally neutral and objective referent, and home, emotionally charged and a more constant referent.

And yet "home" itself is a slippery construct in this film. Does home refer to Iraq or the new place in Ramat Gan, Israel? Is it a cozy place the filmmaker is reluctant to leave even when his girlfriend urges him to do so or is it a constricting space where his mother nags him endlessly? Similarly, does Ofek attempt to wrench the private home from the national one? (The "Ingathering of Exiles" is predicated on the creed that Israel is home for all diasporic Jews.) The images of the home/house on the television screen are beguiling. "Home" as a signifier of stability and origin turns in a Baudrillardian sense into a virtual reality—fragmented, elusive, unstable, and mediated. The possible destruction of the house(s)/home(s) may accordingly betray their ontologically, conceptually, and emotional ephemerally quality.

In *Bayit*, there is a progression then in rendering home/house first as a place, then a topos, and finally a Thirdspace.[154] Already at the film's beginning, Iraq becomes less of an actual locale and more of a topos—the referential and ideological construction of a place and its people. As the family watch the Gulf War on TV, the film offers clear "us"

[154] See Edward Soja (1996) and Bhabha (1994b and "The Third Space: Interview," 1990b). My next chapter will include a detailed discussion of the term and its usefulness to our analysis of "Mizrahi space."

vs. “them” articulations, such as in the aforementioned exchange—“We know them [the Arabs]” and “They deserve it.” The film’s equivocal final scene, which I will discuss next, sheds light on the film's first scene and asserts the postmodernist Thirdspace where performativity takes precedence over origins and locality.

In the film’s opening, Ofek dances to Arabic music in a preposterous fashion. His voice-over “informs” us that as a kid, he would get some allowance when he agreed to dance Arab dances for his father and grandmother. Toward the end of the film, as the war is waning, Ofek contemplates, “Hava [his girlfriend] and I decided that when the war is over we would move to live together, we’ll rent a small apartment in Tel Aviv. But later, when we get married, if we get married, we would move to a quiet place, and we would have a little nice house/home there.” To poke fun at his mother’s nagging and his father’s putatively Middle Eastern male chauvinistic mentality, he adds, “We would have children and let them eat only when they feel like it, we would never yell at each other and I would even learn to cook.” The voice-over accompanies the filmmaker and his parents saying their goodbyes to the grandmother who is moving back to her place. As she leaves in the film’s last shot, the camera pans left to reveal the filmmaker’s future family on Sabbath; Ofek now has a wife and children. This smooth temporal and spatial transition within the same shot from present to future and from one house to another attests to Ofek’s proposition about the fluidity and contingency of time and space. Ofek is barely identifiable in this shot; his face is hidden behind a newspaper he is reading, but his voice is clear and he keeps urging his three or four children to keep dancing to the same music he once danced to for his grandmother. His pregnant wife asks him timidly

to stop this dancing as another baby is trying to sleep. But life is good, Ofek the father suggests, and his only problem is the tiring Sabbath meals they are invited to at his parents' place. On the one hand, we may decipher the ending as an effort to disengage from a constricting tradition, from home. On the other hand, the Jewish-Arab tradition is so ingrained in the grown-up Ofek, the film seems to imply facetiously, that he passes the "traditional" dances to the next generation.

The very choice of the mockumentary genre for this film about identity and place reveals the filmmaker's intent to blur the lines between reality and fiction and thus to eschew simple articulations about roots, identity, and belonging. More than any film discussed in this chapter, the search for cultural roots in *Bayit* is fraught with irony and self-deprecation. The filmmaker plays himself and casts his real-life grandmother for this filmic role to impart a sense of factuality to the film, but the fictive scheme is revealed early on when Arie Elias, a well known actor who plays the role of the father, is first seen. To use Naficy's (2001) abovementioned articulation of the "structure of deception," we may suggest that the ambiguity about the film's verisimilitude keeps the viewers in a state of guardedness, thus triggering reflectiveness and doubts about identity and origins.

Case Study:

***The Barbecue People* (*ha'Mangalistim*, David Ofek and Yossi Madmony, 2003)**

Ofek and Madmony base their film *The Barbecue People* on the popular Israeli TV series *Bat Yam-New York*, which they made in the 1990s. The film's frame story

takes place in Ashdod on Israel's 40th Independence Day, a holiday marked by a sense of national unity and pride for (Jewish) Israelis of all walks of life. Reveling families, among them the Idas, dot the city park of Ashdod for the traditional holiday barbecue. But under this façade of unity and solidarity, the seams that hold the members of the Ida family together are all but torn open. The frame story in the park is the cinematic space where the individual stories and plots intersect. As we shall see, the shattering of a coherent and incrementally progressive narrative into a somewhat beguiling structure consisting of three main sub-plots coincides with the characters' futile attempt to "make sense" of their past and reach a closure in their life stories.

The father, Haim Ida, was an activist in the Jewish Zionist underground movement in Iraq before his immigration to Israel decades ago. When Haim now attends the Center for the Heritage of Iraqi (Babylonian) Jews (an actual center and museum in a suburb of Tel Aviv), he incidentally steps into a filming session in progress where Ezra Tawil (not Haim Ida) is believed to be the intrepid underground fighter who used to smuggle arms inside his *qanun* (a Middle Eastern string instrument). After failing to convince the film crew that he is that person, Haim goes on a short trip to New York to meet Za'arur, an old friend from Iraq, hoping that this fellow fighter would be able to settle the confusion about who the real hero is. Excited about his first trip overseas, Haim also plans to visit his son who lives New York. Haim, however, returns disappointed and empty-handed; Za'arur passed away years earlier and his son Eli could not meet with him.

Eli, an aspiring filmmaker, finds himself directing trash films strewn with horror and violent sex. His lead actress Rahel, an Israeli to whom the filmmaker is emotionally attached, is murdered in exactly the same way she is killed in the filmic role assigned to her in one of Eli's films. Although Eli is found not to be involved in this murder, the police nonetheless decide to expel him from the United States. Although the father and son do not meet in New York, the camera reveals that within seconds after the son enters the airport lobby to take his flight to Israel, the father, who has just attempted to call his son from a payphone in the terminal, exits the lobby and heads to Brooklyn to meet him. Back in Israel, Eli meets Rahel's family and mourns with them. Perhaps to ease his pain and reconnect with his past love, Eli falls in love with Haddas, Rahel's sister. Haddas gradually relents to his courting and they spend -Independence Day together with the rest of Eli's family in the city park of Ashdod. In the concluding scenes there, the father only grudgingly agrees to speak with his son (Eli did not tell him why he could not meet him in New York), Haddas leaves the park angrily after she discovers more details about the film Eli made with her sister, and in the film's final dialogue, young and unmarried Tikva dumfounds her conservative family by announcing that she is pregnant but does not know who the father is.

The third plot—the love story between Haim's wife, Na'ima, and Ezra Tawil—is the most convoluted (and contrived) of all. Again, it is a story where the film's characters strive to find solace in the past. Ezra and Na'ima were sweethearts in Baghdad, however, they have not seen each other since the night, several decades ago, when they were supposed to go together to the premiere screening of *Gone with the Wind*

and Ezra did not show up. Ezra, who chose to live abroad for the better part of his life after emigrating from Iraq, later moves to Israel. He is a charming businessman, and yet, his immense financial success seems to be the result of his mafia-like operations. (Ezra, we realize, is responsible for the killing of the actress Rahel, the daughter of a rabbi who could potentially ruin his meat business.) When Haim is away on his trip, Ezra invites Na'ima to a special movie theater screening of *Gone with the Wind* just for the two of them in what seems like a genuine attempt on his part to redress the past. But after a romantic night Nai'ma spends in Ezra's luxurious place, he disengages from her and Naima's attempts to find him earn her only his contempt.

Another sub-plot involves a non-member of the Ida family. In the film's opening scene, Haim's daughter, Tikva, finds on the park's grounds an old cigarette lighter and then hands it to a stranger, an old man, standing in a distance. By the end of the film, we come to know that forty years ago this person was hiding with his father in a bunker when the 1947 U.N. vote for the partition of Palestine was announced and during the ensuing War of Independence. The bunker was on the edge of the Palestinian village Isdud on which the Israeli city of Ashdod is now located. In flashbacks, this person is revealed to have been a devoted Zionist who had emigrated from Iraq with his father. In the bunker, he taunted his father for maintaining his Iraqi-exilic manners, including his love of Arabic music, and for his use of an embellished cigarette lighter from Iraq instead of the Israeli-made matches. The father could no longer stand the stiffness of the bunker and ventured to emerge from it to get some food and water, but an explosion nearby took his life. Now that the son is given the lighter, he lights his own cigarette with it. In this

sense, this sub-plot is the only one which has even the semblance of closure and coming to terms with the past. The film's last scene—on one side the poised stranger and across from him the Idas who stand shoulder-to-shoulder for a family photo that can barely disguise this family's widening fissures—accentuates then the distinctiveness of this character, a topic that will be further explored later in this section.

The following discussion will focus on the film's postmodern position as expressed in its themes and form. This inquiry will allow us later to establish the film's resulting connection between postmodernist articulation and postmemory in the context of the filmic quest for cultural roots. The postmodern mode of performativity, where all the components of the story have an equal weight and meaning is contingent, is pivotal in *The Barbecue People*. This is evident in the interviews with several secondary characters—a butcher, a hotel maid, a hit man, and a film producer—who are interspersed in the film. Looking just slightly off camera (at one point, the film producer does address the camera directly) and discussing mostly their professions and jobs, these characters offer information only tangentially related to the narrative. Not only do these interviews then break the progression of the story in a playful manner (are we watching a documentary or a fiction film?), but the interviewees' commentary (where they implicitly address the viewer) provides these people with a presence even the main characters lack. The film's structure further evinces a sense of playful contingency and indeterminacy. The different sub-plots intersect throughout the film, but, despite its frame story, they never achieve a complete structural convergence or a unitary effect. The fragmentation of the narrative is furthered by the film's employment of distinct genres—horror (the

filmmakers actually invited a different filmmaker to direct the "trash" scenes), melodrama, and comedy.[155]

Thematically, we should note that various scenes in this film alter their meaning as they are redepicted in the context of another sub-plot. For example, a seemingly innocuous phone conversation the mother Na'ima is having while her husband prepares for his trip to New York is revealed in a later scene (a different sub-plot) to be a hushed conversation she is having with Ezra Tawil to set the time for their rendezvous. Similarly, the film's leitmotifs of absence, breakage (the picnic table keeps falling apart), elusiveness, circularity (no linear progression that leads to a closure), and chance further underscore its postmodern stance. This is evident in some of the film's key scenes, including the abovementioned "miss" at the airport. In another scene, Nai'ma buys a chicken and, back at home, she realizes that it is missing some of its organs. Her determination to find the negligent butcher ultimately leads her to the supplier—Ezra Tawil. Despite our high expectations for their reunion, what follows reveals the futility of Nai'ma's efforts to win him over.

I would argue that the film's resorting to postmodernist expressions can be explicated in light of Naficy's (2001) observation that, although accented cinema is often modernist, "when the grand return to the homeland is found impossible, illusory, or undesirable … the postmodernist semiosis sets in" (27). It is in this context that we ought to understand filmmaker Madmony's (in Koferboim, 2003) provision of the film's thesis—"in this movie people relish their past and strive to re-create it in their present

[155] See Yair Raveh, "ha'Tikva Skews" ("Shipude ha'Tikva") Ha'ir, 5/8/2003, pp. 50-51.

lives. It's a poignant attempt because it is doomed to fail" (44). In this film, as we shall see, the impossibility of the return to Iraq is centered on cultural and psychic hindrances, not national-political ones.

The postmodern-inspired notion of the futility and irony involved in the effort to fix, re-posses, and reconnect with the past or even to define/identify it are beautifully captured in one of the film's early scenes, when Haim stumbles into the documentary filming session about Ezra Tawil's legacy. Ofek, the director of *The Barbecue People*, plays the role of the filmmaker shooting the documentary about Iraqi Jewry. Haim begs the documentary director to let him prove that Ezra is an imposter and that instead of joining the Zionist underground movement in Baghdad "he messed around with women." The filmmaker cannot determine whose is the "real" story, Haim's or Ezra's, and asks his research assistant to talk to Haim and cull more details. But as mentioned earlier, the only person who could corroborate Haim's version of the story, Za'arur, has long been dead. This early scene sets up the struggle over truth, memory, and the history of the Iraqi-Jewish community. By withholding conclusive proofs about the different accounts of the past, the film underscores the invented and constructed nature of historiography. In Foucauldian terms, it is clear that historiography is related to power in this film; Haim accuses a museum official of preferring to have Ezra Tawil's version of the story because the latter has donated large sums of money to the museum.

Language and music and, specifically, the diegetic references to them, underscore the irony involved in the attempted return to the past. The only Arabic employed in this film is the voice-over of Haim's Iraqi friend Za'arur. In a letter he wrote to Haim years

ago, Za'arur goaded his friend to join him in New York "where they can speak Arabic without being ashamed and live among people like them." Haim, though, never joined his friend in America. Considering that Iraqi music is barely recognized or appreciated and that the film accentuates the inability of some of its characters to even pronounce properly the name of the instrument Haim plays ("qanun" with a guttural K sound) further implicate the problematic, if not contrived, nature of the attempt to unearth the past.

This impossibility is starkest in regards to the bunker scene. As the bunker is shelled, the son scolds his father for his love of his homeland and he retorts, "go back to Iraq." Later, the instant death of the father as he emerges from the bunker is meant to signify that "there is no going back." Importantly, the father and son in the bunker scene are played by two Palestinians. Supplanting (displacing?) the Iraqi-Jews with Palestinians (which, at least partially, flies in the face of historical/political realities) and one dialect with another attests to the film's championing of postmodern statements about the slippery and fluid nature of all identities and the unfeasibility of reaching the "authentic." In our interview (5/12/2004), Ofek explained the choice of Arab-Palestinian actors on grounds that "one cannot find an authentic Iraqi" of young age as the script requires.[156] In accordance with my main thesis in this chapter, not finding an authentic young Iraqi-Jew is tantamount to not finding the home/house in *Bayit*, to failing to take

[156] The other motivation Ofek mentioned in our interview for the choice of Arab-Palestinian actors was to effect an ironic reading of the bunker scene. When father and son hear the radio broadcast announcing the U.N. partition vote (practically the first time when an independent State of Israel is becoming a reality), they shout ecstatically "We have a state; we have a state!" The irony—having Palestinians (actors) celebrate the creation of Israel—is congruent with my overall analysis of the film's postmodern playfulness.

the parents back to their past (e.g., in *Cinema Egypt*), and to being unable to employ the Arabic language spoken by the parents' generation.

Indeed, my analysis here is congruent with Hirsch's (1996) articulation of postmemory and its reliance on a constructivist and mediated rendering of the "original" or the Past. The reconstruction and reinvention of events are the filmmakers' guarded way of approaching the past. As in other films I have discussed in this chapter, reflective experiences are then offered to supplant a simplistic and nostalgic return in time. There are two main direct and elaborate references to life in Iraq and, specifically, to the need to preserve Iraqi heritage. Significantly, though, both are mediated through cinema (within the film diegesis) and are, therefore, highly constructed. The first one is the abovementioned film about the underground Zionist cell in Iraq that Ofek (as a persona in the film) directs for the Center for the Heritage of Iraqi Jews, and the other is the construction of a movie house emulating the old al'Wataniya theater of Baghdad. Ironically, it is only due to the "revisiting" of the old movie theater that the estranged lovers can get back together (albeit for only one night). Put differently, the past is accessible here only through this dual fantasy—the screening of (the fictive) *Gone with the Wind* and the fantastic "Israeli" al'Wataniya.

Likewise, the old man in the park—the son who survived the shelling of the bunker forty years earlier—stands out precisely because of his highly constructed portrayal. First, his is the only story employing a voice-over. The cinematic device of voice-over lends itself to a concise and legible depiction of the events told precisely

because it is also highly constructed and mediated.[157] Similarly, as a young man hiding with his father, he is depicted in black-and-white; this chromatic device, which significantly appears again only in the fantastic images of *Gone with the Wind*, underscores the artificiality rather than the verisimilitude of this character. Reminiscent of Hirsch's (1996) discussion of Boltanski's art, the abstraction of this character is furthered when we consider that the old man is the only one of the main characters not named in this film. Again, this story of the old man intimates that artificiality, mediation, and distance, rather than the immediacy of the "real," are the necessary conditions to reach some closure and connect with the past.

To return to the scene in the museum where the truth about the past is debated, it is important that, in the final analysis, history/historiography is determined by postmemory—the fictive product of the filmmaker and his research assistant, both of the younger generation. In other words, as I explored in my previous discussion, postmemory—always constructed and mediated—is the second-generation's creation to cast its stories and to connect with the past it never experienced.

Conclusion

Most of the films discussed in this chapter, including *Cinema Egypt*, *My Fantasia*, *Mama Faiza*, *Bayit*, *Saba*, *Maktub Aleik*, and *The Barbecue People*, engage relationships between (grand)parents and children, oftentimes within the filmmaker's own family.

[157] We can think of voice-over as a non-diegetic construction on top of the constructiveness within the film diegetic.

Attending to this somewhat peculiar phenomenon (considering, as we have seen, its unusual recurrence) will help us reinstate the arguments made earlier regarding the construction of Mizrahi identity among second-generation filmmakers. In his discussion of hyphenated identities in *An Accented Cinema*, Naficy (2001) distinguishes between films that render nativist relations and those that proffer constructivist and contestatory relations. In the nativist employment of the hyphen, vertical and often familial links (e.g., descent-relations and roots) are underscored, while the contestatory usage of the hyphen operates horizontally, "highlighting consent relations, disruption, heterogeneity, slippage, and mediation" (16).

Guided by these articulations, we may suggest that the abovementioned films tend to oscillate between the two positions. On the one hand, the sheer emphasis on the (grand)parents' lives in the Arab world prods us to read these texts as "nativist," yet, in accordance with Hirsch's work, I pointed to the prevalence of mediation, virtual representations, and invented histories in the works of second-generation Mizrahi filmmakers. Indeed, this is another facet of my argument at the beginning of the chapter regarding the imbrication of essentialist and constructivist positions. Whereas by their emphasis on parent/child relationships the structural frameworks of this relatively large body of films imply the propagation of nativist/essentialist notions, the narrational materials and motifs that charge that framework—irony, absence, and re-enactment—testify to the contestory/constructivist feature of Mizrahi identity.

In accordance with Naficy's (2001) "politics of the hyphen," this chapter explored the problematics of the "Arab-Jew" construction—its promise and limitations. Most

noticeably, the cinematic construction of the Arab-Jew identity does not evince a pastiche or hybridity, rather, to borrow Naficy's assertion about one of the possibilities of hyphenated identities in ethnic cinema, it offers "a divided mind, an irrevocably split identity, or a type of paralysis between two cultures" (16). This conceptualization permeated my analysis of the construction of the other within—the Mizrahi—in relation to Zionism's ultimate other—the Arab enemy. We have seen that in Israeli hegemonic discourse, this positioning of the two identities as binary opposites amounted to the attempted displacement of the Mizrahim from their Arab cultural (and, at times, territorial) space. Alternatively, the following chapter will analyze the cinematic rendering of the Mizrahim vis-à-vis the hegemonic center and their emplacement in the geographical, ideological, and sociopolitical margins of Israeli society. The chapter will advance my earlier proposition that the two sets of relations—Mizrahi vs. Arab and Mizrahi vs. the hegemonic center—are interrelated. As will be evident in the following discussions of Israeli films, it is precisely due to the "Arabness" of the Mizrahim that they have been relegated to the periphery. The chapter will re-address postmodernist positions and will focus on the relations between space and identity and attend to some of the same films discussed earlier. However, importantly, whereas the latter part of this chapter accentuated the playfulness of postmodernist cinematic stances, the following chapter will advance to examine the power relations embedded in that play and the material staples performativity leaves behind.

Chapter 4

The Emplacement of the Mizrahi: Space, Hybridity, and Positionality

This chapter explores the cinematic positioning of the Mizrahim in the realm of their communal and even national web of relations and connections. As we shall see, such a discussion of "Mizrahi space" hones our analytical tools to better articulate the cinematic construction of self and other, to have a crisper understanding of the positionality of the Mizrahi, and finally, to attend the imbrication of representation on ideology and discourse. For methodological purposes, I will initially discuss films which accentuate the fluidity, contingency, and "exchangeability" of space and then proceed with an analysis of films in which the Mizrahi space is constructed as fixed and insular. Whereas the former clearly lends itself to postmodern theories of Thirdspace[158] and hybridity, the latter, as my discussion argues, is not necessarily promoting modernist notions of discrete spaces and authentic identities.

In its most extreme formulation, postmodernist thought proposes the de-centering or death of the subject and celebrates an existential and discursive space where "anything goes." Oftentimes, identities and space are defined in phenomenological, relational, and contingent terms rather than ontological and epistemic. The works of Edward Soja, Bhabha, Naficy, and Minh-ha are encoded in those postmodernist tenets, but they also

[158] In postmodern texts, there are morphological variations for "Thirdspace." Whereas Bhabha employs mostly "Third Space" (often alluding specifically to hybridity), others use it as one word, capitalized or not. Throughout this work, unless I refer to or quote Bhabha, I will employ "Thirdspace."

seek to map them within a discursive sphere that recognizes power disparities, displacement, and difference, and thereby, they reformulate conceptualizations of the relations between identity and positionalities.

Thirdspace, Indeterminacy, and Citationality

Soja (1996) deliberately avoids a conclusive definition of his "Thirdspace"; the variant modalities and predicates Soja employs to explicate the term concur with his postmodernist stand where play, performativity, and plurality have precedence over oneness, the "real," discursive and ontological demarcations, or stable referents. Guided by the work of Henri Lefebvre, Soja articulates Thirdspace as a the realm in which spatiality, historicity, and sociality all co-exist in a rebalancing act; put differently, Thirdspace is a realm which allows Marxist historical materialism (sociality) to coincide with Foucault's constructivist discourse on historicity. For Soja, Thirdspace is more than merely a cumulative effect or synthesis between what he calls Firstspace—the "real" material world we perceive—and Secondspace—the imagined or constructed representation of spatiality, our conceived world.[159] Soja often employs Thirdspace interchangeably with "lived space" or "spaces of representation" to allude to its physical and imaginative qualities and to the social fabric in which it is implicated. Since Thirdspace eschews the either/or paradigm, it has to be drawn from a different logical or psychic realm. Naficy (2001) builds upon Soja's Thirdspace and relates it to accented

[159] See pp. 6, 10, and 60-63.

cinema.[160] He employs the term "slipzone" to address accented films' play with open and closed chronotopes (the former often corresponds to home, the latter to exile),[161] the experienced and the imagined, the private and the public. This postmodernist articulation clearly shuns notions of authenticity and origins: "[I]n this slipzone of simultaneity and intertextuality, original cultures are no longer fixed. They are presented not discretely, but in a structure of play of sameness and difference, of authenticity and translation" (213).

Butler's (1993) intervention with "performativity" (albeit with an emphasis on gender) has become a staple in conceptualizations of Thirdspace and slipzone. Ontology gives way in that space to phenomenology and citationality, and, to the extent that this discourse allows for identities, they are constitutive of their enactments and performances. (To explain and exemplify her notion of citation, Butler states that a law is not pre-given. It is constituted upon its enactment for instance, when, a judge cites it.) Similarly to the construction of space and objects/subjects, the text itself is constituted only in its referentiality (citationality) to other texts.

As I have already implied in the previous chapter, the house/home in which Ofek's *Bayit* is set is precisely this Thirdspace or slipzone. The space this film's characters occupy becomes a blurry inside/outside zone. Articulations about origins are supplanted in this film by performativity—the virtual reality on the TV screen, the filmmaker's/son's ludicrous dancing to the putatively old Jewish-Iraqi songs, and the conclusion of the film, which collapses all notions of discrete identities. As I will discuss

[160] Naficy's reference here is mostly to exilic cinema. See pg. 212.
[161] See discussion on pg. 5.

later, future and becoming, rather than past or being, take precedence in this postmodernist thought. Accordingly, the setting of *Bayit*'s conclusion in the future is not only meant to allude to the film's imaginary realm, but to substitute the ontological space of home/house with a speculative and undetermined one.

Passover Fever
(*Leilsede*, Shemi Zarhin, 1995)

If in *Bayit* Thirdspace is created by the exaggerated and played upon aspects of ethnicity, it is the elision of ethnic references that forms Thirdspace in *Passover Fever*. Although not a typical Thirdspace that postmodern positions often desire and envision (mostly due to the film's reliance on fantasy), *Passover Fever* employs some of its salient characteristics. For example, the mixed Mizrahi/Ashkenazi cast, the multiplicity of accents, and the house's indistinct décor are in accordance with the Thirdspace principle of blurring or traversing all rigid boundaries. The film takes place on Passover's eve as Yona and Michael's children and their families join the parents for the holiday feast. The film's rich tapestry of characters and stories is forced into the space of the parents' grand house—the single locale in which the entire film is set.

Other than a few subtle, extraneous, and inconsequential allusions to the parents' Mizrahi origin—one short phrase in Arabic that the mother utters ("shu sar?"—what's going on?), a comment about the mother's knowledge of Turkish, and the fact that some of the dishes served are Middle Eastern—the house is an imaginary space where people can share feelings of love, care, longing, grieving, disappointment, and joy, but where issues pertaining to ethnicity (or, for that matter, class) are never broached. This is not

meant to suggest that every Israeli film about Mizrahi families should address ethnicity, but it merits some reflection as to whether the absence of this issue in this specific film is a structural one. Why is it a Mizrahi family that the film locates in the most luxurious house Israelis could imagine? Why is the area where the house is located never identified or contextualized? What does it mean, then, that in addition to the film's social and ethnic limbo, the characters are forced to perform in a spatial limbo? The decontextualization of space in *Passover Fever* fits with the film's strong sense of fantasy. In the midst of an emotional drama between Yona and Michael, the suffering of the bulimic son Shai, and a nearly fatal accident involving one of the grandchildren, a flower bouquet magically floats in the air and, later, snow falls at a time of year it never does. The house is not a microcosm of Israeli society as some might be tempted to suggest; rather, it is an imagined environment with rules and logic of its own and, therefore, it is precisely the space which allows for the elision of ethnicity. Indeed, in stark contrast to the immediate sense of realism in almost all Israeli films that have been made over the years, this film incorporates fantastic elements that, stylistically, call to mind Latin American magic realism.

Soja (1996) coins the term "realandimagined" to offer a new realm marked by slipperiness and indeterminacy; the term and its morphological form attest to the playfulness and fluidity embedded in Thirdspace. Clearly, cinema lends itself to these articulations of Thirdspace/slipzone since it is predicated on "spaces of *representation*" and on the play between presence and absence (Metz, 1983, original emphasis) and the real and the imagined. *Passover Fever* and other films discussed in this section construct

Thirdspace as a possible alternative to the space often associated with Mizrahi communal life. A critical analysis of this construction in contemporary Mizrahi films in the next section will reveal the discursive and pragmatic dilemmas that arise with the aforementioned postmodernist articulations of space.

Lovesick on Nana Street
(*Hole Ahava be'Shikkun Gimmel,* Savi Gabizon, 1995)

Gabizon's *Lovesick* features the bachelor Victor, who lives in Kiryat Yam. Victor's character is a mix of the slacker, the village fool, and a (Mizrahi) nebbish. But Victor also manages to single-handedly run a popular pirate cable TV station from the apartment he shares with his mother. (The presence of this pirate cable station also helps us to situate this film in the early 1990s, a time period which witnessed the burgeoning operations of these stations.) Victor plays on his station mostly tearjerker Middle Eastern melodramas and pornographic films. He rents the films from a local video store and he reads to his viewers the films' synopses off the video covers.

Lovesick opens with a prolonged ribald story in which Victor uses graphic language to tell his audience of two elderly men about a fantastic/fantasmatic sexual experience he had. This pre-credits scene concludes when, just as Victor is fully immersed in his depiction of the woman's orgasm, one of the old people has a fatal heart failure. This scene sets the pattern for the rest of the film—performativity and fantasy are disrupted by the intrusion of "reality." And yet, since the former are predicated on a circular and non-consummated movement (like Victor's climax that is missing in his invented tale of sexual experience) they are destined to appear time and again.

Although Kiryat Yam is located on the outskirts of the city of Haifa (the "center" of Israel's northern region), it is depicted as one of Israel's derelict and indistinct development towns (usually located away from metropolitan areas), populated mostly by Mizrahim. The film's iconography immediately marks Victor's neighborhood as a part of the periphery—the charmless, gray housing projects (*shikkunim*), the rows of apartments dotted with small windows, the laundry drying in public areas between apartment blocks, and the place's often shabby inhabitants. Similarly, the inclusion of the word *shikkun* in the film's Hebrew title is an intended usage of what potentially signifies "second Israel"—poverty, unemployment, and crime.

Victor's seemingly uneventful life is about to change when the dainty Ashkenazi actress Michaella moves from Tel Aviv to Kiryat Yam. The most conspicuous contrast between the two is apparent at the outset in the characters' physiognomy: the dark, hirsute Victor versus the blonde, light-skinned (almost albino) Michaella. More importantly, that first meeting between Victor and Michaella early in the film establishes the center/periphery thematic dyad. Looking at Michaella, Victor guesses she is from Tel Aviv, and, when she confirms that, Victor boasts of his acquaintance with that city—"oh, I have been there" (read, "oh I heard about it")—and he names (partially wrongly) two main streets there. This first meeting also contrasts Victor's "local time" with Michaella's "Tel Aviv time."[162] The sophisticated, urban Michaella is always conscious of time—she is on the move and often in a hurry. Conversely, for Victor, time is both expansive and dispensable; he expatiates on his (imagined) sexual experiences, he plays a

[162] See Ne'eman's (1998) "The Cup of Coffee and The Glass of Tea" for a discussion of "Mizrahi time" in the Bourekas cinema.

pornographic film at the wrong time slot when children still watch television, and (even before his hospitalization in a psychiatric hospital in the film's second part) he spends immeasurable amounts of time waiting for Michaella to join him. Also, along the lines of the Bourekas' dichotomous representation of the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi dyad, in *Lovesick*, Victor and the asylum inmates traverse the lines between public and private spaces. Conversely, Michaella's and her boyfriend Gadi's conduct, and, specifically, their treatment of Victor's courting, clearly eschew such behavior. Victor's body language, his uncalled-for verbal intimacy, and the intrusion into the lives of others (the broadcasting accompanied by his narration is also a form of intrusion) are constantly contrasted in this film with Michaella and Gadi's reserved behavior and their acknowledgment of boundaries (for example, when they call the police to report Victor's waiting at the staircase outside their apartment).

Constructed within the parameters of the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi sexual economy of the Bourekas—the romance between the affluent, cold, sophisticated Ashkenazi and the poor, warm, gregarious, and simple-minded Mizrahi, the film, then, ought to place the relationship between this newcomer and Victor at center stage. For Victor, he and Michaella are destined for each other; even when he realizes that Michaella lives with her boyfriend Gadi, a teacher of drama at the local youth community center with whom she moved to that town, he is convinced that she desires him and that only the boyfriend keeps her away from him.

But the seemingly romantic comedy of the Bourekas that characterizes the film's first part is aborted as Michaella becomes more assertive in her rejections of Victor's

incessant courting. His obsession with Michaella lands him eventually in an asylum adjacent to his neighborhood, a narrational breaking point after which the film switches gear and genres—it becomes a slow-paced moving drama about people trapped in their fictive worlds. Sympathetic to Victor's heart-breaking love story, the asylum inmates warmly welcome him. One of them—Harfuf—has also been staying in the asylum because of his obsession with his unreciprocated love for a woman. We hear his cries to his lost love Evelyn, whom he knew many years ago, early in the film, but now we also witness the nightly outdoor ritual in which he engages when he pines for her—he lays down his belongings on a small table and then desperately cries for her not to leave him.

The film's flirtation with the Bourekas genre is in itself a statement about the preference of Thirdspace performativity over ontological or essentialist positions. As has been indicated above, the film utilizes the sexual economy of the Bourekas, but the allusions to this genre come with a twist, thus furthering the primacy the film assigns to performativity. For example, this film does not offer the comforting conclusion of the Bourekas comedies, where the Ashkenazi/Mizrahi pair is getting married. Also, in an inversion to the trend in many Israeli films, mostly Bourekas, where the periphery reaches or attempts to reach the center, here, the center, embodied by Michaella, moves to the periphery—once when she comes to Kiryat Yam and then when she visits Victor in the asylum. (This "centering" or "normativizing" of the margins will be further discussed in this chapter.) The screening of the emotionally charged Middle Eastern films on Victor's station is another allusion to the Bourekas; moreover, the melodramatic

narratives involving unrelenting love and the suffering lover, characteristic of both the Bourekas and the films aired, gradually implicate Victor's own story.[163]

Although Thirdspace clearly does not suggest disengagement from reality, I would suggest that the asylum is cast in this film as a Thirdspace/slipzone of sorts. The impossible love story between a Mizrahi bum—Victor—and an elegant and beautiful Ashkenazi young woman—Michaella—can be (re)enacted precisely in the confining space of the asylum. When Victor makes love to his fellow inmate Levana, he blurs identities and traverses the boundaries separating the periphery from the center; he can call Michaella's name (not Levana's) in the midst of the lovemaking scene and Levana would "reciprocate" by assuring him that she is going to leave Gadi for him. Also, the asylum is fashioned as having the peculiar "thirdspatial" qualities of the specific and the abstract, the somewhere and the everywhere (omnipresence or microcosm). For example, it is fenced and secluded, but, on the other hand, its presence extends far beyond the actual location. Harfuf's desperate cries to his loved one of the past, Evelyn, echo every night in Kiryat Yam. (We may also suggest that Evelyn, who has just returned to Israel after spending years abroad and now comes to see Harfuf in the film's penultimate scene, makes this trip to the asylum because Harfuf's desperate calls reached her.) Similarly, Victor's plea for love extends from the asylum where he is to all the households

[163] In my interview with Gabizon (7/3/2004), he indicated that in making *Lovesick*, he was fully interested in having a dialogue with the Bourekas.

connected to his cable station; his story is literally and figuratively enlarged and projected onto other peoples' private and public spaces.[164]

For Bhabha (1994a), any production of meaning involves Third Space.

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. (36)[165]

Bhabha's understanding of Third Space is then a step beyond Bakhtin's conceptualization of heteroglossia. Whereas for Bakhtin (1981a), the act of communication is predicated on a synthetic dynamics of mutual borrowing among speakers and the construction of one's language on that of the interlocutor's, for Bhabha this act always already necessitates a new realm—Third Space.

A key element implied in Bhabha's "act of communication" is its vulnerability; since postmodern Thirdspace eschews any conceptualization attempting to reduce communication to the unequivocal and unproblematic link between the signifier and signified, there is now much more room for *mis*communication or "*dis*communication."

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[164] This construction of Thirdspace is highly evocative of Foucault's (1986) heterotopias: "[R]eal places … which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites … are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (24).

[165] Bhabha's argument is grounded in his deconstructionist position regarding language and culture. As he articulates it in "The Third Space: Interview" (1990b), in the production of cultural meaning "there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness *in relation to itself*" (210, original emphasis).

Indeed, the break in communication is one of *Lovesick*'s main themes. In Bakhtinian terms, Victor does assume the language of his interlocutor—Michaella—yet, he fails badly (e.g., his references to Tel Aviv which I discussed earlier and his accosting humor which confuses more than amuses her). The other story of unreciprocal love is also marked by the frailty if not failure of communication—Harfuf and Evelyn enjoy an intimacy where, finally, only the hospital fence separates them, but Evelyn's words hardly reach Harfuf who returns to his habitual ceremony of calling her name and prefers to express his love for an unapproachable, fetishized Evelyn. *Lovesick* literalizes the breakage involved in human communication in the scene where Michaella deigns to visit Victor in the asylum and listen to him. For the first time in the film, Michaella is positioned (seated) next to Victor, not against him, and in contrast to Michaella, who now becomes rather garrulous, Victor can not utter a word. When the asylum inmates sense that Victor is not getting his love message to Michaella across, a havoc ensues as one of them begins to wreck all he can put his hands on and Michaella is rushed out by the staff.

If direct, face-to-face communication is often doomed to fail, what should we make of mediated messages? To return to Bhabha's quotation above, I would argue that mediated communication epitomizes his Third Space. Precisely because it defies the Saussurean model of "one sender, one receiver," it is very likely to necessitate the texts' "passage through a Third Space" in the production of meaning and to render this space as the meeting sphere between sender(s) and receiver(s), You and I. Clearly then, the frequent employment of media in *Lovesick* , including the videos, cable station, television, and the video rental store, further propels us to identify the diegetic space

created in this film as Thirdspace. As we have seen, media are central to the configuration of "spaces of representation"; like Soja's (1996) terms of Thirdspace, the realms media create and employ are the loci where subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, structure and agency, intersect and, therefore, I would add, are implicated by duplicity and reflexivity. When Victor decides to air a desperate love message for Michaella from the asylum (using his cable station), the whole place turns into a (sound) stage—its inhabitants and objects are positioned strategically for an increased effect for the film *Lovesick* itself and for the aired love message. Likewise, the real-life filmmaker—Dan Wolman—is cast in *Lovesick* as a filmmaker inmate who deems Victor's tragedy most suitable to be made into a film "because it is a story that contains both love and drama."

Postmodernist articulations of Thirdspace often address its unique qualities to mimic, translate, and re-formulate prior realities and positions. According to Bhabha ("The Third Space: Interview," 1990b), one of the modalities of cultural translation taking place in Third Space is as "a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense—imitating an original in such a way that a priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact it *can* be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum" (210, original emphasis). The diegetic space of *Lovesick* is a playfield where events/scenes are replicated and reproduced time and time again during the course of the film. The town's residents, who in the film's first part are mostly inhospitable to Victor, metamorphosed into a sympathetic crowd debating Victor's predicament empathically and in public. This crowd scene of the people engaged with Victor's "real-

life" melodrama is visually refashioned after a previous scene in which these people gather down the street to listen to the sounds of a woman panting while having sex in one of the apartments above. An intertextual analysis of *Lovesick* enables us to take this chain of allusions and cinematic quotations even further. In the former street scene where the crowd follows the shadow image of the panting woman as it moves from one window to another, the *mise en scène* and lighting conjure up the crowd scene in Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951), where the people, cold and shriveled, try to warm themselves up by following a ray of sun as it is cracking through the clouds.

A more concrete form of the translation and interpretive play is evident in the introductory notes that precede the films' screening on cable. The original film is often in Turkish or Arabic, and Victor reads to his viewers the synopsis in Hebrew. When Victor is in the hospital and his mother takes over the cable station operation, she reads the film notes in Moroccan Arabic and, finally, when a local Russian family is watching Victor's broadcast love plea, one of the family members translates Victor's text into Russian for the benefit of his family members.

Lovesick's characters are part of this postmodern "game of indeterminacy"; they are echoed and mirrored in others, thus creating fluid, porous, and indistinct identities. As mentioned earlier, Victor fantasizes it is Michaella, not Levana, he is making love to, and in turn, Levana can assure him of this imaginary transformation. Also, just as Harfuf is an enlarged mirror-image of Victor, Evelyn is Michaella's correlative character; Evelyn's visit at the asylum to see Harfuf is an extension and play on Michaella's visit to see Victor there earlier in the film. As mentioned, Michaella has to leave the asylum

after a few moments of her arrival because of Victor's inability to talk to her and the violent tumult it triggered. Similarly, when Evelyn visits Harfuf she is startled to witness that, after the expected greeting niceties, he disrupts their rendezvous to re-enact his nightly ritual. In this way, both Victor and Harfuf miss a one-time opportunity to connect with the women with whom they have been obsessed.[166]

The Problematics of Thirdspace: Hybridity of Emaciation

> [T]he importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges. Rather, hybridity for me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it…. (Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview," 1990b:211)

> The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and the passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (Bhabha, 1994b:4)

In accordance with Bhabha's and Hall's analyses, my interest here in discussing hybridity pertains to its cultural and spatial, rather than its personal dimensions. Hybridity, as Bhabha contends, needs to be conceptualized in light of deconstructionist understandings of "difference" and "translation"; in postmodern works, these terms point to the lack of

[166] Indeed, this film captures wittingly the very nature of obsessive love; the lover is focused on his/her desire (longing and lack) and not on the object of that desire—the person to be loved.

originary or fixed identities and cultures. More importantly, to employ "identities" one needs to acknowledge the ever-present interventions and exchanges within one society and between whole groups. Considering the fluid and porous nature of Thirdspace and hybridity, it might be expected that they are often associated with play (in the quote above, Bhabha uses "cultural hybridity that *entertains* difference," emphasis added), "in-betweenness," and becoming and are thought to have emancipatory qualities.

Yet, my purpose in this section is to underscore that despite the characterizations of Thirdspace and hybridity as unstable, contingent, and playful, they neither are ephemeral themselves nor do they operate in a power-free realm. Indeed, a more complete reading of Bhabha's, Hall's, and Naficy's postcolonial works as well as a closer analysis of some of the Mizrahi films discussed above will attest to the "material" staples generating and generated by Thirdspace and hybridity. Likewise, instead of the elision or reduction of identities by marking them merely as free-floating signifiers, these works often propose difference to re-affirm cultural and ethnic identities.

Arguably, the exilic/diasporic experience is a hybrid form *par excellence*. For Hall (1990), this experience is defined "by a recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (235). The contrast Bhabha ("The Third Space: Interview," 1990b) draws between cultural diversity and cultural difference further affirms the distinctness (not in the essentialist sense) of group identities. Whereas he dismissively refers to the former as a liberal relativist's *musée imaginaire* (multiculturalism) that renders "other" cultures transparent, cultural difference attests to the incommensurability

of cultures and to a political dimension—the tensions and "potentially antagonistic" ways groups assert themselves.

Even as Shohat (2004) admits the value of articulations about the hybrid—its challenge to racial purity/origin, which, in turn, inspires the conceptualization of nations as homogeneous cultures—she warns us against the tendency to decontextualize it. Rather than underscoring the hybrid's ephemerality, she maintains that "'hybridity' must be seen as always already power-laden" (70). In this context, Shohat and Stam (1994) remind us that hybridity should not be understood as a symmetrical power-play"; the subaltern's (attempted) assimilation into the hegemonic group has different power implications than the latter's conduct of "going native." Accordingly, "[A] celebration of syncretism and hybridity *per se* … risks sanctifying the *fait accompli* of colonial violence" (43). I would further propose that the official discourse about hybridity—e.g., the nation as a melting pot, and even certain multicultural articulations—is, oftentimes, a device to obfuscate real power disparities, as is evident in Shohat and Stam's analysis of the *mestizo* in Latin America.

What then are the modalities of power in the context of hybridity, Thirdspace, and performativity? For now, I will focus on what they generate and the power relations to which they attest. For Bhabha ("The Third Space: Interview," 1990b), "[T]he importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like translation" (211). Similarly, in her discussion of intra and extra-cinematic forms of hybridity as a generative force, Laura Marks (1994) states, "[H]ybrids reveal the process of exclusion by which nations and identities are formed" (251). Guided by Deleuze's

work, Marks identifies the "archaeological quality" of the hybrid; because of its positionality outside recognized identity categories, the hybrid unearths repressed histories and forgotten struggles. Although not explicitly mentioning hybridity in that particular discussion, Naficy (2001) concludes his study of accented cinema by pointing to the problematics of performance of identity as a free play by relating its constitutive elements to the sediments they leave behind. Intersecting and evolving identities are fashioned within regimes of power—"coercion, sanction, or reward"—and they leave their marks "at individual, group, or national levels that cannot with impunity be erased, ignored, discarded, or replaced with new ones—as some proponents of postmodern fluidity seem to suggest" (286).

Although *Lovesick* does not feature hybrid characters, the cinematic construction of the asylum as Thirdspace, as we have seen, enables some of its characters to freely cross identity boundaries. Importantly, though, in the film's conclusion, the asylum resonates as a Foucauldian regime of power sanctioning and disciplining its subjects. Specifically, the last scene—which we may suggest is in general a most definite residue a film leaves behind—re-inscribes identities and affiliations along ethnic lines. If upon Victor's arrival to the asylum borders are traversed (literally when women inmates join Victor in the shower) and identities are confused (e.g., Levana, who substitutes for Michaella), then, at the end, spatial boundaries are drawn again. Victor cancels his trip to Tel Aviv to see Michaella, who moved back to that city with her boyfriend Gadi, and he returns to the Asylum, only this time he desires Levana for who she really is. Indeed, we may claim that instead of the Bourekas' sexual economy, *Lovesick* renders an even more

restrictive order—marginalized/Mizrahi and the dominating/Ashkenazi members of Israeli society are destined to inhabit two distinct and separate societal and geographic spaces.[167] The formers (in the film, Victor and Levana) may live with and love only people of their group (but only in an asylum?). The others (Michaella and Gadi), who cannot acclimate to life on the periphery, inevitably move back to the center, free of the nuisances or interferences of the overbearing periphery and its inhabitants.

If for Marks (1994) the hybrid *reveals* exclusion, I would argue that in the context of Mizrahi cinema the hybrid is *constituted* by exclusion, and I would accordingly propose the seemingly oxymoronic terms of "hybridity of emaciation" or "zero-sum hybridity" in my analysis. What I mean by these terms is that whereas "hybridity" often alludes to an enriching and dialogical process in which groups' identities transcend well-seated positional categorizations and whereby the subjects accrete discursive and experiential dimensions from these exchanges, in the case of the Mizrahi, hybridity is predicated on erasure. Instead of a continuous dialogical process between old and new, there and here, Diaspora and Israel, the Mizrahim in contemporary cinema are often cast as shriveled hybrids; they engage in a one-way linear course grounded on a zero-sum system where each nod to the new "Israeliness" necessarily entails the elision of aspects of one's past. We are reminded here of Azulai-Hasfari's response to all the film critics

[167] Victor is played by the well-known Moroccan-born Moshe Ivgi and Levana is played by Hannah Azulai-Hasfari, whose Moroccan origins became known to Israeli audiences following her semi-autobiographical film *Sh'hur*. Michaella, on the other hand, is an Ashkenazi and her boyfriend in the film is played by Menashe Noi. The latter is actually a Mizrahi, but he is not recognized or identified (by looks, accent, or last name) in the film as such. I alluded to these possible ambiguities in Chapter 2, yet, to reiterate my thesis evident throughout this work, my references to ethnicity are based not only on "blood" or origin, but also on its construction within the film diegesis.

who deemed Heli's story in *Sh'hur* a success—a tale of a woman whose Israeliness signifies an enriched being. It is no coincidence then that in her reproach, Azulai-Hasfari titled her essay in *Ha'artez*, "I Came Amongst You Emaciated and Hungry" (1995), to proffer to the loss of what should have remained part of her (Heli/Azulai-Hasfari) being, including family traditions, but has not. Reproving those who deem Heli's story a success, Azulai-Hasfari conceives her film persona a "result of an anomalous hybridization of East and West, a callous and thoughtless hybridization from the start."

Like Azulai-Hasfari, Niv (1999:173-175) makes it abundantly clear that Heli's hybridity is inscribed by privation; he finds that in the original script Azulai-Hasfari depicted Heli as a barren married woman whose unsuccessful efforts to conceive are attributed to psychosomatic problems. As Niv argues, this cripple (the term used in the script) is congruent with Heli's incomplete being/condition both in a dream she has (again, only in the original script) where her body lacks its lower part (womb and genitals) and in her profession as a TV anchor, always hiding her lower body. Similarly, Heli's neurotic personality (impatient with her own daughter and, oftentimes, seemingly on the verge of a nervous breakdown) is illustrative of Naficy's (2001) qualified "endorsement" of hybridity and performance of identity as empowering. The constant need to redefine one's identity in the exilic/ethnic context (and in the case of Heli, the erasure of her past) "produce[s] subjectivities and identities that are often more anxious and phobic than at-ease and pleased" (Naficy, 2001:270).

Seemingly, the mother Henriette in *Cinema Egypt* is the epitome of a hybrid who is truly enriched by life in the centers, peripheries, and intersections of Arab, French,

Mediterranean, Jewish, and Israeli cultures. Yet, among the various languages Henriette uses, Arabic—one of her native tongues—is excluded. Indeed, Arabic had to disappear from her cultural and lingual horizon in two contexts—once when Henriette's father forced her to go to a French school in Alexandria, away from her Egyptian home-village, and then again in Israel, where any traces of the Levant were expected to be erased. It is in this context that we better understand the son's/filmmaker's voice-over, "ever since she [my mother] matured, she distanced herself from anything Arab." Similarly, in *My Fantasia*, the years filmmaker Dror's father has spent in Israel clearly have not instigated a dialogue between his Iraqi past and his present life. In his case, the psychic and cultural eradication of the years in Iraq (most blatantly, his refusal to talk about it) has not even been a process, but a rupture upon his release from the Iraqi jail and the ensuing emigration from that country. Finally, are the faintest of references to ethnic belonging regarding the Mizrahi family in the fantastic realm of *Passover Fever* not an indication of the same "hybridity of emaciation?" Indeed, the film's use of one phrase in Arabic and a few allusions to the mother's Sephardi cuisine constitute a structuring absence for what might have been included but is instead imploded within the phantom of an unmarked or an "all-Israeli" family. Ironically, it is precisely these absences—the Arabic language that is no longer spoken or past traditions that are now rarely practiced—that nevertheless define the Mizrahi in the eyes of the hegemonic groups.

Cinematic Topos: The Inscription of Marginality

The discussion hitherto focused on cinematic representations marked by some direct dialogue between periphery and center, Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Although these films often conclude with the reconstruction and inscription of spatial demarcations, they nevertheless allude to or entertain the possibilities of porous identities and spatial fluidity. Whereas the films discussed thus far render a Thirdspace in which center and periphery are both present—indeed, they are performed in relation to each other—in the films I analyze in the following section, the center has minimal or no presence at all in the film diegesis. For illustrative purposes, I will distinguish between two forms of such cinema. First, I will discuss films in which, even though the Ashkenazi/center does not appear, it is present as an ideological and discursive reference point the films address—a topos contrasted with the place of the Mizrahi. The latter part of this section focuses on a more extreme cinematic position—films from which the center is altogether excluded, thus attempting to create for the Mizrahi a space away from and independent of the hegemonic Ashkenazi order and subjectification.

In order to assess the dynamics of and motivations for the construction of the center as topos, it is useful to expound first on the significance of this term and to relate it to the Israeli media's treatment of the periphery. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said maintains, "[I]n the system of knowledge about the Orient, the Orient is less a place than a *topos*" (177). In this conceptualization, a topos elides geographical or historical realities and offers instead the referential and ideological construction of territories and boundaries. Avraham's (2003) study of Israeli media identifies a clear trend in the press that,

ultimately, renders the periphery as a topos. In *Ha'aretz*, the high-brow daily that is often associated with Israel's institutional hegemonic power, Avraham finds the following: "[T]here is no need to go thousands of kilometers east or south to get to the Third World. It's right here, close to us, an hour from Jerusalem and two hours from Tel Aviv" (*Ha'aretz*, 5/31/95, in Avraham, 97) and "a Third World, an hour and a quarter from Ramat-Aviv Gimel"[168] (*Ha'aretz*, 4/3/96, in Avraham, 97). Attending to the cinematic inversion of perspectives—the manner in which the *periphery* relates to the center as a topos—we need to posit the following questions: What are the modalities of a depiction of "first Israel" by "second Israel"/"the Third World" as a topos? Specifically, what are the power-related motivations for such articulations of the center in films that otherwise omit any references to life outside the Mizrahi/peripheral community?

To be determinant, the center as topos does not necessarily need to be material or explicit within a film's audio-visual diegesis; it can operate as a latent state of mind that is equally effective and powerful in the characters' conduct and as motivation for unfolding the story. Despite its seeming absence, the Ashkenazi/center often becomes a formative force in the films discussed below; it is the referential point by which the Mizrahi can measure and confirm its marginality. Consequently, the Ashkenazi/center may be almost fully absent in *Sh'hur*, but as Lubin (1999b) maintains in her analysis of the film, "the absence of Ashkenazi characters and Ashkenazi cultural life from the screen, does not conceal or repress power-relations in which the Ashkenazi [remains] the

[168] Ramat-Aviv Gimel is a prestigious Tel Aviv neighborhood.

appropriating hegemony (425).[169] Similarly, in his critique of *Sh'hur*, Chetrit (1999) notices that "only seemingly are there no Ashkenazim in the film. But they are there. The whole time" (81). Although he does not elaborate on this Ashkenazi presence (he has a brief mention of an actual presence of an Ashkenazi youth movement), Chetrit is likely referring to its structured presence below the film's surface—the scathing subjectification and interpellation the hegemony enacts and to which those living in the periphery acquiesce. A case in point is *Sh'hur*'s inside story (as opposed to a frame story). With the exception of Pnina and another sister, all the siblings leave the house or desire to do so to escape the entrapment of life in the periphery. One of Rahel's sisters, Miriam, joins an Ashkenazi religious movement, the young brother Avram leaves for a kibbutz—an Ashkenazi establishment—the oldest brother Shlomo enrolls in the Sorbonne, and Rahel enrolls in a prestigious school in Jerusalem whose goal is to "re-educate" students, mostly Mizrahim, from the periphery.[170] Again, since these or other Ashkenazi institutions barely appear in *Sh'hur*, they become a topos against which Rahel and her siblings define their future.

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[169] With the exception of Gila Almagor, cast as the mother in *Sh'hur*, all other main characters are played by Mizrahi actors. Interestingly, Almagor started her cinematic career playing mostly the roles of a Mizrahi prostitute or maid.

[170] Although not mentioned by name, the high-school Rahel/Heli is about to attend is Boyer. About half the students in this school (and in each class) are local Jerusalemites; for the non-local students, Boyer is a boarding school. Many praise the school's agenda aimed at providing a better education to the bright students selected from the periphery and whose potential might not be fulfilled if they attend their local schools. However, as indicated in *Sh'hur* and recent documentaries, including *The Submarine Children* (*Yalde ha'Tzolelet*, Amir Gera, 1998), this school's curriculum—its emphasis on Ashkenazi culture and history—amounts to the stamping out of these young people's traditions.

Bonjour, Monsieur Shlomi
(*ha'Kokhavim shel Shlomi*, Shemi Zarhin, 2003)

Teenager Shlomi of the comedic *Bonjour, Monsieur Shlomi* is a bonhomie go-between, the family chef-cook, and a peacemaker in his pressure-cooker of a somewhat dysfunctional Mizrahi family. Although two of his grandparents are Moroccan (another is of Iraqi origin), the domineering mother Ruhama dismisses anybody or anything Moroccan. (Ruhama, whose mother is Moroccan herself, corrects those who attempt to point to her own origin, asserting amusedly that she is from Tangier, not Morocco.) Shlomi's resilient and calm nature is interpreted by his mother as nature's compensation for his limited learning faculties. But at his local school in northern Israel, a new teacher recognizes that he is a highly gifted student whose academic potential has so far been wasted. The teacher and the school's principal goad Shlomi into transferring to a prestigious school in Haifa. At the end of the film, Shlomi, who meanwhile finds his true love (a lass of a Moroccan origin!), decides to leave the neighborhood and move in with his girlfriend close to his new school.

In both *Sh'hur* and *Bonjour, Monsieur Shlomi*, the intimation of betterment is always situated elsewhere, away from one's hometown. These two films underscore the topos-like qualities of the center into which the characters are about to embark with their new lives, by marking the center, oftentimes Tel Aviv or Haifa, as the periphery's binary opposite. The referential rather than the actual tangible qualities of Haifa are underscored when the principal drives Shlomi to visit the school for the first time and a road sign seen from the car reads "Haifa—24 kilometers." Leaving the hometown, then, is represented not merely as a concluding stage determined by the narrative order and logic; it is

embedded in the manner in which the periphery is understood only in its relation to the hegemonic center(s).

In the interview for the DVD version of *Bonjour, Monsieur Shlomi*, filmmaker Zarhin maintains that the film is more of a fable than a comedy. Shlomi's windfall in the film's last part—having a charming and loving girlfriend, realizing that he possesses a genius-like aptitude, and being about to depart for the big city—clearly lends itself to reading this film as a fable or fairy tale. What is important and relevant to our discussion here is that leaving the periphery for the big city/center is predicated on the frequent impossibility of this "betterment" in reality. To put it differently, this story about a change of luck and the possibility of leaving the periphery behind often takes place in an illusionary (cinematic) realm only. *Shuli's Guy* makes this formulation explicit.

Shuli's Guy
(*ha'Bahur shel Shuli*, Doron Tsabari, 1997)

In *Shuli's Guy*, the main character is Mazal, who, in an ironic dissonance with her name (meaning luck in Hebrew), is anything but lucky. She is an unemployed single mother divorcee who is staying with her young son Zohar at her parents' place in the peripheral town of Or Yehuda. The family members shun Mazal—she is charged with taking care of the house chores and has to use the balcony as a bedroom for herself and Zohar. The film is set during one day—the eve of the 1977 elections, where for the first time in Israel's history, a right-wing party rose to power. On this day the family is also expecting Avner, whom they have never met before, to visit and propose marriage to Mazal's younger sister Shuli. In a somewhat convoluted comedy of errors, Ezra, who is

selling ice cream off his truck, notices Mazal and without meaning to do so finds himself in her house as he runs away from some riffraff right-wing zealots. Shuli is still asleep in her room when Ezra steps in and the family mistakes him for Avner. Ezra finds an opportunity to tell Mazal that he is not Shuli's guy and, miraculously, offers to share his future with Mazal and to take her to a place befitting her, "where I'll turn you into a queen." Then Avner shows up, the scheme is revealed, and the older brother Niso physically assaults Ezra for this blunder. Mazal stands up to her family and announces that she is joining her man. In the film's last scene, Ezra, Mazal, and her son get into the ice-cream truck and from the outdoor TV sets in the cafes they drive by a news anchor who is declaring the victory of Begin's Likud party in the elections.

Niv (1999:251-265) identifies three fairy tales the film intermixes: *Cinderella*, *The Three Bears*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Asked by Niv about her preference for the fairy tale genre, renowned author Dorit Rabinian, the film's screenwriter, responded, "I prefer to plumb into fairy tales so that the fantasy remains intact and I don't have to be too close to the ground … realism frightened me, so I didn't want to deal with it" (in Niv, 275-276). But again, this fairy tale is not rendered in a discursive limbo. Even if we were to acquiesce with Niv that the film should be read as a metaphor for women's oppression (and liberation?), the broader communal and political context cannot be overlooked; it is rather significant that Mazal's salvation story takes place in the peripheral town of Or Yehuda, at the house of a Mizrahi family, and on the eve of historic elections. To an extent, then, the film flirts with the socialist-Zionist myth of salvation that prescribes the

Mizrahim's dependence on the intervention of their saviors to redeem them from their social and cultural predicament and primitivism.[171]

The Mizrahi disenchantment with the previously ruling labor party and the sweeping Mizrahi support of the right-wing Likud party in the 1977 elections are often considered primary factors in this party's momentous political victory.[172] But despite the rhetoric and appeals to the Mizrahi electorate from late prime-minister Begin and other Likud leaders, they did little to improve the Mizrahi condition.[173] I would argue then that the setting of the film in 1977 and not in the present (Tsabari could have employed one of the recent Likud election victories) is meant to have an ironic effect, underscoring the illusory nature of the Mizrahi salvation as it was offered in the Likud's campaign then. Tsabari may have represented the Mizrahi denizens of the Or Yehuda cafes ecstatic about the Likud victory, but from the perspective of the 1990s these hopes are revealed to be premature, if not naive; the centers of power remained beyond the reach of the periphery in the late 1990s just as they were in all previous years.

Turn Left at the End of the World
(*Sof ha'Olam Smola*, Avi Nesher, 2003)

An analysis of the box-office hit *Turn Left* will enable us to further our discussion of hybridity and topos and will point to the problematics involved in the construction of a Mizrahi space. The film is set in 1968 in an unidentified development town on the edge

[171] The savior in this film is the Mizrahi ice cream man. Clearly this is a digression from the narrative which prescribes the Ashkenazim as saviors.
[172] See for example Elazar (1989:46-50) and Chetrit (2004a:198-201).
[173] See Chapter 1 for my discussion of how, in some respects, despite the right-wing rule over most of the last 28 years, the Mizrahi plight has been worsened over time.

of the Negev desert and features two "clans"—Moroccan and Indian. The Moroccans, who were settled by the government in that place ten years earlier, are dismayed to realize that the "primitive blackies" who have just arrived in Israel are going to live in the *shikkun* across from them. For its part, the Indian family, and mostly the mother, is just as derisive of the others' lack of basic mores. The film then has a twist, where the clash of cultures is not so much between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, but within two incompatible Mizrahi clans.

Despite the meager economic resources and the harsh living conditions in this "no-place," both families attempt to maintain the façade of "high culture" associated with their countries of origin, or more precisely, with the culture of their previous colonizers. The Moroccan parents speak mostly French and hold to French etiquette, while the Indian family members speak English and cherish the petit-bourgeois way of life back in India. (In a humorous scene, as the two mothers dry their laundry on a clothesline in the dusty area between their apartment complexes, an argument ensues about what laundry soap is better; "French!" "British!" the women repeatedly hurl at each other.)

But early in the film the two adolescents—Nicole of the Moroccan family and Sara of the Indian one—who become best friends, signal the thawing of the relations between the families. In a scene that marks the apex of this affiliation between the two clans, the Moroccan family, which thus far has disparaged the Indians' obsession with cricket, joins them in a historic match against a British team that deigned to play in the Israeli desert. Yet when the British unmercifully beat the local team and lead 68 to 0,

havoc ensues as the Moroccans take out their frustration and anger on all the "foreigners"—Indian immigrants and British players.

The preparation for the game and its aftermath coincide with three personal stories of separation and grief. Nicole, who had sexual relations with her Tel Avivian teacher, is now disenchanted by this first lover of hers; The Indian father, Roger, terminates his affair with Simone, a titillating Moroccan widow (who also coaches Nicole on matters of love); and Nicole's mother, Jeannette, is diagnosed with incurable leukemia.

More than any of the films discussed so far, *Turn Left* situates the center as a topos, or, to employ Nesher's words, "a state of mind."[174] Mentions of Tel Aviv as the indexical opposite of the local town are strewn throughout the film—the handsome energetic Ashkenazi teacher who comes from Tel Aviv to teach for one year, magazines that feature the luminous media stars from the big city, and Nicole's impatience to leave for Tel Aviv as soon as she is done with school. Draft calls to the Israeli military that Sara and Nicole get in the mail render another promise of life outside the stifling town; they both cherish the reward mandatory military service has to offer them—life away from their town. Just as *Bonjour, Monsieur Shlomi* ends with Shlomi's moving out to Haifa, *Sh'hur* (its main story inside the frame narrative) ends with Rahel's leaving her family to join the boarding school in Jerusalem, and *Shuli's Guy* ends with the couple's departure to start life somewhere else, at the conclusion of *Turn Left* it is Sara who leaves the development town. Situating these stories of departure from home exactly at the

[174] Interview with Nesher, 6/30/2004.

climactic end of each of these films, the move to the center(s) accretes symbolic meaning to suggest a breach between life in the periphery (shown throughout the films) and the unknown life elsewhere (rarely present in the films' diegesis).[175]

Yet, this film renders unique relations between the town's locality and its topos. As Nesher indicated,[176] the elision of the place's name is meant to make it any (development) town, or similarly, I would claim, to render it a "no-place."[177] When Nicole's mother returns from her diagnosis in Tel Aviv, a road sign at the entrance to the town indicates the distance to Tel Aviv. At the end of the film, another sign shows the distance to the southern city of Eilat and then, within the same shot, the Tel Aviv road sign seen earlier reappears. The town, therefore, is defined by its distance from other localities while the place itself is obscured (not having a name) but also foregone and forsaken. When local employees go on strike in protest of their working conditions and pay in the town's bottle plant—this community's sole major livelihood—the plant manager and government officials do not even deign to meet with the strikers. The "no-placeness" of the town is paradoxically inscribed precisely by the exclusive focus of the film on this one location secluded from the rest of the country; in panoramic shots of the landscape the desert stretches as far the camera's eye can reach. When early in the film Nicole notices that Sara is taking notes in her diary of what she is experiencing in her

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[175] I am employing the notion of ending in the sense Aristotle (1942) conceptualized it. If a beginning is "that which of necessity does not follow anything," then an end is "that which naturally … follows something else but nothing follows it" (16). To apply it to our discussion, the conclusion of *Turn Left* and the other films analyzed here suggest that what follows them has no place or relevance in the stories. Thereby, the ending becomes a point of breach or rupture between present and future.

[176] Ibid.

[177] Israeli film critic Uri Klein (2004) refers to the town and its bottle plant as "a vacuum of a romantic, historical, even sentimental fantasy" (23).

new place, Nicole tells her dismissively in this first exchange between them, "here you'll have only blank pages. Nothing happens here." Similarly, the excessive use of warm colors and the anachronistic contemporary Israeli music played at the end of the film underscore this town's lacuna; they both defy the film's sense of a real place. Instead of the emplacement of the community, the film offers its displacement, its "non-placement." Significantly then, the absence of the town as an actual locality signifies the otherwise abstract topos as a real, solid place.

Ultimately, the spatial topos corresponds to the temporal one; now and again the film's chronology is rendered through references to world events. Therefore, the "no-place" I discussed earlier corresponds to "no-time" as a characteristic of the town. The death of the mother in the film's penultimate scene is constructed to allude precisely to a time-warp; the moment when she slips into death the radio is announcing the historic moment of man landing on the moon. As Nesher indicated in his reference to this scene, this scene is meant to mark an end of an era and the commencement of a new stage in humankind.[178] Considering then that one of the film's first scenes has a mention of the 1968 student riots in Paris and that it concludes with another historic landmark furthers this film's rendering of the town and its inhabitants as a community sealed off in time and space—a "slipchronotope" between spatial and temporal markers.

[178] Nesher refers to this juxtaposition in his commentary on *Turn Left*'s DVD version and he also addressed it in the Q&A session following the screening of the film (in conjunction with the conference "The Mizrahi in Israeli Literature and Cinema" at the University of Texas at Austin, 3/7/2005).

The film's unique addressing of space and topos coincides with its treatment of hybridity. In contrast to the common postcolonial conceptualization of hybridity as a negotiated identity which evolves from the exchange the newcomer or minority member has with the dominant culture, to the extent that there is a cultural exchange in *Turn Left*, it is solely between one peripheral group and another. Initially, the filmic set-up of the bottle factory literalizes the notion of a melting pot; shots of new immigrants from various countries of origin working together are intercut with glass liquefied by fire. But then, this metaphor collapses—first, tensions rise between the "Indians" and the "Moroccans," and later, a strike erupts, bottle shreds are strewn throughout, and the production line comes to a halt. Furthermore, the lingual-cultural hybridity the film offers—Moroccan-French for one family and Indian-British for the other—is not one that is created in the new land but already imported from the families' countries of origin. Again, the film renders the "elsewhere," in this case, the homelands of India and Morocco, as concrete places associated with "origins," whereas the local town has ephemeral qualities.[179]

In place of the common cinematic ethno-sexual economy of the Bourekas, *Turn Left* proffers a new order implicated by separation. The cricket game scene is indicative of this new order; the match starts with some fusion and unity among the locals against the British team, but ends with a mass quarrel between the Moroccans and the Indians. In addition to the return of the (Ashkenazi) teacher to Tel Aviv and the return of Roger to

[179] Interestingly, although as I claimed above the town is being abstracted and its locality decontextualized, the use of wide lenses (having expanded depth-of-field) for the outdoor scenes contributes to the integration of people and space. In other words, in contrast to the film's overall feature of displacement, the inhabitants of the town seem to be, at least visually, fully emplaced.

his loving wife, the ethnic/cultural segregation in the film reaches its apex at the end of the film when Sara leaves the town to join the Israeli army, whereas following her mother's death, Nicole is bound to stay home and take care of the family. The bond between the two triggered some cultural exchanges involving other characters; the separation between them is the final seal of segregation. The music over the film's last scene and the end credits reinforces this interpretation. Seemingly, the lyrics of *At the End of the World*[180] are optimistic, "you would be able to forget all the bad days … you would be able to open a new chapter in your life." But every "would be able" is qualified by "even at the end of the world you will not be able to run away from yourself." The possibility (fantasy?) of ethnic and cultural exchange "at the end of the world" slips off and all that remains is the insular self. With "you will not be able to run away from yourself" in the background, the film's last shot reveals Nicole as (en)trapped within the two road signs—away from both Eilat and Tel Aviv.

Notwithstanding the sweeping, nearly unprecedented success *Turn Left* enjoyed in the box office,[181] numerous films reviewers critiqued the film on grounds of its escapist treatment of real social and ethnic problems.[182] Specifically, critiques often alluded to *Turn Left*'s affinity to the Bourekas films[183] and, thereby, to its reinscription of the

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[180] The song is performed by Ninet and lyrics are by Ehud Manor.
[181] See Russo (2005) and Pinto (2005). With 460,000 tickets sold, *Turn Left* has become one of highest-grossing Israeli films ever. Also, the film was playing in major movie theaters for over six months.
[182] See Schnitzer (2004), Klein, (2004), Mizrahi (2004), and Shuv (2004).
[183] See Schnitzer (2004), Mizrahi (2004), Shalit (2004), and Zakh (2004). Shalit qualifies the labeling of *Turn Left* a *Bourakas* film. Zach employs the term as he relays an exchange in the press between Nesher and a member of the Israeli Film Academy over the Academy's choices not to nominate *Turn Left* and its maker in the categories of best film and best director in what is known as the Israeli Oscar.

demeaning depiction of the Mizrahi. In this context, I would argue that this contemporary film is even more pernicious than the Bourekas films in its treatment of Israeli ethnicity. Resorting to a well-practiced device in the vilification of the other, for the most part as we have seen, Nesher does not pit Ashkenazim against Mizrahim, but rather, the Moroccans against the Indians. The slurs and slanders one group aims at the other have a dual effect: they render the denigration of the Mizrahim self-evident because even they recognize it, and they free the empowered group from explicitly engaging in the criticism of the deprecated or "inferior" Mizrahi.

And yet, based on the previous discussions in this chapter and sidestepping the film's stereotypical representations, it is possible to suggest that, to an extent, the film offers a progressive articulation of ethnic identities; instead of the pejorative "melting pot," the film recognizes the incommensurability of ethnic identities and, thus, it can even open a discursive space for identity politics.[184] Furthermore, the film challenges the construction of an all encompassing Mizrahi identity, even attesting to its artificiality, an issue broached again in the following discussion.

[184] This interpretation markedly departs from Nesher's own affirmative articulations of multiculturalism. Based on my interview with him (6/30/2004) and newspaper interviews, such as with Sasha Levi (9/18/2003) and Shmuel Duvdevani (Nesher, 2004), we can cull Nesher's two-prong understanding of multiculturalism: The first calls for a fertile exchange between the various groups. The second smacks of Anderson's (1983/1991) and Renan's (1990) notions of imagined national identity. "[Ethnicity] is fiction.… There are no Moroccans and Indians, there are people who imagine they are French and others who imagine they are British" (Nesher, 2004:8). In accordance with the second view, for Nesher there is no ethnic struggle in Israel, rather, it is the same kind of struggle he claims one finds in all societies; the new immigrant is fated to be repressed by the hegemonic veteran group (interview with y.s.).

A Normative Space: Marginality "In-Itself" or "For-Itself?"[185]

The first two sections of this chapter focused on Mizrahi films that construct a space marked by a performative act aiming at blurring spatial ethnic boundaries. As we have seen, this performative play often collapses, resulting in the re-inscription of the borders between center and periphery. In the following section we examined films in which the construction of Mizrahi space is characterized by its relations to the center—either as a real place or a "topos." Arguably, the most radical cinematic construction of the ethnic space is in films that eliminate the center altogether and fashion a realm that can no longer be mapped along the center/periphery dyad and, thereby, cast the "margins" as a normative space.

Inspired by the works of black feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Pratibha Parmar, Soja (1996) conceives margins as a space where the subaltern can claim its subjectivity not "'in relation to,' 'in opposition to,' or 'as a corrective to,'… *but in and for ourselves….* The margin refuses its authoritative emplacement as 'Other'" (Parmar, in Soja, 97-98, original emphasis). It is unclear whether Soja's rejection of the "authoritative emplacement as 'Other'" is meant to critique subjectification (and thereby place emphasis on "as Other") or perhaps, based on his postmodernist articulations of Thirdspace that I discussed earlier, it is an expression of his leeriness about "emplacement" in general. Chetrit's (1999) critique of *Sh'hur* for missing its chance "to be, just for once, an inner-Mizrahi story, with no need for the Ashkenazi background,"

[185] In Marxist terminology, "for-itself" refers to a group (class) which has developed a sense of common interests and an elevated political consciousness regarding its oppression. Conversely, "in-itself" is ascribed to a group lacking these characteristics.

(81) is in accordance with his appreciation of the construction of Mizrahi space in *Desperado Square*. Chetrit (2001) claims that in his elision of the center, filmmaker Torati "engages in presentation, not representation" (21)—a slice of life that the film is not even attempting to situate within a defined chronotope. The following discussion of *Desperado Square* and *My Family's Pizza* purports to delineate the parameters of the Mizrahi normative space—its construction, its potential to render collective identities, and the problematics of such construction.

Desperado Square
(*Kikar ha'Halomot*, Beni Torati, 2001)

Torati's film derives its title from graffiti the cinemaphile Yisrael (nicknamed the "Indian" for his love of Indian films) painted twenty five years ago.[186] It was an expression of people's frustration with the closing down of the movie theater—one of only two entertainment venues in that suburb of Tel Aviv. Two brothers owned the movie theater then—the deceased Morris Mandavon and Avram, who mysteriously left the place two and a half decades ago but now returns to pay a visit on his brother's first annual memorial service. The night before, Morris appeared in his son Nissim's dream, and he ordered him to break his old vow to never re-open the theater. Whereas the mother Seniora objects to the re-opening of the movie house, Nissim, his brother George, and all other residents of this neighborhood are eager to materialize the father's plea in that dream. The brothers and Aharon, the projectionist from days past, seek the "Indian's" opinion for what is the most appropriate film to screen in celebration of the re-

[186] Upon the completion of the film, the Hebrew title was changed from *Desperado Square* to the *Square of Dreams*.

opening of the movie theater. Without any hesitation, he recommends the Indian film *Sangam*—an old time favorite in that neighborhood.

As preparations are made for the screening, the brothers unearth a past love story between their mother and their uncle Avram, which in turn explains Seniora's resistance to the re-opening of the theater. As young single people, Seniora and Avram believed they were destined for each other. Oblivious to this blooming love, Morris, himself in love with Seniora, asked for her hand in marriage. Avram felt he could not stand in the way of his brother's passion for Seniora and a marriage agreed upon by the involved families. Out of respect to his brother and to assuage his own pain, Avram left the place only to return after his brother's death. So for Seniora, the imminent screening of *Sangam* entails the opening of old wounds and bringing back painful memories—in late night screenings, she used to privately watch *Sangam* with Avram. Also, the heartbreaking *Sangam* almost fully corresponds to her own story of unfulfilled love. (The film often intercuts between the two stories.)

The insular space of the neighborhood is invaded once when what seems to be a non-local young man tries to steal gas canisters from an elderly woman's front-yard. George catches him and, after the beating the thief suffers, it is clear he would never again set his foot in this place. A brief long shot of contemporary Tel Aviv, with its high-rise buildings and busy highways, is the only other violation of the neighborhood space; against the cold blue colors of the city in background, a wagon is carrying into the neighborhood a film projector for the screening of *Sangam*. These violations of the local space has the effect of enhancing rather than diminishing the topical insularity of the

place.[187] We may know that it is a Tel Aviv suburb, but the characters are oblivious to the adjacent city; unlike repetitive references to the center in films already discussed, in *Desperado Square* the name of the big city or the center (or for that matter of any other location) is never mentioned.

Congruent with this "space-warp" in *Desperado Square* is, again, the time warp; together, these compose an indetermined "time-zone" (chronotope). Other than the wagon (driven by a horse) and the "Indian's" motorcycle, no other means of transportation are seen in this neighborhood. The décor is mostly from the 1970s and, in a traditional celebration of the Jewish *Lag ba'Omer* holiday, the residents burn the effigy of Charles de Gaulle, who passed away thirty five years ago.[188] Instead of the linear progression of time, the film renders a circular time as evident in the conclusion which is a replay of the days of unperturbed love between Seniora and Avram. Following the public screening of *Sangam* in the film's penultimate scene, Seniora finds Avram sitting alone in the movie theater, and, as he used to do in the past, Aharon the projectionist arranges a late night screening just for this couple.

Cinematic quotations and repetitions, such as those in *Desperado Square*, underscore a film's construction of time indeterminacy; past and present often intersect to intimate the notion of time unchanged. *Desperado Square*'s ending constitutes not only

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[187] The film also includes two brief scenes that take place outside of this neighborhood. Both are set indoors and the locations are undefined.

[188] De Gaulle, whose support of Israel was unequivocal before the 1967 War, had a change of heart (and policy, as in his proclamation of a weapons embargo on Israel) due to the attack Israel launched against Arab countries despite his stern discouragements. For many Israelis, de Gaulle turned into their sworn enemy. It is customary among revelers of the *Lag ba'Omer* holiday to burn the effigies of historical figures they deem enemies of Israel or the Jewish people.

the film's narrative apex, but it also contains the film's ultimate rendition of an unidentified time and a secluded space. The lovers sitting alone in the movie theater can be seen as a metaphor for life in that isolated neighborhood. Camera positioning and editing enhance the sense of spatial non-contiguity by creating a sequence in which Seniora and Avram seem to be confined between two gazes—the Indian actor is looking at the couple from the screen and the projectionist (who resembles the Indian actor) peeks at them from his booth. The filmic screen is no longer a window to the world but a mirror, and a time-bound reality is supplanted by a timeless cinematic reflexivity; Seniora and Avram replay the story on the screen, actors "watch" their audience, and the late screening starts with a series of shots of the film apparatus' elements—lenses, projector, and film reels. Almost every component of the film's elaborate last shot (in this otherwise frugal production) alludes to the cinematic realm. As in days past, Yisrael/the "Indian" finds a spot on top of the movie theater roof to watch the lovers on the screen and in the theater. Thereby, the beginning of this shot addresses cinema indexically (the inclusion of another film) and figuratively (watching a film as a voyeuristic act). From that image, the camera climbs down to the big sign of *Sangam* on the front of the theater and, finally, it halts on the "Indian's" motorcycle front-light (projector) at the center of the frame (screen). I would argue that reflexivity, understood as the reference back to the medium itself rather than to the world, freezes time; it renders a realm where images mirror each other instead of temporally leading from one to another.

My Family's Pizza

(*Pitza Mishpahtit*, Ronen Amar, 2003)

Against distanced and cold images of a futuristic, sophisticated urban area where cars move swiftly on highway overpasses, filmmaker Amar reflects, "[A]t this era of globalization and technological progress, when the Internet is threatening to turn us into one little village, we are reverting into a time of small kingdoms, to a way of life in which each household is an entire world in-itself." The filmmaker's heavy North-African accent in his voice-over and exchanges with his family members immediately situates the film in the periphery, even before this film introduces Amar's household. This opening of the student documentary *My Family's Pizza* underscores "locality." The superhighway in the film's beginning is supplanted by a new space where the rest of the film is set—the shabby development town of Netivot in the southern part of Israel ("with a population of 25,000 and one bus route") and the indistinct non-diegetic music gives way to the town's ambience.

Now, the filmmaker is inviting us to his family's house. The first image of this locality is of Ronen's mother trying to wake up Maksim, the filmmaker's brother, by hitting his room window from the outside with a broomstick. Maksim, who co-owns a local pizza place, refuses to wake up for work, but the mother does not budge and, congruently, the camera lingers on this scene that acquaints us with the family. The pizza business is Maksim's best chance to recover from financial debts resulting from previous failing enterprises. ("My family and money is a good recipe for a bad trip.") The business, later solely owned by Maksim, turns into a family affair where the father becomes a delivery driver and the mother provides maintenance services; only the

filmmaker refuses to participate in this endeavor. Amar keeps his camera running (irrespective of his brother's threats at some point) even as the father and Maksim engage in insulting clamors about money, work, and perseverance. *My Family's Pizza* has a few allusions to the world outside Netivot, but even these mentions do not amount to the construction of the center as a reference point; if anything, Netivot is a "small kingdom" oblivious to the world outside.

The father has worked for years as a diamond polisher in Ramat Gan, but this large city adjacent to Tel Aviv is not rendered as the unmarked Ashkenazi center of power we might expect; according to Amar's narration, Maksim's desire is to make money so his father would no longer need to work for the Bukhari owners of the diamond business. Likewise, when Amar refers to his brother's stay in New York six years earlier, when he worked at a relative's pizza place in order to learn the recipe for success, the film leaves out images of New York City and, instead, employs a series of still pictures of the brother from that period, all but one taken indoors. This scene concludes with Amar's comment, "with all due respect to the secret of pizza-making, six months without mom's meat patties is a long time." Indeed, the brother returns home. Therefore, in contrast to the films discussed in the previous section, within the film diegesis, neither New York nor Tel Aviv/Ramat Gan is constructed as a topos, a yardstick by which marginality can be measured.

The creation of a distinct Mizrahi space in the films analyzed here evokes dilemmas pertaining to formulations about group identities and collective selves. The

problem hovering over subaltern groups' separatist tendencies in the construction of their identities and space is that they may lead to unwarranted articulations about origins and authenticity, an issue to which the scholarship of Memmi, Bhabha, Naficy, and Hall often attends. Laura Marks (1994) seeks to identify a minority voice that avoids that trap. Inspired by Foucault and Deleuze, she finds it in "cinematic archaeology"—a reference to hybrid and experimental diasporic films in which a subordinated group poses a challenge to the official regime of truth and carves out it own discursive space. According to Marks,

> [C]inematic archaeology is not a question of exhuming the "authentic voice" of a minority people—for that would be a unitary voice and, in fact, it would simply replicate the transparent domination by which a minority is forced to speak in a minority voice. The minority artist … must undo the double colonization, since the community is colonized both by the master's stories and by its own. (262)

How then can a community or an artist unbind this double colonization and still maintain a sense of group identity? If indeed prepositions about origins or authentic selves must presuppose societies consisting of relatively fixed, distinct, homogeneous, and, most importantly, cohesive groups ("unitary voice"), does it follow that a rejection of originary ideas or authenticity entails the dissolving of collective identities?

Prefacing his analysis of *Desperado Square*, Yonah (2001) contends that the launching of a subversive or alternative narrative to the dominant one is implicated in a subaltern group's formation of a collective identity. Importantly, what Yonah perceives as Torati's greatest accomplishment in this film is his facilitation of Mizrahi (collective)

identity while avoiding suggestions of original, stable, and monolithic group identity. For Yonah, Torati's film reveals the arbitrary and artificial way Mizrahi identity is fashioned, but he only perfunctorily alludes to the film's specifics that may support his assertion. The following discussion is meant to examine more closely Yonah's prepositions in order to better conceptualize the cinematic space *Desperado Square* sets for its peripheral Mizrahi community.

The characters' successful journey to their past at the end of *Desperado Square*—the re-opening of the movie theater and the reunion between Avram and Seniora—is not intended as a cinematic archaeology to identify origins, let alone as a design to situate an "authentic" Mizrahi culture in the Arab homelands. The invented, arbitrary, and artificial nature of a collective Mizrahi identity is proffered throughout *Desperado Square*. What specifically do the Mizrahim of this film seek to relive? What are the cultural venues they prefer that may distinguish them from other communities? As mentioned before, there are only two venues of entertainment for this neighborhood's residents—the movie theater that is best known for its Indian films and a club where Greek music is played. Clearly, collective Mizrahi identity cannot find its "authentic" origins in these traditions or cultural outlets (Indian and Greek), unknown to most Mizrahim prior to their arrival in Israel.[189] The artificiality of constructing a collective cultural or ethnic identity based on these two venues is furthered when we consider that, with few exceptions, the scenes in the club and the movie theater are the only ones that are shot indoors; they are realms sealed onto themselves rather than contiguous to the "lived" spaces. Indeed, in his

[189] The argument that Mizrahi identity (not only the term) is a rather recent formation was discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

analysis of *Desperado Square*, Chetrit (2001) relates the Mizrahi fondness of Indian films and Greek music not to a cultural reconnection but to a rupture. Chetrit maintains that the film takes us back to a point at time and state of mind when

> [the Mizrahim] were still able to forgive and patiently absorb so much oppression and violence. We were so naïve, to the point that we adapted those Indian and Greek [cultures] as substitutes for our Arab culture … [but] it does not occur to us to ask the most obvious question: why Indian, Greek, and later Turkish?... The answer to this question is yet another reason to cry in *Desperado Square*: The Zionist culture police allowed us to wet our kerchiefs in Indian films and to smash plates in a zestful Greek dance, as long as we loyally kept eradicating our Arabness. (24)

What then is the nature of the collectives to which Yonah (2001) and Chetrit (2001) tend and, likewise, what does the marginalized space these collectives occupy imply? In her analysis of old and new Mizrahi films, Lubin (1999a) argues,

> It is here, on the margins … that the space of the ethnic 'home,' the location of the excluded, is situated. The margins can supply such a space, a space for the creation of Otherness as accepted, a 'normative' center, since they, the margins, are located far from the centralized gaze of the monitoring, policing hegemony. The margins are where ethnicity can find home…. (175)

Ostensibly, these articulations are contradictory in terms; Lubin maintains the term "margin," but she also conceives of a possibility that the margin/periphery is constructed as a normative space, or as she adds, a space that claims for itself the "status of the putatively 'non-marked' " (ibid.). By definition, periphery and "margin" are marked

derivative terms; they accrue meaning only in relation to what they are not. How then can films about societal margins (a marked space) construct these localities as normative (unmarked spaces)? To provide at least a partial resolution to this dilemma we need to distinguish between the realm within the film diegesis and the spectatorial space. The films discussed here clearly attempt to devise a normative Mizrahi space. However, within the film diegeses of *Desperado Square* and *My Family's Pizza*, the normativization of space is a moot issue; for the inhabitants of the neighborhoods depicted in these films their habitus is the norm. Therefore, whereas the film's personas may not acknowledge their places as margins/marginal, viewers do; for them, the screening of old Indian films in *Desperado Square* and the Amars' travails in *My Family's Pizza* signify marginality. Indeed, these films derive their meaning and energy and accrue their polemic power, at least partially, precisely from the audiences' preconceived recognition of these spaces as margins and, hence, non-normative.

Returning now to the query posited in this section's heading, *Desperado Square* and *My Family's Pizza* clearly construct Mizrahi communities "in-themselves" only; there is hardly a suggestion in these films' texts of a group realizing its common interests vis-à-vis the hegemonic group, let alone attempting, as a collective, to challenge its subjugation. Importantly, though, my argument here does not imply that the cinematic construction of a community "in-itself"—marginality as a normative space created by the elision of the center (hitherto considered the norm)—*ipso facto* entails the depoliticization of ethno-social dilemmas. Rather, it implies that to render it a "for-itself" group, the normativization of the subalterns should be a choice made by the members of

that community, not the default condition depicted in *Desperado Square* and *My Family's Pizza*.

Thus, I do not question the aforementioned arguments made by Yonah's (2001), Chetrit (2001), and Lubin (1999a) about the subversive power of the films they discuss, but I do find it necessary to specifically situate this potential subversion in the realm of reception, not the films' dialogues, narratives, or characters. Indeed, viewers' reading of these films may be guided by high consciousness of the socioethnic dilemma, and in turn they might even confer onto the characters class and ethnicity-related common causes the films elide. Similarly, in no way is my discussion suggesting that films eliciting a community "for-itself" are more likely to effect change or raise consciousness than films constructing communities "in-themselves," such as the ones analyzed here. It is simply that in the former the sense of common interests and the urge for a collective course of action are embedded in the pro-filmic materials, whereas films such as *Desperado Square* and *My Family's Pizza* release their characters from this burden and may prod the viewer to read them as harsh ethno-social commentaries.

The Mizrahi Niche: Emplacement and Displacement

In this section, we will further our previous discussions of marginality by expounding the imbrication of the subaltern's space with dilemmas pertaining to power relations. For this inquiry, we will focus on two interconnected areas—the public funding system for cinema and television programming—in light of contemporary multicultural models. Articulations about cinematic space where the subaltern speaks

"not in relation to" are often implicated by a progressive multicultural position that advocates the co-existence of ethnic and national groups side by side. Proponents of this discourse of identity politics envision a society where various groups can nurture their cultural traditions without being usurped, dominated, and coerced by other, more powerful groups. But as our previous discussions have implied, it is prudent to inquire whether, within this seemingly progressive model of multiculturalism, power imbalances remain mostly intact and subjectification and subjection infiltrate through the back door. In other words, we should ask ourselves who benefits from the fragmentation of a unitary discourse and the rendering of multiple voices, under what terms do they take place, who sets the rules for this putatively "free play," and lastly, who listens when the subaltern speaks "in-/for-itself."[190]

Bhabha's ("The Third Space: Interview," 1990b) aforementioned discussion of the distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference reveals his suspicion of liberal democracy's understanding of and motivation for multiculturalism. The rejection of and unwillingness to accept true cultural differences translate, in the name of multiculturalism, into the promotion of cultural diversity predicated on subordination and containment of the subaltern groups and, ultimately, to a reinscription of the values of those determining the parameters of that cultural diversity.

> A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that 'these other cultures are fine,

[190] Naficy (2001) also recasts Spivak's maxim to ask "can the subaltern be heard?" My emphasis here differs though from Naficy's; whereas he examines the problem of "the cacophony of voices competing for attention in the market" (11), my interest in rephrasing Spivak's rhetorical question is, as we shall see, to profess to the "ghettoization" of the subaltern's voice.

> but we must be able to locate them within our own grid.' This is what I mean by a *creation* of cultural diversity and a *containment* of cultural difference … the universalism that paradoxically permits diversity masks ethnocentric norms, values and interests. (208, original emphasis)

Relating these assertions to cinema, we may identify two congruent possibilities in the containment of subaltern cinema. First, the hegemonic group expects filmmakers to portray their peripheral groups in accordance with *its* conception of the latter—one of modalities of "the burden of representation" discussed earlier. As we shall see, there is a subtle, yet real, system of rewards and penalties rendered by the dominant group and affecting the filmmakers involved. The other dimension of containment, as Naficy (2001) suggests in his analysis of Third World and exilic cinema, is that those filmmakers are "generally not expected to make films about either outsiders or other insider groups" (67). The power asymmetry regarding this expectation is blatant; no doubts are raised about the dominant group's ability and entitlement to represent not only itself but all other groups as well.

In my interview with David Ofek (5/12/2004), co-director with Yossi Madmony of the successful TV series *Bat Yam - New York* and the film *The Barbecue People* it inspired, Ofek described to me the reaction to the screenplay draft expressed by representatives of Channel 2's franchisee Keshet, which co-sponsored the film. Considering that both Ofek and Madmony are of Mizrahi origin and that their subject-matter in *The Barbecue People* is the story of one Jewish-Iraqi family, the script readers had concrete expectations about the film narrative and style and deemed the draft "too

cold." For Ofek, this statement betrays deeply embedded perceptions and anticipations that Mizrahim should be associated with hospitality, emotiveness, and conviviality, not with human alienation as the script was designed to portray them. In Ofek's words, "we felt they [Keshet's critics] were reducing us" (also, delimiting us).[191] Similarly, in interviews with these two filmmakers and others, I often heard that Mizrahi directors making their films on Mizrahi communities or people are labeled "Mizrahi" filmmakers. Again, the asymmetry between Mizrahi filmmakers and others is glaring; regardless of what Ashkenazi filmmakers portray in their films—their community, culture, and history or that of others—they would not be designated an ethnic label and thus remain "unmarked."

In this last section of the chapter I will propose that in order to more fully realize the extent of the cinematic containment of the Other's culture, we should move beyond textual issues of representation and inquire about the broader context in which films are made and pursue questions of film finance and distribution. It is beyond the scope of this work to engage in a comprehensive application of cultural policy and political economy theories. Yet, it is necessary to address certain elements of the Israeli film and television infrastructure and to understand filmmaking as a process consisting of (pre)production, the film itself, and distribution, in order to better articulate the "Mizrahi niche."[192]

[191] The Hebrew phrase Ofek used is "metzamtzemim otanu."
[192] Although reception is yet another element, this work only tangentially addresses it.

FILM FUNDS

An analysis of the most prominent fund supporting documentarists—The New Foundation for Cinema and Television (The New Fund)—elucidates the formation of niche cinema. The New Fund was created in 1993 by the Ministry of the Arts and, since its inception, it has supported over 150 films, mostly documentaries.[193] Based on the mandate given to it and, hence, for its own financial sustenance, The New Fund has to exhibit a record of supporting films about various national, religious/secular, and ethnic groups in Israel. The New Fund's support of films is based on the quality of the proposed projects (smaller amounts are given to project development and project completion). Often, The New Fund plays a pivotal role in marketing and distributing to local and foreign broadcasters and art movie houses the films produced with its financial assistance. Therefore, The New Fund provides a complete institutional framework for preproduction, production, and distribution. Under the directorship of David Fisher since September 1999, The New Fund has paved the way for the impressive record of success Israeli documentaries are enjoying in foreign markets, and particularly, in some of the most prestigious international film festivals, such as those in Amsterdam (idfa), Toronto (HotDocs), Munich, and Berlin.[194]

And yet, a number of the filmmakers I interviewed question the merits of The New Fund's promotion of Mizrahi cinema. One of the key areas this critique attends to is The New Fund's Designated Track, the creation of which was meant as a form of affirmative action (in Hebrew, "corrective discrimination"), where funds for

[193] See The New Fund's web-site http://www.nfct.org.il/english/nfct/About.htm.
[194] Ibid.

underprivileged or underrepresented groups, including Arabs, "minorities" (ethnic groups), Jewish settlers in the territories, and handicapped people, are set aside.[195] However, this funding structure raises several problems. On a discursive level is The New Fund's reinscription of minority films as marked; labeled as "Designated Tracks"/"special" projects, these films are distinguished, even excluded, from an "all-Israeli," broadly defined, and, thereby, mostly non-marked categories.[196] Relatedly, several filmmakers maintained in our conversations that when a proposed film tackles issues suitable for one of the designated tracks, it is not likely to receive funds if that proposal is submitted for the general category. Also problematic is that the monetary allocations for the Designated Track's projects are often lower than those offered to non-designated films.[197] Finally, whereas the general category is open to applicants throughout the year, proposals for the Designated Track are accepted about once a year, and, most importantly, each year only one sub-category offers funding (e.g., this year, 2005, it is the Designated Track's "people with handicap").

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[195] The structure of The New Fund is rather complex. The New Fund supports films in a general, non-designated category. In addition, there are several tracks/special projects; as mentioned, one of which is the "Designated Track" another is the Social Fund (a collaboration between The New Fund and Israel's Channel 2 on which I will elaborate in the following discussions). "Mizrahi cinema," which is not an actual category, falls under the Designated Track's subcategory of "minorities."

[196] It is noteworthy in this context that The New Fund has one group of lectors for the general category and another is selected ad hoc to determine nominations and fund allocations in the "designated" category.

[197] According to Fisher (interviews on 6/8/2004 and 6/8/2005), films in the Designated Track receive between 45% to 85% of the amounts provided for films in the "non-designated" Social Fund. However, whereas several filmmakers contend that the amounts provided for films in the Designated Track are lower than for others "non-category" films, Fisher maintains that, overall, The New Fund equally supports "general" and "designated" projects.

Based on the interviews referenced below and others, it becomes clear to some filmmakers that The New Fund furthers the displacement and estrangement of the Mizrahim precisely by the creation of the Mizrahi niche cinema—a space that defines and contains subversive voices more than nourishes them. In my interview with Madmony, he more than once used the terms "ghetto" and "ghettoizing" to address this fund's (and others') policies and purposes vis-à-vis Mizrahi cinema.[198] Similarly, Benchetrit, whose documentary *Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle* (*Ru'ah Kadim*: *Cronica Maroka'it*, 2002) was partially financed by The New Fund, deemed the track system racist and the quotas it imposes (e.g., it would support one Mizrahi film or one Arab film) stifling.[199] On similar grounds, film producer and social and political activist Osnat Trabelsi vehemently attacked The New Fund.[200] At the time I conducted the interviews with her, she was producing a film about the Ashkenazim. The film, titled *Ashkenaz*, strives to reveal the extent to which Israelis find it difficult to "mark" the Ashkenazi (as is evident, for example, in answers passersby give to the question posited to them by the filmmaker, "what is an Ashkenazi?"). Trabelsi and director Rachel Jones submitted their film proposal to The New Fund, requesting that the project would be considered under the "minorities" Designated Track. Their request was meant to be more than simply an effort to raise money for the making of the film; it was designed to provoke The New Fund's director and its lectors to put films about Ashkenazim in the same niche designated for other ethnic groups. Clearly, Trabelsi and Jones's unusual

[198] Interview with Madmony, 5/18/2004.
[199] Interview with Benchetrit, 6/24/2004.
[200] Interviews with Trabelsi, 6/8/2004 and 6/2/2005.

request, which was intended to reveal the problematics involved in the transparency of the unmarked Ashkenazi, coincides with the thesis the film itself offers.

The limited support The New Fund can offer its Designated Track films featured centrally in my interview with Ziv Naveh[201]—director of the Gesher (in Hebrew, "bridge") public multicultural fund. When Naveh (the first Mizrahi ever to head any film public fund!) took office at the beginning of 2005, she set out to revamp the current system of financial allocation to "designated"/multicultural films. Israel's Cinema Law stipulates that 4.25% (approximately $560,000, annually) of the overall budget the Film Council[202] administers should be channeled to "designated" films—projects engaging multiculturalism and often produced by members of underrepresented groups in Israel. In recent years, Gesher has received twice the amount allocated to The New Fund for its Designated Track projects. However, whereas for the latter these funds constitute only a small portion (approximately $187,000, annually) of the overall money appropriated to it by the Film Council, being a "specialized" fund (supporting *only* multicultural films), Gesher's $373,000 allocation is all that is budgeted for by the Council.[203] As a "specialized" fund then, Gesher's sole effort is to support otherwise unprivileged filmmakers and to enable them to broach issues rarely presented on the Israeli screen. Naveh's undertaking to have Gesher administer the entire budget for "designated" projects is meant to tend to some of the concerns the Mizrahi filmmakers I mentioned

[201] Interview with Ziv Naveh, 6/12/2005. Financial information provided here is based on this interview.
[202] The Film Council is a public institution that administers the funds the government allocates to cinema (including film festivals) in accordance with the Cinema Law.
[203] Like other Israeli film foundations, Gesher raises additional funds from public and private sources.

above expressed. For Naveh, the splitting of the (already relatively small) "designated" films' budget between various funds is detrimental to filmmakers engaging "designated" films. She reiterated that The New Fund's support of "designated" projects is meant merely to comply with the mandate given to it (six times during the course of the interview she employed the phrase "putting a check mark"), but in practice is categorically peripheral, considering The New Fund's allocations, priorities, and efforts regarding the general, "non-designated" projects.[204]

Filmmaker Yamin Messika, whose work includes low-budget independent films, holds the most unorthodox view among Mizrahi filmmakers about public and government funds for Israeli films.[205] Unlike his fellow filmmakers who advocate a remedy to what they perceive an unjust allocation of resources, Messika proposes to expunge the current funding system in its entirety and turn film and television industries into a fully private enterprise of the American ilk, where films' financial success will be determined by the private sector—audiences, distributors, and broadcasters. Specifically, instead of the current system where films compete for public funds mostly in the pre-production phase, Messika proffers a free market competition based on the finished product and the use of public funds mainly to boost films' distribution. Messika employs The New Fund's Social Fund to demonstrate how the funding system and the broader

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[204] It is noteworthy that the Film Council appropriates more funds to the Rabinowitz film foundation than to The New Fund or Gesher. Yet, in line with our discussion here, this fund no longer seeks the Council's funds for "designated" films, leaving that amount of $560,000 to be split between The New Fund and Gesher. Lastly, The Israel Film Fund provides the most generous financial support, but its allocations are for feature films only. This latter fund's choice of the features it supports is based solely on the proposed films' quality; no categories or quotas of the kind The New Fund and Gesher have exist there.
[205] Interviews 6/24/2004 and 6/8/2005.

context in which it operates pre-determine films' distribution and broadcasting avenues and success. The Social Fund is a collaboration between The New Fund, which administers it, and the Second Authority, which administers Israel's Channel 2. This collaborative endeavor guarantees Channel 2's broadcasting (hence, exposure and financial benefits) of films supported by this fund. For Messika, it is clear then that films not supported by the Social Fund have comparatively diminished opportunities to be shown on Israel's most popular television channel.[206] Indeed, in our interviews,[207] Fisher underscored that films supported by The New Fund, regardless of the specific category, have the added benefit of a semi-official seal of quality. More broadly then, based also on my previous discussions about the "ghettoizing" funding system, it is expected that, at least some extent, Mizrahi films are not as likely to benefit from the pre-production funding/broadcasting synergies and the various distribution initiatives The New Fund has undertaken.

TELEVISION

The following discussion will explore the marginalization or ghettoization of Mizrahi cinema on Israeli television and will go beyond the problems broached thus far by Messika and others. Although my focus veers into the domain of Israeli television,

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[206] Messika, a filmmaker of Libyan origin who received his film education in the U.S., has made over ten films in Israel, one of which—*Kerem ha'Tikva* (1997)—was funded by The Social Fund. Noteworthy in the context of our discussion is his distribution strategy, which relies almost exclusively on selling video copies (hereby the term *sirte casetot* [lit., "cassette films"]) of his films to music and video stores (booths) in areas heavily populated or trafficked by Mizrahim, such as the marketplace district in south Tel Aviv. Chapter 5 will elaborate on the subversive aspect of this distribution method. (Information here is based on my interviews with Messika, see above, and on Shiran [2001], Banai [2004], Vagner [1997], and Yoaz [1997]).

[207] Interviews with David Fisher, 6/8/2004 and 6/8/2005.

film and television are highly interconnected in the realm of Israeli media. The previous discussion already alluded to one aspect of this imbrication, and another is the common practice where Israeli filmmakers and other members of the film community are involved in television productions, mainly television drama and series. Moreover, institutional and financial connections between the two media industries were made explicit since the passing in 1999 of the Cinema Law, which stipulates the partial funding of the film industry by revenues Channel 2 and cable companies generate from their operations. In order to further pursue the issue of marginalization and containment of Mizrahi cinema and television, it is necessary then to peruse aspects of the infrastructure of Israeli television and to address certain formative changes that have been rendered over the years.

From the launching of television broadcasting in 1968 until the early 1990s, Israel had one television channel only—the non-commercial, state-owned, terrestrial Channel 1 (IBA). The heavy control the government exerted over key appointments and contents of Channel 1 created television audiences (and special interest business groups) desperately awaiting alternative broadcastings. Expectations ran particularly high with the introduction of cable television and the inauguration of channel 2—the first commercial television channel in Israel.[208] This channel, modeled mostly after UK's ITV, includes three private franchisees selected by government tenders. The Second Authority, whose executive power consists of 15 government-appointed council members selected from

[208] Channel 2 started its full, independent operation in 1993. Cable operators were licensed at the beginning in 1989, but penetrating a significant section of Israeli households took place only after Channel 2 went on the air (see Ruby Ginel, 1997, and Yuval Elizur, 1995).

various public sectors, constitutes the institutional framework under which Channel 2 operates. The Second Authority law from 1993 situates Channel 2 in the public domain (among other things, the law requires that the council protect "public interest"), but the Channel's direct ties with and dependency on the private (business) and political sectors are also anchored in the law.[209]

Minority groups, Mizrahim included, had much to celebrate or at least to hope for with the expansion of media outlets in Israel. We can identify a number of potential benefits for Israel's subaltern groups regarding the creation of the Second Authority and Channel 2. Stipulated by law, "public interest" was meant to expand Israeli television's discursive space and to offer an alternative to the monolithic government-oriented social and political perspective of Channel 1. Similarly, the franchisees were required to include at least 50% locally produced programs on the screen.[210] (The law has often been overlooked and cynically abused by the franchisees.) These expectations were furthered with the sweeping changes rendered by the introduction and rapid availability of cable television. A specific act in the direction of opening up media space to subaltern groups was a recommendation (partially implemented) by a public advising committee formed by the government to permit the operation of five new niche cable channels, including Orthodox-Jewish, Arabic, Russian, and Middle Eastern music channels.[211] (As for the last one, why not an explicitly Mizrahi channel and why music?) Today, in addition to the

[209] For a more detailed discussion of the Second Authority law and the often conflicting private, public, and government interests pertaining to the operation of Channel 2, see Gideon Doron (1998), Ginel (1997), and Elizur (1995).
[210] See "Israel TV Revolution" (1993/4).
[211] See Doron (1998).

terrestrial channels 1 and 2, there are approximately forty cable channels and seventy satellite channels, and both cable and satellite television offer niche channels. The extent to which the immense fragmentation of electronic media, that just over a decade ago were fully centralized, is truly revolutionary is expressed in Israeli media scholars' fear that the trend may lead to the disintegration of core values and culture that, supposedly, have held Israeli society together.[212]

To the chagrin of those who advocate a multiculturalism predicated on cultural difference and identity politics and with the potential to induce the decentralization of institutional and political power—and, possibly, to the comfort of those who feared the disintegration of unifying values or national agendas if Israeli television indeed were to commit to radically diverse programming—Channel 2, cable television, and satellite television have not offered a true or revolutionary alternative where minority groups have similar footing and presence in Israeli media as to the presence of the dominant groups.[213] The following discussion will allude to the continuing marginalization of the Mizrahi community on television as implicated by its policies and programming.

The critique offered in Noam Yuran's study of Israel's Channel 2 may be summarized by the title of his book—*Channel 2: The New Statism* (2001).[214] Yuran's

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[212] See Elihu Katz's analysis and recommendations in the *Beracha Report* (1999) and Doron's (1998) critique of what he terms the Israeli media's move "toward a multicultural model." The deep concerns about the social and political fragmentation of the Israeli public and about the multicultural trend inspired by identity politics extend beyond the field of media and are evident in the works of scholars from a wide range of disciplines and with different political convictions. See, for example, Gadi Taub (2004) and Nissim Calderon (2000).

[213] See, for example, Avraham's (2000) reference to Yehimovich's study, which finds that 86% of senior editors/decision-makers in the Israeli media are Ashkenazim.

[214] Peculiarly, the Hebrew title *Arutz 2: ha'Mamlakhtiut ha'Hadasha* is translated in the book as *The New Statehood*. The proper translation of "Mamlakhtiut" is "statism."

main thesis is that ideological conservatism and pan-Israeli values are just as rampant in the new channel as they have been in the old statist television channel.[215] For Yuran, the centralization of television has not been abolished, but rather it simply switched hands, so that the power over and control of media are now in the hands of a few profit-driven wealthy companies. According to Yuran, the program variety that Channel 2 is putatively offering is merely an illusion; the underlying text and the latent purpose are to goad viewers (back) into a unifying agenda. Channel 2's policies and codes of operation, Yuran claims, can be construed by the franchisees' close ties with political powers (the connection between money and governance) and, therefore, these media owners have no desire to offer or promote meaningful discursive and political alternatives. Further explanation for the channel's operation is that a true fragmentation of the television audience (which, considering the size of Israel's population, is already relatively small)—a likely outcome if radical programming alternatives are introduced—is determinant of commercial television, whose subsistence depends on advertising money and large audiences.[216]

Although not specifically addressing Israel's Channel 2, Zimerman (2003) offers a scathing critique of government and public funding of Israeli cinema that coincides with Yuran's analysis. Inspired by Marcuse's discussion of capitalism's creation of

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[215] Filmmaker Eyal Halfon (interview, 6/2/2004) expressed a similar concern; he maintained that channel 2 is the new tribal fire-camp—a media space marked by unanimity rather than heterogeneity. These concerns triggered Halfon and some other members of the film/TV community in Israel to organize a few years ago in order to intervene in the government's then impending tender for launching Channel 10—Israel's second commercial channel. Their efforts failed and the new commercial channel went on the air as originally planned.

[216] Clearly, broadcasters can sometimes benefit from niche audiences, a topic to which I return briefly in the next discussion.

"false needs," Zimerman contends that, like any product's offering, the seeming plethora of film themes is a conceit where people are led to believe in their freedom of choice, while in actuality, all offerings are a variation on the same theme and are meant to distract people from real needs and dilemmas. In the case of Israeli cinema, this theme or framework, according to Zimerman, is a nationalist-Zionist one, dictated by the people who hold key positions in Israeli film funds. I would argue then that, taken together, Yuran's and Zimerman's analyses of various facets of Israeli media make it abundantly clear that media privatization, the provision of mostly fictive dilemmas, the connection between capital and governance, and the designation of the viewing audiences not as publics, but as consumers, can only be harmful to Israel's unprivileged groups.[217]

Haim Bouzaglo, a prominent director both in cinema and television and one of a relatively few Mizrahi filmmakers who operate successfully from within the "system," described in our interview[218] the specific features of the displacement of Mizrahi provocative programming on Channel 2's Tel'ad franchisee.[219] Despite the impressive high ratings of his controversial television series *Zinzana*,[220] the original prime-time slot the franchisee designated to the program was moved to a later hour at night. Similarly, four years after its completion, the third season of the program has not yet been broadcast. For Bouzaglo, the explanation for these "abnormalities" lies in the deep-rooted desire to contain and marginalize Mizrahi culture and society.

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[217] I use the term "Publics" in order to underscore the plurality of audiences and to allude to Habermas's conceptualization of public sphere.
[218] Interview with Haim Bouzaglo, 6/17/2004. Information below is based on this interview.
[219] Since 2005, Tel'ad is no longer one of Channel 2's franchisees.
[220] The program features mostly Mizrahi characters and is set in locations such as a prison and mental asylum.

Ron Kahlili, a pivotal player in the creation of Mizrahi programming on Channel 2, cable, and satellite television, echoes Yuran's and Zimerman's theses in his analysis of programming policies. In his view, programming is largely implicated by capitalist agenda and motivations, not necessarily by ideology, and clearly not by public needs.[221] Addressing Kahlili's assertion will, in turn, help us to explain Tel'ad's peculiar treatment of Bouzaglo's *Zinzana*. Kahlili ran the first and only Mizrahi niche channel—Briza—which overall enjoyed significantly high ratings. This channel was carried on the Israeli satellite station Yes, starting in 2000. For Kahlili, Yes's inclusion of Briza meant to capitalize on the periphery where cable was not yet available. In 2003, Yes had a new CEO who decided to cut 90% of Briza's budget. Kahlili realized that his executive and Yes's board of trustees actually intended to close down the channel. The reason, as he conveyed it to me, was that high ratings alone are insufficient; Yes's trustees and CEO cared about the "quality" of the audiences. They wanted consumers/audiences whom advertisers desire—those who can spend big sums of money and not the poor Mizrahi audiences that are presumed to watch Briza. It is tempting then to intimate the discursive circularity regarding the displacement of the Mizrahi. Upon their immigration, Mizrahim were doomed to occupy the lower socioeconomic status because of their cultural otherness; in recent years, it is their economic status that feeds back into their marginalization, thus reinscribing their otherness.

We have seen then that, despite the emergence of a multicultural media space in Israel where various group putatively have an equal place, niche cinema and television

[221] Interview with Ron Kahlili, 6/10/2004. The information below is based on Kahlili's provisions in this interview.

are delimiting, marking, and marginalizing Mizrahi audiences, directors/producers, and programmers. The next chapter will explore the possibilities where marginality can provide the geographical and discursive space for the subaltern to organize, accrete power, and even posit a challenge to the hegemonic center. Indeed, whereas this chapter focused on the construction of the Mizrahim as a group "in-itself," Chapter 5 will tend to the cinematic formation of a collective "for-itself"—people's recognition of their group's predicament and the actions they deem necessary to effect change.

Chapter 5

The Absence of Power and the Power of Absence: Victimhood, Struggle, and Agency

The dream of the Zionist left is dead. We are now left with my dream.

Kokhavi Shemesh, in *The Black Panthers Speak*

We [Mizrahim] have already conquered the music scene in Israel; now onward to cinema.[222]

Eli Hamo (filmmaker and social activist)

The Dialectics of Power

The scholarship of the Frankfurt School yielded a cogent articulation of power relations; on one end, there is the hegemony that is always already the purveyor of power and, on the other, there are the vulnerable subalterns suffering the oppressive power exerted over them. This chapter seeks to explore discursive positions and specific spaces that allow for the dominated group to challenge the dominating group(s) and even to effect societal changes. In the first section, I will provide the general analytical framework by inquiring how, dialectically, the relegation of a group to the margins can also be mobilizing and even empowering for that group. However, in using the title "The Absence of Power and the Power of Absence," I do not wish to imply that the lack of power, e.g., a group marginalization, can be fully compensated for by certain empowering forces that subordination and margins may provide, nor do I propose a symmetry between the dominating and the dominated groups whereby the former's

[222] Interview, 6/2/2004.

usurping of power has the same weight and consequences as the latter's attempts to gain political clout. Rather, I want to articulate the multivalence of power relations and, specifically, how group consciousness and agency can develop not in spite of the group's marginality, but because of it.

At the risk of a crude generalization, I suggested in Chapter 1 that Adorno and Horkheimer's (1979) work theorized the subaltern as a subject without power. Conversely, I proposed that Foucault's conceptualization of ancillary power approximates a position of power without subjects. As mentioned, for Foucault "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1990:95). In Foucault's theory, then, not only is subjectivity emptied of its full significance, but individuals' or groups' resistance, volition, and desire to effect change are eclipsed as well.[223] Alternatively, the following discussion expounds on Bhabha's postmodernist and postcolonial work and, in particular, his articulations of the colonized/subaltern intervention. Bhabha's understanding of "ambivalence" regarding self and Other, and regarding power and the lack thereof, is quite relevant to my discussion here, both because it attests to the dialectics of power and because Bhabha assigns liminality and margins a pivotal role in postcolonial agency and power-play.[224] But my discussion of Bhabha's theory of subjectivity and intervention (agency) and of related postmodernist and postcolonial scholarship, including bell hooks' and Hall's, is also meant to assess

[223] See, for example, the following (quoted in Chapter 1): "A historical event is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the [temporary] usurpation of power" (1984:88) and (effective history as) "the iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance" (88-89).
[224] See Bhabha's "DissemiNation" (1990a) and "The Third Space: Interview" (1990b).

their usefulness in providing a theoretical framework for the analysis of agency, struggle, and protest in Mizrahi cinema.

In order to articulate Bhabha's position on intervention and the sites in which he situates it, we need to recapitulate his theoretical tenets. Three related models inform Bhabha's scholarship—deconstructionist-semiotic, psychoanalytical, and postcolonial. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Derrida's *différance*, one element of which is the deferral or instability of meaning, is critical in deconstructionist thought. This impossibility of lingual closure is congruent with Bhabha's assertion that the binary construction of self versus Other (or colonizer versus colonized) ought to collapse once those pairs are understood to be ever-negotiated and slippery.[225] The Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical model supplies Bhabha with the ambivalent nature of subjectification and desire, one dimension of which is the fear of the Other (due to the acknowledgment of difference) and the resulting disavowal (rejection of difference). A related aspect is this theory's construction of the Other as an object to be controlled (again, due to its difference/lack), but also desired, and onto which taboo desires are projected. The Others have what the self does not and they can act in a manner which is prohibited for the self. Finally, Fanon's (1963 and 1967) postcolonial theory, which tends to the instability of cultural signification and national narratives guides Bhabha in rendering the minority

[225] See Bhabha's (1985) "Signs Taken for Wonders" and specifically pp. 150 and 158.

challenge ("minority history") not so much an inversion of History as a discursive space marked by indeterminacy and in-betweenness.[226]

We have already noticed that the hybrid is featured centrally in Bhabha's theory. The hybrid is the product of colonial power: "[T]he colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory" (1985:154). For Bhabha, the colonizer's disavowal of difference (and lack) involves the fetishist discursive reproduction of the Other/hybrid, which is always marked by excess and slippage.

As suggested by Young (1990), in the framework of the dialectics of power, Bhabha's most explicit and cogent references to the potential for hybridity to become the site of resistance and intervention is found in "Signs Taken for Wonders" (1985):

> If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (154, original emphasis)

Importantly, Bhabha is not interested in articulating the hybrid according to ontological origins, as is often the case; even when Bhabha expounds the colonized hybrid, the latter is identified by processes of subjectification and discourse encoded in the

[226] For Bhabha's employment of Fanon, see "DissemiNation" (1990a) and particularly the section "Of Margins and Minorities" pp. 152-157. See also "The Commitment to Theory" (1994a), mainly pp. 37-38.

psychoanalytical and deconstructionist principles I outlined. This perspective is conducive to my analysis of Mizrahi cinema; in this work my usage of the term "hybrid" does not allude to one's mixed origins, but rather, to his/her consignment to the psychic or discursive margins. Put differently, I am interested in hybridity not as an ontological "reality" but as a discourse which, as my discussion of Bhabha's work has shown, is predicated on ambivalence.

Yet, we may ask, is it possible to identify agency in the contingent world Bhabha renders? The dilemma arises only if we think in terms of modernist notions of subjectivity; indeed, within Bhabha's re-conceptualization of contingency and agency, this becomes a moot question. In his "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency" (1994d), Bhabha proffers that agency *is* the activity of the contingent; it is the différance of meaning and the recognition of the arbitrariness of the sign that open up space for agency and social consciousness. Agency requires the "return of the subject," but as a temporality rather than as an instigator of closure. Bhabha then concedes that the elements of social consciousness—"deliberative, individual action and specificity in analysis"—are prerequisites for agency as long as they are "thought outside that epistemology that insists on the subject as always prior to the social or on the knowledge of the social as necessarily subsuming or sublating the particular 'difference' in the transcendent homogeneity of the general" (185).

Still, these articulations about the relations between contingency and subjectivity elide a more pertinent question: Is there *subaltern* agency if hybridity (the space that marks the instability and arbitrariness of the sign) is produced and facilitated primarily, as

we have seen, by the hegemonic group? Put differently, to what extent can hybrid subjects have a position of exteriority to the colonial discourse of ambivalence from which they can undermine the colonizer/hegemony? One way Bhabha tackles these issues is by assigning importance not necessarily to the subjects per se, but to the knowledge that emanates from their social marginality: "[I]t is from those who have suffered the sentence of history—subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement—that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking" (172).

The dialectics of power rendered by Bhabha's theory of hybridity, marginality, and subjectification reverberates in other postmodern scholarship and figures especially centrally in contemporary racial/ethnic and feminist studies that attempt to identify disobedience and intervention from within the postmodern framework. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler argues that interpellation is doomed to fail because it signifies more than it intended; it produces the performative excess. The slippage between, on the one hand, the discursive economy and command and, on the other hand, its actual rendering (citation) and effect opens a space for disobedience. In her critique of Althusser's conceptualization of subjectivities, Butler delineates the various modalities in which the law of interpellation can be refused:

> Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it. (122)

Alluding to the dialectical power of positionality and place, bell hooks's *Yearning* (1990) articulates marginality in terms of the decentered subject's site of intended change and resistance, not only a place marked by deprivation. The transformation hooks addresses in this context engages the individual and the collective—"a community of resistance" (149). hooks makes it clear that the power to intervene and resist is not a result of one's consignment to the margins, but rather, it is one's (difficult) choice, an argument captured well in the title—"Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness"—she gives to one of her essays in *Yearning*. To an extent, this view emanates from her assertion that marginality is as much a position and actual praxis ("lived experience") as it is a place. In reference to her experience as a member of a black American family living in a small Kentucky town, hooks points to a specific power the decentered subject has precisely because of this unique positioning beside the center or mainstream—the experienced knowledge of two sets of codes and perspectives: "We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both" (ibid.).

Hall's (1996b) aforementioned allusion to the ironic aspect of the postmodernist age, where margins and center are often re-conceptualized and lose their earlier signification, offers a related argument regarding a relative advantage the peripheral groups may have. As we have seen in Chapter 1, postmodernist discourse about the dismantling and dispersion of cohesive and unitary identities coincides with the rise of identity politics and "the slow contradictory movement from nationalism to ethnicity" (119). That the margins (e.g., people of color) are becoming centered ("I become

centered”), is another allusion not only to the dialectics of power, but also to the formation (however contingent) of group identities. Again, this centering of the ethnic/racial subject clearly does not imply the concomitant inversion of power relations; rather, it signifies the possibility of articulating identity and laying “a kind of claim to certain parts of earth” (115) in an era where the hegemonic unmarked subject may be denied these privileges.

Bakhtin’s theory of speech and its application to media studies in works such as Stam’s (1989) and Martín-Barbero’s (1993) designate further roles and significance to the subaltern. Whereas for Bhabha, as I have implied, the challenge to the hegemonic group (the colonizer) is encoded in the slippage of *its* articulation of Otherness—a conceptualization in which no explicit agency is given to the subaltern—Bakhtin’s theory assigns specific agency to the subaltern by attesting to the dialogical nature of any discourse. We may propose then that the films of the subaltern are poised favorably to evince that centrifugal force in the ever-negotiated realm of heteroglossia. Relating all these positions on agency to the study of the subaltern in cinema, we can now broach these questions: What is the alternative or subversive address the subaltern can then voice in cinema? What are the prospects that minority/minor cinema can effect change? Relatedly, what are some of the impacts subaltern cinema may have on both minority communities and the hegemonic groups which it challenges?

The aptness of cinema to guide us in reconceptualizing the power of the margins and to offer sites of intervention and struggle is encoded as much in its fundamental aesthetics as in its narratives. The cinematic notion of “mimetic surplus,” coupled with

Stephen Heath's (1975) claim for the unresolved tension between a film's narrative and its discourse, fully concur with the abovementioned arguments regarding the openness of the text and the structural impossibility of the medium to provide a dialogic closure. Similarly, for Marks (1994), a cinematic truth—a cogent and unifying discourse—is necessarily an impossibility considering that the medium's constitutive elements are multifarious and multilayered and that rather than complement each other they form a cinematic polyphony.[227] Consequently, Marks's "A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema" (1994) partakes in Bhabha's (1994d) effort to articulate agency that is devoid of essentialist positions and in his assertions that the subversive voice should not be unitary, intend to offer an ultimate truth, nor be appropriated as such:[228]

> [T]he power for the people in the process of becoming is the power of the false, an assertion that will not privilege *their* experience as truth either, only undermine the hegemonic character of official images, clichés, and other totalizing regimes of truth.… In the cinema, 'powers of the false' are at work when there is no single point that can be referred to as real or true. (Marks, 1994:260, original emphasis)

"The power of the false" in Mark's discussion of diasporan cinema/people is intended to undo the double colonization (i.e., subjugation predicated on internally and externally

[227] Marks's reference here is specifically to the tension between the visual and verbal aspects of cinema.

[228] Bhabha expresses this position clearly in his discussion of minority discourse in "DissemiNation" (1990a): "[T]here is no reason to believe that such marks of difference [heterogeneity and the 'living perplexity'] cannot inscribe a 'history' of the people or become the gathering points of political solidarity. They will not, however, celebrate the monumentality of historicist memory, the sociological totality of society, or the homogeneity of cultural experience" (157).

produced discourses); the alternative, subversive discourse should steer away from either an imitation or inversion of the hegemonic one.

Employing Deleuze, Marks asks minority cinema for nothing less than to "destroy myths from the inside" (1994:262), and best equipped for this endeavor is the hybrid. In her essay, Marks employs "hybrid" in the context of both a genre and its pro-filmic agents[229]—resistant characters "who dispute the filmmaker's construction of truth at every turn" (ibid.). In sum, Marks's key intervention here is in relating Heath's (1975) allusions about the futility of the film's narrative to contain the discourse(s) to the study of minority/hybrid cinema, while also wrenching out his conceptualizations from the psychoanalytical-deconstructionist domain of the individual and situating them in that of the collective—"[M]inority media make it clear, by virtue of their strained relation to dominant languages, that *no* utterance is individual" (Marks, 1994:257, original emphasis).

In the next sections I will offer my assessment and analysis of Mizrahi cinema in light of the theoretical framework laid here, but first, it is worthwhile to turn back to Lubin's (1999b) essay on *Sh'hur* and her conceptualization of the film's subversive discourse.[230] Although Lubin assigns as much importance to the feminist discourse of the film as to the ethnic one (and to the connection between the two), I will relay here only her discussion of the latter. Lubin begins her analysis by stating unequivocally that *sh'hur*—the black magic ritual—does work; on most of the occasions it is performed in

[229] The term Marks uses here in reference to these semi-fictional, semi-authentic characters is Deleuze's "intercessors."
[230] See discussion in Chapter 2.

the film, it yields the desired results. However, Lubin is more interested in *sh'hur* as an organizing agent than as an event—she treats it as a constitutive force that is intended to supplant the Zionist master narrative and to tell history from a framework other than that of the exclusionary national one.

In accordance with the earlier discussions in this section, Lubin (1994b) emphasizes that the film's drive (and accomplishment) is not based on its criticism of the dominant discourse and on the formation of a cohesive and stable alternative, rather, the film is meant to carve a Mizrahi (and feminine) space that is not subtended or defined by Israel's hegemonic group(s). An attempt to sabotage the Zionist master narrative by simply inverting it would, again, situate and constitute the Mizrahim in relation to those whom they are not—the Ashkenazim: "[W]hen the critical act is operating from the margins, it does not entail then the negation of the autonomy of the displaced; it does not necessitate the subordination of the critics and their positioning vis-à-vis the center" (431).

Similarly, *Sh'hur*'s challenge to the naturalness and omnipresence (and natural presence) of the Ashkenazim—indeed, the structuring absence of this hegemonic group—at least to an extent renders *them* "marked." Lubin (1994b) refers to the relations between the film's frame story and the story inside in order to demonstrate that, if anything, "naturalness" and "the norm" are associated here with the marginal group of the Mizrahim. The frame story, which depicts the "Ashkenized" adult Heli, is revealed to be a peripheral tale and, ultimately, the main, internal story (taking place exclusively in a Mizrahi space) deconstructs it and reveals the artificiality of both the frame story as a

literary/cinematic device and the all-encompassing Zionist master narrative to which it correlates. No longer constructed as organizing forces in *Sh'hur*, the frame story and the Zionist narrative collapse and are dethroned from their position as the necessary, yet transparent agents. Indeed, Lubin's position here entertains the possibility that *Sh'hur* is designed to accomplish no less than to "destroy [the] myth[s] from the inside" (Deleuze, in Marks, 1994:262).

To further this discussion, we may now look not only at the film's subversive power, but also at its transgressive qualities. As discussed earlier in this work, "cinematic excess/surplus" often refers to the tension between discourse and the richness of the narrative that destabilizes rigid and unitary readings of the cinematic text. Consequently, by its very definition, "excess" entails or connotes overflow, that which cannot be contained and, therefore, transgresses boundaries. Feminist scholars, including Julia Kristeva (1982) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994), refer to the body's orifices as sites of transgression and boundary violation between the inside and the outside. For Grosz, the body's "orifices and surfaces can represent the sites of cultural marginality, places of social entry and exit, regions of confrontation or compromise" (193). Physiologically, these orifices are the gateway for a person's body fluids, such as blood, vomit, saliva, and semen. It is precisely its fluidity, shapelessness, and "uncontainability"—and therefore the risk it poses to physical, social, and cultural order—that renders this excess abject (Kristeva's term) or transgressive. Since *Sh'hur*'s diegesis is replete with references to blood, urine, saliva, tears, sweat, and vomit, we may propose then that the film's

excessive usage of these bodily fluids is meant to undermine order.[231] Put differently, I suggest here that the film's emphasis on bodily excess furthers our previous discussion in offering that it is not only the inside story that undermines the frame story, the local narrative that displaces the Zionist master narrative, and the Mizrahi that challenges the Ashkenazi, but it is the oppressed body itself that asks to defy the dictates of the official order.

Victimhood and Agency

Contemporary scholarship in media and cultural studies often addresses quandaries of victimization and victimhood only haphazardly and, instead, prefers to focus on agency, change, and consciousness. To a large extent, the limited discourse about victimhood derives from contemporary cultural studies' disenchantment with "top-down" conceptualizations about people's cultures, societies, and politics as articulated by orthodox Marxism and the Frankfurt School. This is clearly not meant to suggest that recent scholarship discounts the severity of atrocities and oppressions that have taken place in the modern era, but rather to point to the emergence of theoretical models that problematize a monolithic reading of history and power. One of the most significant contributions of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was its effort

[231] The film's most explicit scene of "bodily repellence" takes place in the *sh'hur* the mother performs on her son Shlomo to relieve him from his romantic misfortune. She is covered with a white sheet only and then also wraps her naked son with it. The mother pushes down Sholomo's head (as if giving birth to him) and calls "exit, exit as you exited your mother's womb" in what amounts to an act of exorcism. On a strictly textual level, the excess—curse/person—in this *sh'hur* ritual is repelled to restore order rather than to threaten it. Interestingly though, this *sh'hur* does fail; Shlomo will marry the woman he dishonored/deflowered and will give up his plan to study at the Sorbonne.

to articulate agency and change within pre-given, deep-seated, structural power imbalances.

In my view, another related factor that further contributed to the gradual diminishing of scholarly interest in victimhood pertains to postmodernist and poststructuralist conceptualizations that deem cohesive individual and collective identities social constructs only and, thereby, eschew notions of "natural" or essentialist identities. To elaborate on my argument, we may look at a position adopted by those afflicted by the perpetrators' heinous deeds—in professing their victimhood, the victims are likely to argue that "we are discriminated against because of who we *are* (e.g., African Americans, Mizrahim, or women)." In claiming such discrimination, they proffer a position that smacks of essentialism.[232] The oppression or victimization are understood by its victims as a targeting of their group based on their racial and ethnic origins, even on biology or sex, not on their sociopolitical consciousness, agenda, or agency. Emphasis on victimhood then easily lends itself to or derives from essentialist articulations of which the contemporary theories I have discussed here are highly suspicious.

In my analysis of Mizrahi cinema and, particularly, of protest films, I seek to reinstate the issues of victimhood and victimization. My purpose in taking this analytical path is precisely to point to the relevancy of victimhood to agency and to attribute the

[232] As I perused in Chapter 1, essentialist positions may be rendered by both the dominant and the dominated groups. Relatedly, when victims identify their origins as the cause for discrimination, that does not entail that *they* resort to an essentialist definition of their group; it may be a critique of the dominant group for *its* formulations of biological/essentialist truths that are employed to justify oppression.

formation of group identities to the imbrication of the two. Put differently, my approach here is meant to steer away from two problematic positions: one that altogether elides discourse on victimhood and focuses only on agency, and the other, a view that draws a categorical distinction between victimhood and agency. This latter position has been central to the Zionist narrative and possesses unique characteristics. We then need to expound on "victimhood" and to examine its specific modalities in the context of the Israeli psyche in order to better realize the position I offered here and the alternative it provides. This discussion will then revisit the dilemma of essentialism, only here it will be explored in the context of ethnic struggle and not of culture as I have done in Chapter 3.

In its casting of the *sabra* as the binary opposite of the diasporic Jew, the Zionist movement envisioned a "new breed of Jew" marked by confidence, pride, assertiveness, independence, and action. If the *sabra* is isomorphic with agency, victimization conjures up passivity. Accordingly, in the years immediately following World War II, Zionism saw mostly shame in the Holocaust of European Jews; in contrast to the glorification of those who participated in the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1944, other exterminated Jews were rendered a submissive mass, "led like lambs to the slaughter."[233] Importantly, though, I would argue that the fate of Holocaust survivors ("human dust" in the words of Ben-Gurion) and dead is associated with victimization, not with victimhood, and I want

[233] For an elaborate discussion of Zionism's position toward and treatment of Holocaust victims and survivors and the construction of the latter in terms diametrically opposite those associated with the *sabra*, see Segev's *The Seventh Million* (1991) and, particularly, the chapter "A Barrier of Blood and Silence"; Elon's "An Open Wound" in *The Israelis: Founders and Sons*' (1971); and Zertal's *From Catastrophe to Power: Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel* (1998).

to distinguish here between the two. Whereas victimization often focuses on the action itself (e.g., the physical or emotional violation and abuse of subjects) or its experience by those on whom this action is inflicted, victimhood attests to a condition and a state of mind of the victims. A sense of victimhood, at least from the perspective of the hegemonic group (or perpetrators), often connotes not only victims' fixation on their predicament, but also the exploitation of their condition to gain various societal and financial benefits they may not deserve. Therefore, if "victimization" often arouses sympathy toward the victims and underscores their innocence, "victimhood" is often meant to elicit the opposite reaction. As I suggested in my introduction, the broaching of the Mizrahi plight in Israeli discourse is often dismissed as yet another cry of victimhood. The Hebrew term "korbanut" denotes precisely what "victimhood" does in English, but it has a strong connotation of people's undue whining and an unjustified sense of entitlement. In other words, if being a victim has been reproved in Zionist discourse, betraying sentiments of victimhood is even further reproached; these subjects are seen as flaunting their pain, already a social taboo, where it is assumed that other members of society suffered no less. It is in this context that, in the Israeli realm, victimhood has been construed in diametrical opposition to the willingness to sacrifice one's self for the state.[234] Whereas sacrifice signifies the willingness of individuals to give away their goods for the collective and even to risk their lives for a national cause, victimhood is

[234] For the centrality in the Israeli psyche of the readiness to sacrifice one's self, see Elihu Katz and Michael Gurevitch (1976:276). In their study of culture and communication in Israel, these researchers provided their respondents with 22 different characteristics and asked them to rank them according to what they believed best defined the Jewish/Israeli people then (the study began in 1970); "self-sacrifice for the ideals of the people" was ranked second.

associated with groups that persist in getting what, in the first place, it is doubtful they deserve.

Yet, Loshitzky (2001) identifies "victimhood contest" in the emergence of identity politics in contemporary Israel—"the former pride in making sacrifice for the state has been replaced by charges of being victimized by the state" (68). In "The Culture of Complaint Rides Again," Gideon Samet (9/20/2002) critiques Benchetrit's *Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle* protest film, which I will discuss here, exactly by relating the accusation against Moroccans' (and the filmmaker's) unjust whining to the putatively general fad of "victimhood contest." Samet argues sarcastically that if the film is of any value, or more precisely, if it "describes any relevant phenomenon, it is the film's reverting to the culture of complaint" (B1). However, we may suggest that the dominant group's dismissal of victimhood is meant precisely to silence protest and, thereby, to reinscribe power imbalances.

The films discussed below betray, at least to an extent, a sense of victimhood which, as I have shown, easily lends itself to essentialist positions (or, alternatively, is informed by them). I will first focus on *The Black Panthers (in Israel) Speak*, *Have You Heard about the Panthers?*, and *Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle*, all documentaries that explicitly explore the Mizrahi predicament and struggle. I would argue that Mizrahi subjects/characters are initially motivated by a sense of victimhood and that the films' construction of Mizrahi identity is predicated mostly on ethnic and geographical origins. Yet, guided by Fuss's (1989) re-articulation of essentialism,[235] I will be most interested in

[235] See discussion in Chapter 3.

discerning the filmic presentation of the interrelations between structure and change, victimhood and consciousness/agency, and essentialist and constructionist positions. As we shall see, all three films guide us to reassess essentialist conceptualizations of *Mizrahiyut*; they attest to a Mizrahi struggle that is consciousness-based (rather than prescribed or predetermined). Finally, our findings here will guide us in the next chapter's discussion about Mizrahi cinema's attempt to open up space for struggles based on groups' solidarity and coalitions.

The Black Panthers (in Israel) Speak
(*ha'Panterim ha'Sh'horim Medabrim*, Eli Hamo and Sami Shalom Chetrit, 2003)

The film *The Black Panthers Speak* assembles the founders and the most prominent figures of the Israeli Black Panthers movement of the early 1970s, who together reminisce on the origins of the movement, the sociopolitical realm in which they operated, and the racial and social struggles that inspired them. Haim Hanegbi, an activist in the late radical movement Matzpen[236] provides his perspective on his movement's collaboration with the Black Panthers. The film and its speakers explore these issues as a springboard to assess the movement's legacy and its relevancy to the Mizrahi condition at the present. *The Black Panthers* begins with the caption, "This independent film was produced with no financial assistance from any Israeli cinema foundation, all of which have rejected it."[237] At the very outset then, the film evokes a sense of victimhood by creating a subtle analogy between the (negative) reception of the

[236] "Matzpen," literally a compass, is related to the Hebrew word for conscience. The movement was established in the early 1960s.
[237] After the completion of the film, it received a grant from the Israeli Makor Foundation.

film by the Israeli media establishment and the discrimination of the Mizrahim in general. Consequently, over still pictures of the Musrara neighborhood in Jerusalem where the Black Panthers' revolt burst forth in March 1971, crawling titles provide information about the Mizrahim's dire state. The Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, defined by their origins, are constructed along binary terms—for example, "1970 – Israel is divided. The economy and power dominated by Ashkenazim (European Jews) while Mizrahi Jews were exploited as cheap laborers." Statistics about the Mizrahi unemployment, education, and poverty are interspersed throughout the film, again, often to starkly contrast them with the socioeconomic status of the Ashkenazi. The emphasis on unchanged conditions (the continuity between past and present), the homogenization of each of the two groups, and the references to ethnic/geographical origins re-inscribe essentialist formulations of the two groups.

Yet I would argue that, like other films discussed in this section, *The Black Panthers Speak* does not fall into a reactionary form of essentialism, but rather, to use Fuss's (1989) terms, it deploys and activates it.[238] As we have seen, the historical and discursive contextualization of a position, movement, and struggle often render simplistic and sweeping generalizations associated with essentialism untenable. The film (like the study "*The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel 1948-2003*," authored by the film's co-director

[238] Fuss (1989) points out that the terms used in reference to essentialism—"lapsing into" and "falling into" vs. "deploying" and "activating"—allude to a polarity in our articulation of "essentialism"; whereas the former pair "implies that essentialism is inherently reactionary," the latter suggests that "essentialism may have some strategic or interventionary value" (20). In her view, since essentialism needs to always be contextualized, it is imprudent to create dichotomous (essentialist) distinctions about it. To an extent, then, by resorting to that distinction, I am employing Fuss's terms precisely in the manner of which she is suspicious.

Chetrit) explores the modalities of the Mizrahi condition and strives to reveal the evolvement of ethnic protest over the years and the connections between its outbursts—indeed, to attest to change through continuity. Former Black Panthers Reuven Abergil and Haim Hanegbi claim in the film's first interviews that the Black Panthers' revolt was a direct offspring of the Wadi Salib riots of 1959.[239] Later, the Mizrahi Orthodox party of Shas is understood to rise to power thanks to the efforts of the Black Panthers. (Most of the film's participants render this trajectory of the movement detrimental to the Mizrahi cause.) The progression of the Mizrahi struggle and the allusions the film makes to the various political and social positions the Mizrahim have taken over the years encourage complex, dynamic, contingent, and multilayered formulations of *Mizrahiyut* and ethnic struggle.

One element in the "de-essentialization" of the Mizrahi in *The Black Panthers Speak* merits further discussion. Kokhavi Shemesh, one of the Black Panthers' ideologues, reveals that his movement had to confront Mizrahi organizations which were co-opted into and collaborated with Israeli authorities' repression of the movement. Similarly, he is dismayed that, at the present, no Mizrahi revolution can take place because many of the potential "soldiers" of the revolution—the Mizrahi poor—have

[239] Wadi Salib is a neighborhood in Haifa populated at the time of the riots mostly by North African Jews who had been brought there to take the place of its former Arab residents. Due to problems of housing overcrowded housing, poverty, and unemployment, tensions between residents and authorities ran high even prior to July 9, 1959. On that day, a policeman shot a drunken and unruly denizen of a local café after failing to stop him. What started as an orderly protest, led by David Ben-Harush the following day, turned into violent riots where demonstrators destroyed and burned public and private properties. The police reacted with harsh force, but the riots spread to other parts of the country and lasted several weeks. (I use the term "riots" here, but depending on the position one takes, other terms used are "uprising," "rebellion," "events," and "revolt)." For a more complete account of the events and the terms used to define it, see Chetrit (2004a:101-112), Swirski (1989), and Dahan-Kalev (1999).

turned to drugs rather than to social and political activism. In these references, Shemesh not only eschews notions of Mizrahi unity and comity, but he plays with the notion that agency is highly imbricated with awareness, positions taken, and choices made, and is less affected by pre-given origins.

Have You Heard about the Panthers?
(*Shama'ta al ha'Panterim?*, Nissim Mossek, 2002)

In this film, Mossek incorporates clips from his 1973 film about the Black Panthers—*Have You Heard about the Panthers, Mr. Moshe*?—with a journey he is taking now with three of the movement's leaders to find the whereabouts of the movement's other founders. Again, this film engages the victimization of the Mizrahi and the film characters' sense of victimhood. Already in the first few scenes, the film addresses the Israeli authorities' ill-treatment of residents of the Musrara and Sham'aa Mizrahi neighborhoods in Jerusalem. In addition to the dire housing conditions there, the film implies that the settling of the new immigrants in this neighborhood near the border rendered them cannon fodder in the years prior to the 1967 War. Locals of these neighborhoods attest in the film that, triggered by increased property values in these areas after the '67 War, the government attempted to evict them. Also, they relay their sense of anger and frustration following Prime Minister Golda Meir's and Mayor of Jerusalem Teddy Kollek's disparaging and condescending responses to their pleas at that time.[240] Similarly, Charlie Bitton, one of the three leaders the film features, maintains that, on his way to screen the film abroad in the 1970s, Israeli *Shabbak* (GSS—General Security

[240] For example, Golda Meir's well-known (and mocked) reference to the Panthers—"they are not nice boys" ("hem lo bahurim nehmadim").

Service, the equivalent of the American FBI) agents stole from his suitcase what was believed to be the film's only copy.[241] However, like *The Black Panthers Speak*, this film does not dwell on victimhood; instead, it is designed to raise consciousness, and ultimately, it centers on the residues and relevancy of the 1970s struggle to Israeli society today. Mossek and his interlocutors contemplate the possibility of re-establishing the movement to fight injustice in present-day social and ethnic power disparities. Importantly, the titles of both films on the Black Panthers attest to the filmmakers' intent to expose a voice that had previously been elided, ignored, or unknown ("have you heard"/"the Black Panthers speak"); the films, literally, provide a stage for the Panthers to speak and to be heard in what amounts to "presencing" the absence of this movement.

Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle
(*Ru'ah Kadim: Cronica Maroka'it*, David Benchetrit, 2002)

The film (shown on television as a mini-series) features six Moroccan Jews who immigrated to Israel still in their formative years: former Black Panther Reuven Abergil; poet, scholar, educator, and social activist Sami Shalom Chetrit; Ezer Bitton, resident and former secretary general of a small settlement near the Lebanese border; Ovad Abutbul, an activist in the public-housing campaign; Arieh Deri, former leader of the Shas party who was removed from office and convicted on charges of embezzlement; and Labor party member and ex-government minister Shlomo Ben-Ami.

More than the other films discussed above, *Ancient Winds* provides an elaborate chronicle of victimization. The film opens with the Moroccan national anthem, thus

[241] The original film was never screened and is considered lost. But then, a few years ago, a second copy of the film was found in the archives of the Jerusalem Cinematheque.

situating the film, from its outset, outside the hegemonic Zionist discourse. The Moroccan anthem is played over images of the demonstration on September 3, 1999, when Deri's supporters gathered to say farewell to their leader who was about to start his time in jail. Deri's reference to this day of conviction as "The Bastille Day of Sephardic Jewry" is meant to conjure up images of group persecution and repression (and, as we shall see, also of a Sephardi revolution), themes to which he returns throughout his film interviews.

In other scenes, Deri and Ben-Ami express their disappointment with their Ashkenazi political partners; Abergil reveals the systematic selection (filtering out) the Israel absorption authorities enacted in bringing Moroccan Jews to Israel, often allowing only the young to immigrate; and Abutbul points to housing policies that blatantly discriminated against the Mizrahim. The film intensifies the mode of victimhood by underscoring former Prime Minister Barak's public apology to the "*ma'abara* generation" (read Mizrahi) in September 1997 for the wrongs inflicted on them by previous Israeli Labor governments. Similarly, in the following sequence, the camera lingers on a mass demonstration following Barak's election in May 17, 1999; the crowd supporting Barak keeps chanting "anything but Shas" in a plea for the elected Prime Minister to form a coalition government without the Orthodox Mizrahi party, which has just won the substantial number of 17 seats in the Israeli parliament. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the scenes impels us to interrelate the events and, thereby, it confers an additional meaning on our reading of each. A prolonged audio overlap of "anything but Shas" leads from the first scene to the second. Not only does Barak's apology in the

earlier scene seem hypocritical, but, in turn, the anti-Shas sentiments are understood within the ethnic framework of that apology. *Ancient Winds* points to the racial aspect of this demonstration; not surprisingly, Deri, Shas's leader until later that year, suggests in the film that had the demonstrators called "anything but Yisrael ba'Aliya" (a party of and for Russian newcomers), the Russian immigrants would have turned to the U.N. to condemn Israel for its racism.

While the film unabashedly resorts to victimhood predicated on essentialist positions, its agenda lies elsewhere; it calls for swift, radical, and revolutionary sociopolitical changes. In the next section I will assess the frameworks, discourses, and characteristics of *Ancient Winds'* and other documentary and feature films' treatment of protest and collective struggle. In concluding our discussion about victimhood and consciousness, it bears noting that the filmmakers whose works are discussed here—Hamo, Mossek, and Benchetrit—conveyed in my interviews with them that they eschew notions of *Mizrahiyut* (and thereby of ethnic struggle) predicated on origins; rather, they deem it a state of mind, awareness, and sensitivity which is also open to Ashkenazim.[242] Accordingly, they offer that Ashkenazim can actually have "Mizrahi consciousness" and participate in the Mizrahi struggle. Conversely, they suggested, Mizrahim, who lack this awareness and do not protest the Mizrahi condition, are either active "collaborators" with the oppressive hegemony or acquiesce and reveal servile compliance with it; either way, they are not to be the soldiers of the ethno-political fight the filmmakers envision.

[242] Interviews with Eli Hamo, 6/2/2004, Nissim Mossek, 5/14/2004, and David Benchetrit, 6/24/2004.

Protest Cinema

THE MODALITIES OF MIZRAHI PROTEST

In the peculiarity of Israel's political semiotics, the Left is defined mostly by its relatively dovish position vis-à-vis the Arab/Israeli conflict and not, as in most countries worldwide, by its social(ist) agenda. It is mainly in this context that we should understand Shemesh's assertion, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, that the Zionist Left's enterprise has failed. His pithy statement is congruent with the title of Chetrit's 1999 collection of essays "*The Ashkenazi Revolution is Dead*."[243] As a matter of fact, Chetrit and former Black Panthers featured in the films discussed here take a much more dovish/leftist position regarding the Arabs/Palestinians than any Israeli government has ever taken; their "eulogy" of the Ashkenazi-Zionist, socialist-"leftist" revolution is, therefore, not meant to champion the political right, but to spark a social protest and even revolution.[244]

Indeed, the language used in the films discussed here often conjures up a struggle tantamount to a civil war, a coup where Mizrahim ought to forcefully grab power rather than comply with the present social/ethnic order. Participants in these films employ "outburst," "explosion," and "uprising" in their allusions to the change they call for. Former Black Panther Victor Alush angrily cries in *The Black Panthers Speak*, "you take

[243] The title of Chetrit's essay collection (1999) is a direct reference to Zionist Kalman Katzanelson's *The Ashkenazi Revolution* (1964), which renders the Zionist movement a noble Ashkenazi enterprise. The book is rampant with extreme racist addresses regarding the Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews and its publication was eventually outlawed.

[244] The Black Panthers' contacts with the PLO in the early 1970s, a time when the Israeli governments outlawed such contacts, and Bitton's membership in the Arab-Jewish Haddash communist party are a few indications to the movement's leaders' position regarding the Palestinian issue.

your rights; you don't receive them." Importantly, the Hebrew title of Benchetrit's film (literally, "Eastern Wind") is taken from Ezekiel's prophecy (Chapter 19) about destruction and doom.[245] The images and editing employed in *Ancient Winds* further the participants' ominous tone. The film opens with a dedication to David Ben-Harush, the leader and instigator of the Wadi Salib riots.[246] Following the dedication is the sequence of the protest against Deri's impeding imprisonment. Importantly, Deri starts his address in this scene with "Remember this day, friends … The revolution day," and then he repeats "The Bastille Day of Sephardic Jewry" twice. Deri has also the last say in Benchetrit's film—over images of fire burning to venerate the grave of Sephardi spiritual leader the Baba Sali, the former government minister and Knesset member Arieh Deri prophesies "I have no doubt that, eventually, a great explosion will take place here."

I alluded earlier to the incongruence between social and political positions regarding the Israeli parliamentary reality. The anomaly has another dimension which has been eschewed in Mizrahi protest and posed a serious challenge to the current order. Former Black Panther Shemesh relates in *The Black Panthers Speak* that he used to encounter people who suggested that he and his fellow activists needed to avoid politics and focus instead on ethnic and social issues, a plea that is, again, encoded in the attempt to wrench the social from the political. His response to them has been, "Why not [engage in politics]? Is it an Ashkenazi privilege?" Haim Hanegbi of Matzpen expresses similar sentiments in the film. For him, the history of Israel is rife with instances in which social

[245] "East wind" appears in verse 12: "But she was plucked up in fury, She was cast down to the ground, And the east wind dried up her fruit."
[246] Similarly, Mossek dedicates his film *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* to Haim Turgeman, a recalcitrant and bold former Panther, who passed away after the filming was over.

issues had to give way to "security emergencies." (The Black Panthers movement itself dissolved with the start of the 1973 War.) It is in this context that Black Panther Sa'adia Marciano professes in this film that waving the social and the political flags together is essential. In their heyday, the Panthers understood that one dilemma—the ethnic and social discrimination—cannot be solved without attending to the other—the oppression of the Palestinians, a topic to which I will return in the next chapter.

Similarly, former government minister Ben-Ami decries in Benchetrit's *Ancient Winds* what he deems the fiction that the social is Mizrahi and the political is Ashkenazi. Although he held various portfolios during his political career, Ben-Ami maintains that the expectation from him as a Mizrahi was, as he maintains, "to worry about how to provide [also, divide] bread and not how to divide Jerusalem." Accordingly, he conceives it an Israeli "invention" that the weak should formulate their own social discourse and agenda rather than rely on and operate within a system in which such a discourse is a common current; again, his assertion becomes even more damning considering that the Labor party (of which he was a member) used to be marked as a socialist one.

PROTEST FILMS AND FILMS ABOUT PROTEST

In my interview with film producer and social and political activist Osnat Trabelsi, she drew a distinction between protest films and films about protest.[247] In this section, I intend to employ this distinction in order to hone our analytical tools for our

[247] Interview on 6/8/2004. Trabelsi maintained this distinction in her presentation at the Van Leer Institute, which was then published as "Mizrahi Self-Erasure in the Van Leer Institute," *Kedma* (Portal), 1/16/2003.

inquiry into the Mizrahi struggle in Israeli cinema. My focus on protest films is motivated by two considerations: (1) Protest films are best posited to explore the dialectics of power because, by their very nature, they are meant to empower and mobilize those who have been victimized; (2) Because protest cinema is an exemplar of the medium's formulations of struggle and agency, it can serve as a litmus test for the potency of the theories addressing social or cinematic intervention and subversion, which I discussed earlier, including Bhabha's and Marks's articulations of alternative truth(s), group identity, and the relations between hybridity and struggle.

I would suggest the following characterizations of a protest film in the context of Mizrahi cinema. (1) The film explicitly contests the hegemony and, relatedly, the protest is a constitutive element of the film. (2) In order to challenge the dominant Ashkenazi-Zionist group, the film has to articulate aspects of the Mizrahi dilemma and offer a solution. In other words, victimization and the sense of victimhood need to be imbricated in the action sought. (3) The filmmaker has personal stakes in the film's social agenda. In this context, Alcoff's (1991/2) distinction, mentioned earlier, between "speaking for" and "speaking with" is relevant and useful. (4) The film's focalization,[248] not only its point of view, is of a Mizrahi underprivileged group. Additionally, in evaluating protest films we should ask what a film does, not only what it contains. Therefore, guided by Downing's (2001) assertion that in defining radical alternative media "context and consequences must be our primary guides" (x), in my analysis of Mizrahi protest cinema

[248] See discussion in Chapter 1 on Gérard Genette's (1972) conceptualization of focalization.

I will explore the reception and framing of a film among film critics, social activists, and the general public, and I will assess its potential to effect change.

But before we attend the abovementioned thematic elements that define protest cinema, we should also consider how films' aesthetics and distribution/marketing strategies can be subversive and amount to a protest. Readdressing Messika's films, we can identify elements of protest both in his production mode (aesthetics) and in his distribution methods.[249] As Shiran (2001) proposes, Messika's insistence on producing films even with extremely limited budgets makes him "a protesting artist … who challenges subsidized, arrogant, and alien to many … Israeli cinema" (82).[250] Most of Messika's films are overtly melodramatic tales of love and crime and are set in Mizrahi slums and working class neighborhoods. His earlier films were made with a minimal budget of $10,000 each (his most expensive production thus far cost $50,000), where crew members (often only one or two people) and actors deferred their fees.[251] It is clear that these lean production budgets affect the films' aesthetics—Messika works mostly with non-actors or obscure ones, camera movement is never elaborate, the audio quality is wanting (in some of his films, Messika used a microphone mounted on the camera), and the *mise en scène* is determined by functionality, not splendor (e.g., when deep depth-of-field is employed, such as in one of the pub scenes in *Hello Sigal* [*Shalom Lakh*

[249] Relevantly, Messika became a social activist for Mizrahi/social causes already in the early 1970s when he helped creating the community social protest movement Ha'ohalim ("the tents").
[250] It is noteworthy in this context that most critics have dismissed Messika's films, *inter alia*, for the recurrent representation of Mizrahi as criminals and destitute which, they claim, perpetuates negative ethnic stereotypes (see references in Yoaz 1997, Vagner 1997, and Gefen 1996). However, Messika repeatedly refers to his films as a social critique. (This is evident in the statements he made in our interviews, 6/24/2004 and 6/8/2005, an in his web-site http://www.hamizrah.com.)
[251] Information is based on my interviews with Messika (6/24/2004 and 6/8/2005.)

Sigal, 1996], it is strictly to enhance the drama). In my Afterword I will return to the issue of aesthetics to explore whether Mizrahi cinema at large offers an alternative and a challenge to "mainstream" cinema in Israel. At this point it is noteworthy that Messika's practice of including songs by a film's main character in the diegetic and non-diegetic soundtrack is highly uncommon in Israeli feature films, but is evocative of Arab and Turkish melodramatic films known to many Mizrahi audiences.

In Chapter 4, I alluded to Messika's reliance on the *sirte casetot* ("cassette films") form of distribution. Not only is this distribution strategy—where public screenings become either secondary or non-existent—utterly unconventional among Israeli filmmakers, but it calls to mind the Mizrahi music revolution of the mid-1970s, where Mizrahi singers, repeatedly shunned by radio broadcasters and "reputable" music halls, launched a successful alternative venue to distribute their audiocassettes. These singers produced a limited number of audiocassette master copies of their recordings and sold these cassettes to owners of music stands in marketplaces and areas adjacent to central bus stations (hereby the derogatory term that stuck to it—"central bus station music") where these cassettes were then dubbed locally in quantities determined by customers' demand. In our interviews (6/24/2004 and 6/8/2005), Messika made it clear that, indeed, his unorthodox method of bringing his films to the public was inspired by the Mizrahi music revolution marked by its innovative, alternative venues of distribution that challenged the hitherto Ashkenazi hegemony and complete control of music production, broadcasting, and distribution. Furthermore, Banai's study (2004) of Messika's films reveals that Messika was greatly influenced by the Iranian "cassette

revolution" where Khomeini's audiocassettes were sent from France to the U.S. and distributed there free of charge. Curious and fascinated by the power of this direct marketing, Messika, a film student in San Francisco at that time, actually participated in the distribution of the videos.[252] Tracing the affinities between Messika's filmmaking and filmmaking in the Arab/Muslim Middle East, Banai concludes that, "In its style, its target audience, and the reality it depicts, Messika's cinema is emplaced in an extra-institutional 'Mizrahi' territory. Messika's choice of this type of filmmaking and distribution turns into a subversive act against the dominant culture" (186).

Considering my discussion above of the thematic and contextual elements characterizing protest cinema, *Ancient Winds* and *The Black Panthers Speak* should certainly be considered protest films. As we have seen, these films depict the Mizrahi predicament and relate it (even if by allusion) to a course of action. Based on my interviews and conversations with Benchetrit, Hamo, and Chetrit and on numerous materials published by and about them, it is clear that their films engage with a cause and struggle they fully share with their filmic subjects. Yet my discussion of Mizrahi protest cinema is not meant to propose that there is a quintessential protest film nor that only documentaries qualify as such; rather, it recognizes that protest cinema may have various forms and diverse discourses. Torati's feature film *Desperado Square* contains most attributes of a protest film.[253] As I proposed in the previous chapter, the most salient element of protest in this film is its elision of the Ashkenazi center; the film features a

[252] See Banai (2004, 183-185).
[253] Notwithstanding the absence of the term "protest cinema" in Chetrit's (2001) and Yonah's (2001) analyses of *Desperado Square*, my discussion of this film as a protest film fully concurs with their articulations about the film's subversive force.

Mizrahi community in-itself and not one defined by the dominant group. I would further argue that despite the film's restrained and non-pugnacious mode, it nevertheless offers the local version of "black power"—a form of ethnic/racial separatism that can sustain itself and thus challenge the hegemony.

Although not quite protest films, a relatively large number of contemporary Mizrahi films are films *about* protest, works that challenge, often only haphazardly, the hegemonic Zionist discourse about the Mizrahim and the modernist/co-optation model which guides it.[254] Often, in these films that treat the issue of Mizrahi contestation and struggle, the protest is employed as a narrational springboard for other themes the film is actually interested in foregrounding. A case in point is *Turn Left at the End of the World* and, specifically, its address of the workers' strike at the bottle factory. Seemingly, various factory scenes—starting with the one in which Roger, the Indian newcomer, commiserates about the need to work there (on his first day he is still dressed as an Indian prince) and concluding with the penultimate scene in the factory, in which the management announces that the strikers' demands are met—encourage us to consider

[254] I will discuss three such films in this section. Notable among those not addressed here are *Zohar: Mediterranean Blues* (*Zohar*, Eran Riklis, 1993), which depicts the rise and fall of the "King" of Mizrahi music, Zohar Argov; *Underdogs: A War Movie* (*Beit She'an: Seret Milhama*, Rino Tzror and Doron Tsabari, 1996) about a local soccer team which, despite its limited resources and the town's peripheral status, manages to survive in Israel's National League; *George Ovadia: Merchant of Feelings* (*Mokher ha'Regashot,* Ron Tal, 1992) that broaches the disparaging treatment Ovadia's melodramas received by film critics who thought his films might be more suitable for the Arab/Muslim Middle East (from which he emigrated) than "westernized" Israel; *The South: Alice Never Lived Here* (*ha'Darom: Alice Af Pa'am Lo Gara Kan*, Seniora [Sini] Bar-David, 1998, which I will discuss at length in the next chapter). *The Quarry* (which will be addressed in the next footnote) and some of the films already addressed in previous chapters, including, *Sh'hur*, *Samir*, *Cinema Egypt*, *Bagdad Bandstand*, *A Bit of Luck*, and *Café Noah* also contain elements of Mizrahi protest.

Turn Left as a protest film. Indeed, these scenes expose the Mizrahi workers' harsh conditions (victimization), their recognition of the mistreatment they have been subjected to (victimhood), and, finally, the factory scenes depict the course of action the workers take (consciousness and agency) to remedy the situation. Likewise, the strike clearly pits the workers—Moroccans and Indians—against the Ashkenazi management, thereby underscoring the ethnic aspect of the workers' exploitation. Finally, not only is the film sympathetic to the strikers, but its focalization is clearly rendered through the Mizrahi perspective. Yet a closer analysis of the film will reveal elements that frustrate the labeling of *Turn Left* as a protest film.

The factory scenes are merely a vehicle filmmaker Nesher employs to advance the narrative; they are subordinated to the film's overall erotic code and are particularly meant to provide the spatial context for the increasing sexual tension between Roger and Simon, which eventually leads to their love affair inside the factory. The factory scenes conjure up not only the "melting pot" notions which I discussed earlier. Arguably, the repeated images of fire and boiling glass may also allude to the simmering anger among workers. Yet, it is just as compelling to suggest that these visuals, coupled with the rhythmic motions of the bottle machine and its ejecting/"ejaculating" of the liquefied glass, are suggestive of the steaming passion between Roger and Simon.[255]

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[255] *The Quarry* (*ha'Mahtzeva*, Roni Ninio, 1990) renders a strikingly similar dynamic where on the surface, and clearly in the film's first half, the story seems to delve into a social/ethnic dilemma where the quarry workers are exploited by the Ashkenazi management to the point that Mizrahi muscleman Nissim Levi, the workers' leader, stirs a mini-riot ("only the workers should decide who the manager is") and becomes the quarry's new manager. However, the quarry as a front stage for workers' unison turns out to be a backdrop in the feud between Nissim and his subordinate Moshe over the woman (now Nissim's wife) these two men have loved since the time they lived in Casablanca.

Importantly, it is not the actual protest that yields the results where the management improves the working conditions; to an extent, the management's response is not because of the strike but in spite of it. The film underscores how, following the strike and the decision by the factory management in Tel Aviv to close down the plant and to fire the workers, the bosses do not even deign to arrive in that town to negotiate with their former employees. The management's interest in the town is awakened only due to the auspicious (and surreal) visit of the British cricket team to the local town and the coverage the match between a British team and the local team receives. (When the factory manager is about to announce the decision to meet the strikers' demands, the single statement included in the film is, "you have more luck than brains"; only later do we learn the specifics of the concessions from Nicole's sister.) The point of my discussion here is to reiterate that a protest film should maintain the focus on contestation, namely, to contextualize struggle within what motivates it and link that protest, positively, to the results it brings (or intends to bring) about; *Turn Left* does that only superficially.[256]

Framing the protest in that way immediately calls to mind Sallah's treatment of the challenge the inhabitants of the *ma'abara* pose to government officials in their request to improve their housing conditions. Knowing that a protest will not yield the desired results, the *ma'abara* inhabitants in this comedy employ a new tactic—they ask government officials not to provide them with *shikkun*, a better housing development.

[256] However, a more subversive reading of the film might suggest quite the opposite of what I propose here, namely, that the negligent and non-conscientious treatment of the workers by their employers—ignoring their protest but then conceding for the wrong reason—further the film's critical stand.

Indeed as the schemer Sallah hoped for, the government is giving them what they "do not want"—the *shikkun*. Both *Turn Left* and *Sallah* then broach the dispiriting possibility that, if a protest succeeds, it in spite of itself.

In the last part of this section I want to turn to Mossek's two recent films; I will compare his *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* with Hamo and Chetrit's *The Black Panthers Speak* in order to advance my discussion of the distinction between the two types of films engaging in protest, and I will then analyze Mossek's other film—*Who is Mordechai Vanunu?* by relating it to the extra-filmic discourse about agency and protest that the Vanunu affair evoked. My contention is that while both of Mossek's films significantly enhance our understanding of victimhood and agency, notwithstanding their filmic values, neither is a protest film.

One of the criteria I addressed earlier for protest cinema is the extent to which the makers of the films are politically or socially invested in their work and in the struggle in which their characters engage. On the face of it, Mossek is heavily committed to the Black Panthers' cause—he made a film about their struggle over thirty years ago,[257] he follows them closely now, and he subtly prods his subjects to re-unite and re-form the movement. Likewise, Mossek has presence within the film's aural and visual space—he appears throughout the film and instigates some of the encounters. But it is precisely here that we can distinguish between *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* and *The Black Panthers Speak* to articulate their different treatment of the Black Panthers' protest. Earlier, I pointed to the significance of these films' titles, but it as important to identify

[257] At the opening of his film Mossek reminisces in voice-over about his collaboration with the Black Panthers in the early 1970s "I joined them to make a *protest film.*"

the subtext each of the titles contains. To put it flatly, Mossek's title can be understood as a literal prefatory question—"Have you heard about the Panthers?"—whereby if the assumed answer is "no," the filmmaker presents his film as if to say "OK, let *me* tell you about them." In contrast, the literal interpretation of Hamo and Chetrit's film title may be one of duty—"The Black Panthers speak, so let's be quiet and listen to them." The former clearly creates a cinematic and discursive distance between the filmmaker and his subjects which, I would argue, has the effect of detracting from Mossek's full engagement and investment in the Panthers' protest. Ironically then, Mossek's presence in the film and his interventions in his subjects' story derail the focus from the Panthers' protest to the filmmaker's tale about making a film on the Black Panthers. Occasionally, Mossek challenges the former Black Panthers and he even questions Charlie Bitton about his ability to lead a struggle considering his comfortable life at the present. Conversely, Hamo and Chetrit's absence from the film's diegesis intensifies their commitment to the cause of their subjects. As Chetrit indicated in a public screening of his film,[258] in making *The Black Panthers Speak*, he genuinely sought to let his subjects speak, which, in turn, necessitated minimal intervention on the filmmakers' part. My point here is not to suggest that one film is constructed while the other is not; clearly, all films are constructed. Rather, I mean to assign importance to the manner in which the films are constructed.

Certain aesthetic devices employed in *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* are constitutive of the filmmaker's distanced position from the struggle he depicts. In the

[258] Screening and discussion on 3/9/2005, University of Texas at Austin, in conjunction with "The Mizrahi in Israeli Literature and Cinema" event.

footage from Mossek's 1970s film, locals walk by the graffiti "the Black Panthers," which is at the center of the frame. "Have You Heard about" is then keyed in above the graffiti and "Mr. Moshe" below it to create the full title of the original film.[259] We may interpret this device in the original film to fuse the pro-filmic and extra-diegetic materials as an attempt to erase the aesthetic and discursive difference between subjects from both ends of the camera. Yet, "the Black Panthers" is self referential—the former Panthers are directly signified by their graffiti; conversely, the filmmaker's addition "Have You Heard about"/"Mr. Moshe" creates an aesthetic and positional gap between him as a "speaker" and those the film is about.

Relatedly, *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* (the 2002 film) opens with the former Panthers gathering in their childhood neighborhood of Musrara and, as if to rekindle their protest of three decades ago, they plan to repaint the Black Panthers' graffiti on the same wall on which it was once painted. Following these opening scenes, we return to that wall toward the film's end as the former Black Panthers now actually repaint the graffiti. Then, at the film's conclusion, the same wall is shown again, only this time the graffiti is gone (the police erased it)—an image that coincides with Mossek's conceding voice-over, "but the Panthers movement itself was anyhow erased."[260] The Black Panthers no longer exist—either as a movement or as signified by

[259] The discussion of the clips from the original film is useful and relevant here because they are included in Mossek's newer film on the Panthers.

[260] The journey Bitton, Marciano, Shemesh, and the filmmaker are taking to find other former Panthers ends up also being sobering; those who are found are no longer involved in social or political activity they engaged in decades ago. Furthermore, most of them have become religious or Orthodox Jews, supplanting social struggle with faith. Toward the film's end Mossek comments cynically in voice-over about one of the movement founders who became a pious Jew: "Amram Cohen [now] loves God; the world's grand economist."

the graffiti that indexically bears their presence. However, whereas the plans to re-form the movement are not materialized, the film *does* reach a completion precisely because it employs the graffiti/movement erasure as its climactic point; to put it bluntly, I would argue that the failure of one is the success of the other. In sum, the film's cinematic devices further attest to an enhanced gap between the filmmaker, on the one hand, and his subjects and their struggle, on the other.

Who is Mordechai Vanunu?
(*Mi Ata Mordechai Vanunu?*, Nissim Mossek, 2004)

This film about Israel's nuclear "whistle-blower" Mordechai Vanunu was shown on Israeli television around the time he was released from prison in April 2004.[261] Relentlessly, over a period of a few weeks, the Israeli media turned into a public forum where people of all political affiliations and with various personal and moral convictions engaged in a debate about Vanunu's sentencing eighteen years earlier, his treatment while in jail, and the risks involved in his release even as he completed the whole term of his imprisonment. The film (mainly its recent version) and the public debate about Vanunu's conduct and ethnic origins provide us with a unique perspective on the relations between victimhood, protest, and public debates about Mizrahi cinema and the context within which they take place. However, I will first need to relay Vanunu's story as told in the film.

Who is Mordechai Vanunu chronicles the story of a man harshly vilified by most Israelis ("national punching bag," "public enemy number 1") and extolled by others. It

[261] A more recent version of the film includes materials from Vanunu's release, a topic to which I will return later in my discussion.

begins with Vanunu's emigration from Morocco and the family's disillusionment about Israel once they had been settled in an impoverished neighborhood in Beer Sheva. Later, the film follows Vanunu's adolescent and college years. In 1977 Vanunu was hired as a technician in Israel's most secretive and protected site—the nuclear power plant in Dimona—and, despite his well-known radical leftist political views, he managed to work there for ten years. Attending Ben-Gurion University in Beer Sheva during that time, Vanunu sought the company of Palestinian students, daring and subversive conduct at the time, and expressed his support for their national aspirations. Clandestinely, Vanunu started taking photographs of some of the nuclear plant's facilities, yet, even today, it is still unclear what he intended to do with the evidence he had gathered. (Vanunu did not develop the films for some time after he had left Israel.) Despite the GSS's recommendation, Vanunu was eventually fired (apparently because of his dubious contacts with Palestinians), and he decided to start a new life abroad. At this point, the film proposes that Vanunu was actually used by the GSS, which knew about his activities all along. One hypothesis is that, as a measure of deterrence and intimidation, the Israeli government and its intelligence services wanted the world and, specifically, the Arab enemy, to know about Israel's nuclear power without having to publicly divulge this information. (Importantly, although it is now an open secret that Israel has nuclear capability, to this day not a single Israeli government official has denied or acknowledged this fact.) The film also suggests that the GSS might have had plans to use Vanunu as a mole infiltrating Arab student organizations or the Arab-Israeli communist party, but that Vanunu declined to cooperate.

The chain of events triggered by the evidence that Vanunu possessed and the story of his capture, to which I will allude only briefly, are of no less intricacy and manipulation than the most imaginative espionage tales. After a period during which he lives in Australia (and converts to Christianity there)—where, at some point, he is goaded into collaborating with the *London Sunday Times* and sharing with the newspaper the pictures he took of the nuclear plant—he travels to Britain. Once he suspects that he is being watched by Israeli intelligence agents, he transfers to Italy with a woman he meets—a decoy named Cindy, who is working for the Mosad. Agents of the Mosad then kidnapped Vanunu from Italian territory[262] and, following his transfer to Israel, hid him there for several weeks until the opening of his trial (behind closed doors). Vanunu's sentence of eighteen years in prison, eleven and a half of which he spent in extreme solitary confinement, is the harshest ever given in Israel for charges of high-treason and espionage—the specific charges brought against Vanunu. Two elements of this uncanny tale are of much relevance to our discussion: (1) The film's references to the role Vanunu's ethnic origins and socioeconomic conditions played in forming his political convictions and moral stand; (2) The discourse surrounding Vanunu's release and, specifically, the demonstrations in the vicinity of the Ashkelon prison on the day he is freed, directly engaged issues of victimhood, agency, and protest.

In the film, Vanunu is highly aware of and disturbed by the drastic status change his family had undergone upon its immigration to Israel. Even in his trial, Vanunu

[262] Suspiciously, this kidnapping, an illegal act according to international law, was never officially contested by the Italian government, nor did it submit a call for the condemnation of Israel in the U.N.

mentions the economic comfort the family enjoyed in Morocco and contrasts it with its predicament following its emigration. Mossek's voice-over toward the end of the film reiterates that Vanunu "felt on his skin the deprivation, discrimination, and bigotry against the Sephardi Jews."[263] Moreover, one of Vanunu's lawyers, Avigdor Feldman, proposes that Vanunu's heightened awareness of the Mizrahi discrimination may explain his action and, thus, relates Vanunu's victimhood to his agency.

Yet the film underscores that the demonstrators who chanted "death to Vanunu" and "Vanunu—a traitor" outside the prison in Ashkelon were mostly Moroccan locals themselves. Against these demonstrators stood a group of supporters, many of whom are international activists, who deem Vanunu's recalcitrant struggle a heroic stand against the global proliferation of the nuclear threat.[264] One member of the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow (Hakeshet), Matityaho Shemoelof, carried a sign "Vanunu—You Are My Mizrahi Hero."[265] (Shemoelof indicated to me that some anti-Vanunu demonstrators

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[263] In *The Ashkenazi Revolution is Dead* (1991), Chetrit dedicates two essays to Vanunu, who was still is prison at the time the book was published. In "Good and Bad Spies" (56), Chetrit suggests that, had Vanunu been an Ashkenazi, his case would have been debated ceaselessly in Israeli public and media. Chetrit supports his argument by allusions to Ashkenazi spies whose arrest triggered national debates and whose motives, whatever they were, were not disparaged. Chetrit furthers his claim for the discriminatory treatment of Vanunu in "Mordechai Vanunu Was Born to Be Free" (pp. 114-116). The title is a play on the slogan used to encourage the Israeli government to find the whereabouts of the pilot Ron Arad, whose plane was shot down over the Lebanese air space, and to bring him back home. (Arad was missing for ten years and Vanunu was in jail for ten years at the time the essay was written.) Chetrit maintains that Vanunu is the real hero out of the two and that his conviction and harsh conditions in jail are due to his Mizrahi origin.

[264] Vanunu was nominated twelve times for the Nobel Peace prize and won the alternative Nobel Prize once. Harold Pinter and Suzanna York were among his supporters and Pink Floyd dedicated a song to him.

[265] In the in-progress edited version of *Who is Mordechai Vanunu?* that Mossek showed me during my interview session with him (5/14/2004), the film included shots of this group and the signs it carried; peculiarly, they were omitted in the final version.

grabbed the sign from him and tore it down.)[266] Several days later, I attended Hakeshet's forum meeting where the issue of the organization's position toward Vanunu was broached and discussed. Interlocutors expressed their affirmation of Vanunu as a Mizrahi hero. They often cited the elements I have addressed to indicate that, indeed, Vanunu suffered precisely because he was a Mizrahi and, since they identify with his peaceful message and acknowledge the heavy price he has paid for expressing it, they considered him a hero.[267] My position, which I also shared in that forum, is that the contention that Vanunu is a Mizrahi hero (or agent) is founded on problematic grounds. Indeed, we may suggest that Vanunu is a Mizrahi victim, and, according to some members of Hakeshet he is also hero, but, I would argue, that does not render him a *Mizrahi* hero. Put differently, his agency may have been triggered by his experiences as a Mizrahi, yet his agency has little to do with causes pertaining to Mizrahim. To return to the film itself, despite its repeated allusions to the linkage between Vanunu's sense of discrimination and his heroic conduct (again, at least in the eyes of some), the film fails to offer even a single instance to indicate that, at any point since his imprisonment, Vanunu strove to advance the Mizrahi issue. In the Israeli context, his conversion to Christianity (and signing his letters "JC"—Jesus Christ), coupled with his desire to leave Israel and to disengage from it altogether, render his activism peripheral or irrelevant to

[266] Interview, 5/29/2005.

[267] Vanunu never expressed any regrets for his deeds and, in almost every opportunity he has had, he has condemned Israel's nuclear policy. One of the first statements Vanunu made upon his release was "Vanunu Mordechai says we don't need a Jewish state." In the film's opening sequence, Mossek reveals similar sentiments; he divulges his own admiration for Vanunu: "I've been following Mr. Vanunu's story for 18 years. For me, he was a myth. A lovely and brave man who acted out of pure motives."

the Mizrahi protest. In other words, Vanunu's victimhood (i.e., his conviction that his family's predicament should be attributed to a policy of ethnic discrimination) is encoded in the Mizrahi condition but his agency advocates issues not directly related to *Mizrahiyut*; *Who is Mordechai Vanunu* may well be a protest film, but not a Mizrahi protest film.[268]

Protest cinema may be thought of as the distilled form and centerpiece of subversive or resistance political films. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, our analysis of Mizrahi protest films reveal that their (sub)texts are hardly congruent with the formulations of (discursive) struggle, group identities, and the construction of alternative narratives as articulated in the works of scholars such as Bhabha, Marks, and bell hooks. *Ancient Winds* and *The Black Panthers Speak* have no interest in proffering one more version of truth as Marks envisions minority cinema; Benchetrit, Hamo, and Chetrit recruit an array of cinematic devices to inscribe their narrative as a replacement to and displacement of the Zionist prevailing discourse, not a supplement to or merely a different reading of it. For example, these films do not include views of contesting parties (one form of which would have been to juxtapose interviewees with adversarial agendas); thus, again, they frustrate any possibility of a dialogical discourse.[269] Indeed,

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[268] The possibility that Vanunu's stand on Israel's nuclear threat may concomitantly be related to a social (or ethnic) struggle is offered by an old neighbor and, as mentioned, former Panther Victor Alush who maintains that all the money spent in Israel on security "needs," including the nuclear plant, could have been diverted to remedy the country's social ills.

[269] "His Own Canton" ("Canton mi'Shelo," Lily Galili, 8/2/1998), an article published at the time Benchetrit was filming *Ancient Winds*, broaches the issue of the cinematic single-voice. Benchetrit states that when he and his wife, Seniora Bar-David, submitted a film proposal about *Yalde Teiman* (lit. Yemenite children, an affair concerning the alleged kidnapping of Jewish Yemenite babies from public hospitals to transfer them to Ashkenazi families), they were rejected on the grounds that the script was considered unbalanced. His response was "what should they

film reviewers of *Ancient Winds* generally underscored (whether critically or not) the filmmaker's effort to do away, once and for all, with the deception embedded in the Zionist discourse, and they noted that the film is not simply an effort to mend Israel's historiography, but an enterprise to rewrite it.[270] The interspersion of quotations from Zionist leaders' degrading statements about Mizrahim in *The Black Panthers Speak* is clearly not meant to open up some dialogue or a discursive exchange;[271] the sole purpose is to use those statements (mostly from the pre-statehood period or immediately following the creation of the State) as exemplars of the Zionist discourse at large and to rebuke it altogether.

Of course, we may suggest that this is precisely what Marks and Deleuze advocate in "destroy[ing] myths from the inside," yet again, unlike the postmodernist articulations of struggle I have discussed, these films reject the multivalent facets of power, the plurality of voices, and the problematics involved in struggle predicated on group identities. Similarly, against the postmodernist and poststructuralist conceptualization about the contingency of individual and group identities, these protest films, including *Desperado Square*, present and champion stable, distinct, and well-

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[seven old women crying for the loss of their babies] be balanced with? When people make films about the Holocaust, do they balance it with the Nazi [view]?" (B3).

[270] Some press references to the film in this context include: "the history that was never told" (Poria Gal, 9/13/2002), "The Bridge that Was Never Built" (Gal Ohovski, 9/18/2002), "this is the conclusive series of the Moroccan narrative, in particular, and of the Mizrahi, in general. This is its myth…" (Roggel Alfer, 9/20/2002). A notable exception to this trend is Uri Klein's (9/15/2002) "The Dark Side of the Melting Pot" with the subtitle "… *Chronicle Winds* reminds (us) that history is multifaceted." In Klein's article, the focus is not on the film's power to invert or replace the Zionist (meta)narrative, but rather to add an important layer to it.

[271] Some of the most notable quotations in this context are: "A European Jew is worth twice a Kurdish Jew" (Nahum Goldman, late chair of the World Zionist Organization) and "The divine presence has deserted the Mizrahi Jews, and their influence on the Jewish people has ceased," Ben-Gurion). Citations are also in Chetrit (2004a:65,329n).

defined identities. We may read *Desperado Square*'s elision of the Ashkenazi presence as an attempt to create an (imaginary?) space where identities are never negotiated and heteroglossia collapses into a "monoglossia." It is palpably clear that the employment of pro-filmic materials of the 1970s in a film that is set at the beginning of the 21st century alludes to a community "stuck in time" rather than one that is evolving or becoming, to use postmodernist terms. Occasionally, the emphasis in *The Black Panthers Speak* on the continuity of the Mizrahi struggle amounts to an attempt to construct a cohesive and stable Mizrahi group identity; the statement of former Black Panther Abergil at the beginning of this film—"we are the sons of those parents of the Wadi Salib [riots]"—points, therefore, not only to the continuing struggle as I emphasized earlier, but also to a generational identity unison. Accordingly, both *Ancient Winds* and *The Black Panthers Speak* often resort to dichotomous constructions of "us versus them," with little attempt to articulate intra-ethnic differences or Jewish inter-ethnic commonalities.

In my view, the gaps between the discourses rendered in protest cinema and some of the contemporary scholarship about political struggle should not necessarily be attributed to the latter's (at least partial) irrelevancy to the analysis of resistance cinema at large. Rather, perhaps protest films are an extreme and unique form of resistance in cinema and, therefore, are not typical of the genre. Indeed, as our analysis of films such as *Sh'hur*, *Bayit*, and *Cinema Egypt* in earlier discussions revealed, these films fashion their resistance to the hegemonic narrative in manners more congruent with the abovementioned postmodernist and poststructuralist scholarly articulations of ethnic and political struggle. In contrast to the protest films *Ancient Winds*, *The Black Panthers*

Speak and *Desperado Square*, these films are not poised to render the ultimate story of the Mizrahi struggle and predicament; instead, they offer dialogical voices. Even if we accept Lubin's (1999b) claim about the collapse of *Sh'hur*'s frame story, there is still no doubt that the "Ashkenized" Heli is in a constant dialogue with her childhood character as well as with the Ashkenazi environment surrounding her. The same dynamics were found in *Bayit* and *Cinema Egypt*; all these films steer away from speaking in a unitary voice and proffer group identities that are never stable, but rather are negotiated, fluid, and contradictory.

Notwithstanding the discussion above, I would like to conclude this section by suggesting that it is also possible that the discrepancy in the understanding of struggle and intervention to which I alluded here derives from an actual gap between theory (or at least the theories discussed here) and practice in (Mizrahi) cinema. Indeed, it is rather tempting to interpret Bhabha's "intervention," bell hooks's "resistance struggle," and Marks's "power of the false" as their inclination and wish that the subaltern's struggle would take a certain route rather than the one it usually takes. Interestingly, their articulations often resort to subjunctive pronouncements; thus, they become more advocates or promoters of certain kinds of societal and ideological changes than mere observers documenting an existing phenomenon. This issue is evocative of a broader dilemma, namely, whether cinematic practice lags behind theoretical advances or, alternatively, whether theory, or in our case, theories of struggle and identity, operate on a level often detached from people's praxis and art.

The Sderot Cinematheque

It is rather facile in this work that is based on textual and ethnographic analysis to overlook aspects of cultural policy and political economy. In this section, I choose to focus on a single institution—the Sderot Cinematheque—to explore how its vision, operation, and accomplishments inform our inquiry about the power of the margins and the radical alternatives they may forge. Sderot is a development town four miles east of the northern tip of the Gaza Strip. Although the town is less than forty miles away from either Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, it is often perceived in the minds of many Israelis as a place (no-place) "at the end of the world." (To demonstrate this perception, the Cinematheque's general director, Noam Peretz, indicated to me that, oftentimes, people overestimate the place's distance from Israeli urban centers and, moreover, towns that are geographically further south of Sderot are thought to be closer to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.)[272] The town's geographical location, the perceptual designation of the place as periphery, the predominantly Mizrahi population of Sderot,[273] and its overall bleak economic conditions turn it into an epitome of social, economic, and cultural marginality. How then does the cinematic enterprise this town has undertaken attest to the potential impact societal margins might have in contemporary Israel?

Cinematheque Sderot, a non-profit organization, launched its full operation in 2001. Its vision has been to provide a cultural and artistic venue to a place having only scant cultural options and, more importantly, to utilize what is considered the town's

[272] Interview with Noam Peretz (6/20/2004). The information below is based on this interview and literature about the various programs the Cinematheque offers.
[273] In the last two decades Sderot has witnessed a growing community of Russian/former Soviet Republics' immigrants.

weakness—its marginality—precisely as leverage and opportunity to offer films and filmic activities that are not likely to be offered or to be as relevant elsewhere. Preference in selecting the films screened is given to Israeli films, foreign films from the Third World, and films with an emphasis on socioeconomic problems and struggles.

A case in point is *Festival Darom* (lit. Festival South)—the highlight of the Cinematheque's offering which it organizes yearly. According to Peretz, two main factors motivate the festival organizers to focus on alternative cinema or, in his words, "the cinema of the Other"—the place and the desire (and need) for the festival/Cinematheque to distinguish itself from others in the country. In June 2004, Sderot hosted the third *Festival Darom*, and the theme chosen for that year's event was "daring." Peretz finds it most natural to expect daring to be carried out precisely from the margins (possibly, a surprising take on the slogan "we have nothing to lose but our chains"). The first page of the festival's brochure further explains the festival's theme. "We chose this term intuitively, we thought it can express our position that there is always a sliver of hope even in the hardest and most desperate situations. We think, 'daring' is needed in order to identify and materialize opportunities that are at the heart of every condition, to turn misfortune into a blessing."[274] The Hebrew word for "daring" is "he'aza," which is also associated with "gathering in" or "aggregating." Therefore,

> We imagined a light or laser beam, that … if focused, can be used to dissect, open, and to move forward. The gathering in of our physical and mental powers is essential for those who seek to change, found, and create. Gathering in, in order to enhance hope

[274] Avner Faingulernt and Daphna Saring, Festival Darom's program (2004).

> and possibilities. Gathering in, in order to identify a hidden opening, to burst into one which has been blocked, to invent the thing that has been forgotten or perhaps never existed. (Ibid.)

The Cinematheque then creates a match between the local population's actual conditions, dilemmas, and, possibly, needs and the films screened. It is not surprising then that Peretz refers to this institution as a "social Cinematheque." Importantly, this symbiosis also exists on another level—a concourse of the Cinematheque's ideological agenda and various financial realities and necessities. The bulk of the Cinematheque's budget is provided by the public body of the Israeli Film Council that, since 1999, is designated to support Israeli cinematheques (among other film institutions and endeavors). One of the main criteria the Council set for the level of support it provides is based on the number of Israeli films a cinematheque screens over a year-long-period. This stipulation, which is meant to assist in the distribution and success of Israeli films, is not taken as a constraint in the case of Cinematheque Sderot; rather, it is seized as an opportunity for the Cinematheque to distinguish itself at the same time as it offers a cultural venue suitable for the local community.[275] Similarly, the Cinematheque is supported by and collaborates closely with the Sapir (Negev) College located nearby and, particularly, with its highly respected film and television department. Other than the social agenda the heads of the film and television department and the Cinematheque's management share, in practical terms, the collaboration between the two institutions

[275] I do not mean to suggest here that the local population necessarily prefers Israeli to foreign films; rather, I use "suitable" to allude to the likelihood of the relevancy of the films screened to people's lives.

provides the Cinematheque with much-needed money and visibility and, in return, the college enjoys a rare venue to screen its students' and others' films.

Some of the operations or, specifically, membership regulations, seem to defy the rampant logic of a capitalist system. All the screening and events associated with *Festival Darom* are free of charge. Furthermore, it is one of the Cinematheque's main goals to make membership affordable; "there should not be a situation where someone would want to watch a film and would be prohibited from doing so due to financial hardships" (interview with Peretz, 6/20/2004). Accordingly, annual membership (which includes unlimited admittance) for locals is relatively inexpensive (approximately $45/year), and for people who are affiliated with one of the town's clubs/organizations for the socially disadvantaged, annual membership is only $10, half of which is paid by the club or organization.

Most importantly, Cinematheque Sderot forces us to redefine our formulations of margins and center. Thanks to this cinematic endeavor, Sderot is turning into a hub of sorts for some of the satellite communities in southern Israel. In accordance with the commitment to make films available to all, Peretz offers, "if people cannot come to the Cinematheque it would come to them" (interview, 6/20/2004). One of the Cinematheque's projects is called "The Wandering Cinematheque," where teenagers are responsible for hauling the films shown in Sderot and screening them in other development towns in the south. Similarly, the success of this Cinematheque inspired the opening of another one in the development town of Dimona. Also, the International Student Festival, whose location used to alternate yearly between Tel Aviv and a city

abroad, took place recently in Sderot (and in Nazareth, the only cinematheque in an Arab community). Finally, not only has the Cinematheque been successful in (re)defining the town's cultural space, but, as Peretz attests, one of its significant impacts has been to define or confer a certain image onto the films shown there. That was the case when Doron Tsabari and Julie Shles chose the Sderot Cinematheque to premiere their film/TV series *Southward* (*Daroma*, 2002)—a story of women workers' struggle after the closing down of the only sewing workshop in their development town of Mitzpe Ramon. It is precisely because the issues the film tackles echo local economic problems Sderot has been facing, and because of the Cinematheque's repute for focusing on Third World and social cinema, that the screening of the film *Southward* was imbued with a distinctive social agenda.

The Re-making of Identities

The earlier discussion focused on protest cinema as encoded in the articulation of Mizrahi identity and victimization. This section takes a different route in order to investigate how heightened consciousness about social and ethnic discrimination and the struggle it evokes may, in turn, redesign group identities. I will point to two areas this inquiry involves—the influence of struggle on the subaltern group, on the one hand, and the pressure protest exerts on the hegemonic group to re-assess its identity, on the other hand. This inquiry will provide us with yet another dimension of the power of marginality and will further support our argument that identity is neither an ephemeral

constructivist entity nor rigid and stable; rather, to use Hall, it is an arbitrary and contingent closure.

In his conclusion to *The Mizrahi Struggle* (2004a) Chetrit employs the American Civil Rights Movement to summarize his analysis of the history of the Mizrahi resistance:

> At the beginning [of the struggle] the subject-matter is the struggle itself. The culture is a culture of struggle and the identity is an identity of struggle. Later on, the struggle creates solidarity and social and cultural networks that time and again re-produce a new and renewed content out of the experiences and the collective memory of the protest activists. (308)

For Chetrit, this solidarity (on which I will elaborate in the next chapter) engenders not only a collective (i.e., Mizrahi, rather than, say, Moroccan) alternative to the hegemony, but also an enhanced or renewed self-identity. In other words, it is not only that identity (or identity politics) can inspire a struggle; struggle, in turn, might redefine identity. In Chapters 1 and 3, I addressed the plurality suggested by Edot ha'Mizrah (the Mizrahi ethnic groups)—a term created by the Ashkenazi hegemony to spite ethnic commonalities. Chetrit suggests that the succession of ethnic confrontations and struggles the Mizrahi has experienced left their mark, creating a collective Mizrahi identity. Therefore, Mizrahi and *Mizrahiyut*—the preferred terms by most Israelis who have developed social and ethnic consciousness—should not be articulated as a vulgar essentialism attesting to biology or ethnic roots, but rather as a shared cultural and experiential form of identity.

A case in point is a film whose text seemingly challenges notions of a collective Mizrahi identity. In *Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle*, Benchetrit deliberately focuses on the story of Moroccan immigrants—one community whose predicament is said to surpass that of all others. However, it is important that Mizrahi and Ashkenazi film critics and reviewers often read *Ancient Winds* as a pan-Mizrahi protest.[276] Granted, we may interpret the preference taken by the critics to employ the broader category—Mizrahi—as a practice and power-driven strategy dominant groups often use in the homogenization of the Other.[277] However, we can also suggest that, at least for some of those writers, as a protest film "Moroccan chronicle" stands for the hi/story of all Mizrahi Jews, and thereby, *Ancient Winds* can inspire the formation of a collective Mizrahi identity. As suggested in earlier reference to Downing's (2001) analysis of radical media, the impact and residue left by this and other protest films is as important as the text itself or the filmmakers' intentions in assessing films' subversive power.

Films such as *Ancient Winds*, *Desperado Square*, and *The Black Panthers Speak* are clearly not made in a cultural or political vacuum. The emergence in the late 1980s and the 1990s of groups and organizations such as the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow,

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[276] I is sufficient is to indicate the relatively large number of newspaper articles' titles and subtitles where "Mizrahi/m" supplants "Moroccan," e.g., "The Ashkenazi Did What They Did and *Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle* is the Mizrahi Right to Respond" (Shalit, 9/19/2002), "*Ancient Winds* is Asking If We Can Take in the Story of the Mizrahi Discrimination" (Alon, 9/30/2002), "The Ghost of Israeli culture: Why is the 'Enlightened Left' Capable of Recognizing Palestinian Suffering, But Has to Be Insensitive to and Repress and Deny Mizrahi Suffering?" (Misha'ani 10/11/2002), "The Bridge that Hasn't Been Built: *Ancient Winds* Should Ask Why Are Mizrahi Jews (Edot ha'Mizrah) Sensitive to Their Suffering Only?" (Ohovski, 9/18/2002), "The Mizrahi Answer to *The Pillar of Fire*" (a television program about the history of Israel) (Mimoun, 10/4/2002), and "Channel 2 Presents: The Mizrahi Cry," (Gvirtz, 9/12/2002).

[277] For a discussion of this issue, see Chapter 1.

Kedma, Hila, and Ahoti[278] forced the Mizrahi issue into Israeli public awareness. In turn, as part of a broader phenomenon regarding the increasing visibility of the Mizrahi in academic studies and the arts, Mizrahi protest films may have urged the hegemonic group to respond to the challenges it has recently been facing (e.g., the films' explicit calls for uprising or the blunt charges against the Ashkenazim).

IBA's (Channel 1) *The Ashkenazim Are Coming; The Ashkenazim Are Coming*,[279] to which I will turn next, has repeated references to the intimation that now it is the Ashkenazi whose culture and identity are at risk. The program quotes former Israeli minister Tomi Lapid's controversial aphorism, "more than we conquered Tul Karem [a Palestinian West Bank town], Tul Karem conquered us"—a reference to the prevalence of a Mizrahi/Arab mentality and culture that, in his view, have been taking over. Importantly, Lapid has been the party leader of Shinui, whose platform and agenda, as many political analysts have suggested, is to mobilize people around their aversion to the Sephardi-Orthodox party of Shas, its political clout, and the threat it poses to the secular Ashkenazi hegemony. Similarly, the program refers to a song by the Ashkenazi singer Eran Tzur, who, even in his only "Mizrahi" song, laments Israel's dismantling of cultural and social values and attributes it to its Levantization. Finally, Ashkenazi journalist Sahara Blau is quoted, "[we] lost the battle; the Mizrahi Revolution is getting us."

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[278] The NGO Kedma, founded in 1993, and Hila, established in 1987, advocate equal educational opportunities. Ahoti (lit. "my sister") was founded in 1999 to provide Mizrahi women with a voice of their own. (Ahoti was formed as a splint group of the mostly Ashkenazi feminist movement in Israel in protest of the latter's disregard for Mizrahi-feminist concerns.)

[279] Program is from the series *I Called/Named You* (*Karati Lakh*), presenter and producer: Arieh Yas, aired on Channel 33, 9/15/2003.

"Ashkenazim from the Bunker" (A'aron Dolev, 9/25/1998)—the extended newspaper article that triggered much public debate when published in 1998—attempts to articulate the position that now it is the Ashkenazim who sense that they are under siege or a sustained Mizrahi attack (hence the article's title).[280] Ronen Zaretzki, one of the contributors to the article, maintains, "[W]e, Ashkenazim, ignore reality, we look in the mirror and we believe that what we see are the masters of this land. This is a mistake. The power is with the Mizrahim" (46). His argument is that the Mizrahim (a slight majority at the time the article was written) determine the election results and have the power to influence social policy that, Zaretzki alludes, now discriminates against the Ashkenazi.

Dolev's (1998) introductory comments in that article offer an intriguing proposal:

> The original purpose of this article was to return to the basics. To try to figure out what does the word "Ashkenazi" mean today. What is your first response when somebody utters it?… We didn't seek comparisons with the Mizrahi emancipation or inquire what it says about me that my parents are from Poland or Germany, [but] the Moroccans are the ones at home now. (34)

What Dolev is offering here is nothing short of the need for the Ashkenazim to define *themselves* now. A number of times in this work I referred to the hegemonic group as the unmarked that marks the Other. The radical Mizrahi protest, then, not only problematizes and undermines the neatly dichotomous Ashkenazi/Mizrahi divisions (the former being educated, benefactor/savior, politically progressive, and the latter passive, traditional,

[280] The subtitle, as mentioned earlier, reads "Three Tel-Avivians, Ashkenazim in Their Thirties, Feel Under Siege." The article has Dolev's introductory comments that are followed by short essays by various (some Mizrahi) contributors.

conservative, needy), but it compels the Ashkenazim to pursue who they are, culturally and otherwise.

Within the period of six months I spent in Israel in 2004, there were several events focusing on the Ashkenazim, largely an unprecedented phenomenon in earlier years. Notable among them is "The Ashkenazim" conference[281] which included presentations such as Karin Amit's "Indeed Ashkenazim?," Neta Amar's "A Look at the Ashkenaziut in the Israeli Judicial System," and Miri's Freilich's "Various Aspects of Ashkenazi Identity." In accordance with her film *Ashkenaz*, Rachel Jones's presentation at the conference "From the Other of Europe to the Europe of the Other," which included unedited vignettes from the film, employed "whiteness" as her conceptual framework to problematize the transparency of Ashkenaziut.

The argument that it is imprudent to discuss Ashkenazim's efforts to identify their cultural and lingual heritage separately from the Mizrahi struggle and, accordingly, that these are mutually constitutive forces in the playfield of Israeli identities is often broached in *The Ashkenazim Are Coming; The Ashkenazim Are Coming*. Journalist and writer Nir Bara'am states in the program that the Ashkenazim now take a position implicated by both concession and a new demand—"if you [Mizrahim] already dismantled our hegemonic position, at least set us also free from the designation of the "eternal victimizer.… Since you are now free, free us as well." "I am proud that the Mizrahim have started their struggle and, thanks to them, now attention is also given to

[281] The conference was held in the Beit Berl College, 6/3/2004, and sponsored by The Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow and the Beit Berl College. The event was in memory of Vicky Shiran who for years played a pivotal role in the Mizrahi and feminist struggles and mobilized people for these causes.

us," Shmulik Atzmon, a veteran of Israeli theater and the founder of the Yiddishpiel Theater, says in this program.

One venue proposed by participants in *The Ashkenazim Are Coming; The Ashkenazim Are Coming* as a starting point for their pursuit of Ashkenazi identity is the pre-Zionist Eastern European Jewish culture. Like many others in Israel, Atzmon claims that Zionism has eradicated not only the Mizrahi culture but the Ashkenazi one as well—"The Ashkenazi, Eastern European Jews, assimilated into the *sabra*," or Israeliness.[282] Atzmon attests that he added back to his surname the original, Eastern European surname "Virtzer" the family used to have. Similarly, young actor Tzahi Moskowitz, who claims he did not even know he was Ashkenazi in his childhood years (the transparency of the unmarked?), tells in this program how he is now connecting to his Ashkenazi forefathers' tradition by reading and using Yiddish. Even a cursory address of these statements immediately calls to mind my discussion in Chapter 3 of the Mizrahi effort to construct an identity encoded by the pursuit of a "lost" past. We may then boldly suggest that the Mizrahi discourse and protest, furthered by other societal and discursive challenges to the Zionist master narrative (e.g., by the new historians I discussed in Chapter 1), prescribe the death of the Zionist revolution and prod both the Ashkenazi and the Mizrahi to redefine their group's identities.

[282] For an elaborate affirming discussion of this assertion, see Nurith Gertz 's *Holocaust Survivors, Aliens and Others in Israeli Cinema and Literature* (*Makhela Aheret*, 2004), and Miri Paz's (2004) "We Live in a Culture of Erasure" an article about the book and her interview with author Gertz.

Chapter 6

Intersectionality and Alliances

Whereas the previous chapter's focus was on the struggle of the Mizrahi as a unitary group, this chapter will engage several vectors pertaining to Mizrahi intra-group and inter-group positions and dynamics. One direction leads us inwards to examine one Mizrahi subgroup—women. The other direction involves the discursive relations between the social categories of ethnicity (*Mizrahiyut*) and class. In these two sections, we will naturally engage intersectionality, which is often construed as the convergence of gender, ethnicity (or race), and class. However, this chapter uses "intersectionality" selectively; rather than attending to the confluence of all these components, it will explore the intersection of ethnicity with the other two components in turn, first with gender and then with class. Our inquiry here will enable us to relate the Mizrahi intervention and positionality to other groups' resistance and to explore the cinematic construction of subalterns' alliances and coalitions.

The Mizrahi Woman

As we have seen, identity politics in Israel has been broached as a challenge to the all encompassing Zionist discourse of *Am Ehad* (one people). Its emergence in discourse and practice has been inspired by the attempts to identify ethnic, national (i.e., Israeli vs. Palestinian), religious, or gender-related commonalities the members of a group share. The formation of group identity is meant to attend to the group's discrimination, advance its status and, often, further its political clout. In Chapter 4, I alluded to the concerns

scholars such as Katz (1999), Doron (1998), Taub (2004), and Calderon (2000) express about the risk involved in adopting extreme forms of identity politics, where a national core identity and shared goals give way to a multiplicity of often distinct and irreconcilable group values. Yet, for any subaltern group in Israeli society, it is precisely the predominance of the Zionist master narrative—its power to dismiss or discard any alternative voice—that has subjugated the group to the socioeconomic margins. Granted, the unifying national master narrative has been losing its appeal and sway. But how narrow and exclusive should the new categories on which identity politics is based be? For example, is the general ethnic category "Mizrahi" too broad? The dilemma is whether the fragmentation into intra-group identities empowers or limits the subaltern. This section will focus on one such Mizrahi subgroup, women. I will frame my discussion here not through the national lens, focusing on the potential risks identity politics pose to Israel's national cohesion. Rather, my emphasis here is on the perspective of the Mizrahi women's group—*its* interests, discourses, motives, and forms of empowerment.

Scholarship by global/Third World/critical race feminists provides us with critical tools to investigate the unique positioning of women in their societies. The employment of "intersectionality" in this scholarship attests precisely to the need to articulate women's condition, status, and struggle not in terms of the broad category of gender alone, but in terms of the convergence of gender with race, class, and even religion. Intersectionality, therefore, is often meant to point to the double or multiple levels of "otherizations" of women in many societies. The fragmentation of the general category

or group identity of women is most conspicuous in black feminists' emphasis on the unique modalities of the experiences of working class women of color compared to those of middle and upper class white women. As bell hooks suggests in her analysis of race and gender, "[T]he vision that sisterhood evoked by women liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression—a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality" (in Yuval-Davis, 1997:125). Likewise, black feminist Crenshaw (1991) coined the term "structural intersectionality" to address the qualitatively different experiences of women of color compared with those of other women. For example, domestic abuse or rape, the issues on which Crenshaw focuses in her study, have particular features regarding black women and, therefore, the remedies should be tailored to their needs. Just as relevant to our discussion is Crenshaw's "political intersectionality"; the term refers to the potential for the disempowerment of women of color if their agenda is subsumed within the platforms of two broader (subordinated) to which groups they belong—black people and women. In Crenshaw's view, traditionally, women of color had to divide their political energies between these two groups, whereas black men or, alternatively, white women are spared this specific burden. Crenshaw therefore unabashedly advocates identity politics which involve the breaking down of the broader categories of race and gender, precisely because of the shortcomings of the non-specificity of anti-racist or feminist discourses alone. "Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of

white women," she concludes, "antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms" (1252).

These articulations by black feminists will inform my discussion of Israeli films that focus on Mizrahi women. The unique positionality of Mizrahi women—as women, different from Mizrahi men, and as Mizrahim, different from Ashkenazi women—is the focus of my discussion here. We have seen in Chapter 1 that the Zionist narrative is inherently gendered and is epitomized by the promethean figure of the *sabra*—the native born, Aryan-like Israeli man. Congruently, Mizrahi women's discourse has to also be understood by its position vis-à-vis the Zionist discourse. Focusing on *Jacky*, *Mirrors*, *The South: Alice Never Lived Here*, *Sh'hur*, and *Turn Left at the End of the World*, I will examine whether there is a common thread in women's positionality in contemporary Mizrahi cinema. Ultimately, I am interested in discerning whether the filmic challenge Mizrahi women pose is primarily gender- or ethnicity-based; put differently, I will ask whether the distinction the Mizrahi women seek is marked mostly as difference from Mizrahi men or from non-Mizrahi women.

Jacky
(Rachel Esterkin, 1990)

Jacky, the titular character of this short film, is a young Mizrahi woman living in a rundown neighborhood, possibly in a development town. She deals soft drugs along with her boyfriend David (whom she declines to marry), but she is later approached and asked to provide heroin to a kibbutz member. Her boyfriend leaves her when she resolutely refuses to hand over the transaction to him, making it necessary for her to

move from the familiar/familial territory into the harsh masculine milieu of hard drug dealers. To carry out the transaction and buy the heroin, Jacky deceitfully tells local pushers that she was sent by her brother-in-law Eli (also a hustler) to get the stuff. The transaction falls through, and, in a violent face-off, her boyfriend is stabbed by Eli. The film concludes with Jacky's solo erotic/tantalizing dance in the local café, a space she now occupies alone.

As Lubin (1999a) points out, Jacky transgresses both gender and ethnic boundaries in carving out her own space. Jacky wants her Mizrahi boyfriend to get some education and enhance his professional prospects beyond drug dealing, which, Lubin reminds us, regretfully, is an uncommon undertaking for many Mizrahim in development towns. On the gender front, Jacky seeks financial, "professional," and personal independence, all of which defy customs regarding the place and role of women in this environment. Her gender transgression becomes most blatant when she moves to dealing hard drugs in an exclusively male-dominated domain. Guided by Lubin's analysis, I maintain that *Jacky* embodies a true intersectionality; treating gender issues or ethnic dilemmas separately is insufficient in expounding the film or Jacky's conduct. Gender and ethnic issues are interrelated precisely because of the Zionist construction of women and Mizrahim as others and because of the emasculation of Mizrahi men in the hegemonic discourse.[283] Jacky's independence is, therefore, congruent with the film's elision of the Zionist/national framework. This becomes abundantly clear considering that "Zionism privileges the working body over the sexual body; the public, communal

[283] See discussion in Chapter 1.

sphere over the private, intimate sphere; the professional individual over the non-professional, *luft gesheft* [non-working] money-maker" (179)[284]—all of which are gendered (and ethnically marked) since (Ashkenazi/*sabra*) men are often associated with the first in each of these binary constructions and women (and Mizrahim) with the latter.

The full extent of the Man/Ashkenazi and Woman/Mizrahi role reversal and, therefore, of the film's subversive power vis-à-vis the tenets of Zionism are revealed in the scene in which Jacky interacts with the *kibbutznik* who seeks heroin. No longer is the kibbutz (the crowing achievement of the Zionist enterprise) represented as the savior of the needy Mizrahi; here, a Mizrahi woman is the supplier (of hard drugs!) for the feeble Ashkenazi man. When the *kibbutznik* thanks Jacky for the high-quality (soft) drugs she had previously provided him, she retorts slyly, "[this is] my contribution to the 'drought' in the *kibbutz*"; literally the reference is to the shortage of drugs in the Kibbutz, but it also implies the Kibbutz's ideological and financial bankruptcy in the last decades. In Lubin's (1999a) view, the emplacement of Jacky at the center of the narrative, coupled with her strength to turn domesticated domains into public ones, earn *Jacky* the distinction of being the only Israeli film to transcend a mere subversion and, alternatively, to posit a bold "critique of Israeli society on several scores: gender, ethnicity, class, and social structure" (180).

[284] In a stark contrast to a common trend in (mainly early) Israeli films, Jacky does not sell her body as her poor Mizrahi young women counterparts often do. See Lubin (1999a) for a more elaborate discussion of *Jacky*'s refusal to objectify its protagonist, to render her an object of desire.

Mirrors

(*Mar'ot*, Orly Malessa, 2004)

Filmmaker Malessa was born in Ethiopia in 1978, and, at age two she moved with her parents to a refugee/transient camp in Sudan where the family spent three years before immigrating to Israel.[285] The immigrant experience features centrally in *Mirrors*. In this short narrative film, Malessa intercuts between her heroine Elmaz's story in Ethiopia and the woman's present life in Israel. In Ethiopia, Elmaz is having a happy and unperturbed life, but then two momentous events change her life: the family prepares to immigrate to Israel and her parents plot an arranged marriage for her. In Israel, Elmaz (given the Hebrew name Zehavit), her husband, whom she was forced to marry twenty years earlier, and her daughter live in a small apartment. It seems that Zehavit, working evenings as a janitor in a school, is the breadwinner. Unlike the husband, who feels alienated from anything Israeli, the mother cherishes her second homeland and aspires to master both the language and the culture. After some trepidation and gentle prodding from a (female) teacher, Zehavit decides to join an adult Hebrew class in her school after she finishes her cleaning chores there. Her husband mistakes her coming home late and the cosmetics he finds in her bag as signs that she is having an affair, and he slaps her in a moment of fury. Zehavit slaps him back and then alludes to the class she has been taking. The film's conclusion offers a measure of reconciliation between the couple as Zehavit, lifting a kerchief made to look like a veil, asks her husband to see her anew, to recognize her as he has never done.

[285] Interviews with Malessa conducted on 6/27/2004 and 5/29/2005.

Notwithstanding the film's putatively personal and intimate features, I would suggest that the Zionist ethos lurks here to provide the main discursive framework. Again, we find the new country that rescues the ignorant Mizrahim, and again we find that the Ashkenazi (represented by the character of the teacher) is their savior. If Ethiopia is ultimately marked in the film as an end (the forced marriage as an event terminating innocence and childhood), Israel offers a new beginning. In the classroom where Zehavit mops, a big sign reads "One for all and all for one," and later, in the classroom where she studies Hebrew, the sign above the chalkboard quotes the biblical fiat, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18). These "signs on the wall" allude to the communal (socialist) responsibility Zionism proclaims and are devoid of any irony. The immigrants who study Hebrew in the evening (or the young students who study there during the day) can rest assured that they are embraced by the society in which they now live.

The film's emphasis on the mother's desire to learn Hebrew furthers the centrality of the Zionist discourse in the film. Even those opposed to Zionism often concede that one of the movement's most distinguished accomplishments is the revival of the Hebrew language. For the immigrants, acquiring the new language (often at the price of alienating themselves from their mother tongue) has been the crucible for their integration into Israeli society. In *Mirrors*, not only is this linguistic/cultural/political issue not problematized, but the mother's infatuation with the language verges on a fetishist obsession. Zehavit sensually moves her fingers over the Hebrew words on the chalkboard, she is gratified when she writes her name in Hebrew, and we learn that she

prepares herself for the Hebrew lessons as a woman would prepare herself for seeing her lover. It is not surprising then that when her husband accuses her of unfaithfulness, she retorts that she was "having an affair with papers." There is, therefore, a marked discursive difference between *Mirrors* and *Jacky*. Whereas the latter offers a social critique encoded at the intersection of gender and ethnicity, *Mirrors* constructs the gender dilemma in utter isolation from ethnic or Zionist national issues and, consequently, acquiesces with the governing social realities in Israel.

The South: Alice Never Lived Here
(*ha'Darom, Alice Lo Gara Kan Af Pa'am*, Seniora [Sini] Bar-David, 1998)

Bar-David's poetic documentary focuses on the stories of three generations of Mizrahi/Sephardi women. Grandmother Ida Reuben grew up in Didimoticho, a Greek town bordering Turkey. She left by herself for Plovid, Bulgaria, at an early age, and later, in 1948, moved with her husband to Israel. Ida's granddaughter, filmmaker Bar-David, who was born in the Ajami neighborhood, a destitute southern suburb of Tel Aviv, personifies the film's middle generation. Bar-David includes in her film the articulate fifteen-year-old Elinor and attempts "to find the girl [I] was once" through her conversations with this teenager. Whereas *The South*'s treatment of generations of women is reminiscent of *Mirrors*, in stark contrast to the latter, Bar-David's documentary poses a harsh criticism of the Zionist project, mainly vis-à-vis its social and educational blunders regarding the Mizrahi community.

Within the mosaic of locations in Israel and abroad, Tel Kabbir, the neighborhood where Elinor lives and where Bar-David grew up, looms large. In a Foucauldian fashion,

the filmmaker defines the boundaries of the neighborhood by its institutions: "[O]n the east side there is the jail, in the south the hospital, in the west the soccer stadium, and in the north the pathological institute [morgue]." Still along these Foucauldian lines, the history of the place amounts to an "archeology" of displacement, where the eradication of the old/past is constitutive of the new/present; Tel Kabbir was first an Arab village (Abu Kabbir), then, after 1948, an immigrant transient camp, and later, a slum inhabited mostly by Mizrahim. Again, the "south" in this film is not only a geographical reference but a psychic one as well, a topos denoting poverty, crime, and stalled time. Indeed, in this journey "southward" into her childhood neighborhood, Bar-David is dismayed to realize that little has changed since she left the place over a decade earlier.

The filmmaker's "double," Elinor, is facing the same hurdles and dilemmas known to Bar-David from her own past: lack of opportunities, a failing educational system, and diffidence. In one of the early encounters between the two, Elinor commiserates, "What hurts the most is that a poor person is not just one who has no money, it is a person who is poor [deprived] of everything—a sense of security … to be able to say 'I will succeed, it will be alright.' This evokes an immense anger and aversion, and if I, a fifteen-year-old girl, am angry, all the more so are the grown-ups of this neighborhood whose anger has been boiling up all these years." The Integration Program—a government endeavor putatively aimed at raising the educational level of students in the periphery by transferring them to schools in more affluent and prestigious neighborhoods—failed Bar-David then and frustrates Elinor now. The stigma placed on the "southern" students by the "northerners" is best captured by Elinor's Ashkenazi

teacher, who admits to the yawning gap between the two groups and, unflinchingly, attributes the "southerners'" low achievements to their lack of "motivation to excel," which, he claims, "starts at home." In the case of Elinor, the shame involved in one's social status and ethnic origin recurs on a daily basis; on the one hand, she attests to loving and respecting her mother, but on the other hand, she has been ashamed of her mother ever since she realized that she works as a maid in the house of one of her classmates' grandmother.

The South provides an intricate case of the relations between gender and ethnicity. In this feature-length film, there is not a single direct reference to "woman power" or to gender-based imbalances and oppression. And yet, a closer analysis of *The South* will reveal that gender issues constitute the film's structural undercurrent. Importantly, this story of three generations of women diverges from the conventional grandmother/mother/daughter dynasty tale. Elinor is not part of the filmmaker's family and, therefore, the connections between Ida, Seniora, and Elinor are inherently thematic; put differently, the seemingly individual story of these three women is meant to exceed the boundaries of a single familial narrative. Furthermore, in the following discussion I will suggest that the film's reflection on woman's condition transpires from an existential, rather than a concrete social position.

The film's opening establishes its main motif: the fugitive, rootless, and even ephemeral being of women. First, there is the long black-and-white tracking shot alongside a solid stone wall, which establishes the onlooker's (the filmmaker's) fleeting view. Then, still in black-and-white, the camera freezes on a wall against which a young

unidentifiable girl is dissolved into the scene. The girl, playing hopscotch, is shown in slow motion, creating a slight sense of floating, and then she is dissolved out as a ghost image. Indeed, all three women in the film are best characterized by their fleeing or their desire to move elsewhere. This is evident in the women's tales: the refugee grandmother whose chain of displacements started in 1923-24 when she was subjected to the forced population exchange between Greece and Turkey; Elinor, who, because of the social and cultural irreconcilability of home and school, wishes to abandon the former; and finally the filmmaker, who confesses in a voice-over during the opening scene with the girl playing, "I have always wanted to get lost, to find myself in a place that knows nothing about me." Bar-David's personal-cinematic journeys to the places where her grandmother once lived and into her own past, along with the repetitive mentions in the film of words such as "fleeting," "loss," "evasive," and "elusive," are thematic elements that fully concur with the film's figurative play with the presence-absence of the girl/woman.

Indeed, the film offers an intriguing and somewhat unconventional "feminist" position: the three strong female characters are defined more by their inferred psychic-existential state than by their actual presence. Importantly, the filmmaker is rarely shown in the film and so it is mostly her voice-over that implies her presence. The film's name—*Alice Never Lived Here*—and its thematic and titular reference to Scorsese's American road film *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* clearly encourage us to attend to women's absence or their symbolic journeys more than to their presence. Moreover, the film's title and themes invoke *Alice in the Wonderland*, which features yet another figure

whose story is marked by the play of presence and absence. Elinor makes this reference to Lewis Carroll's tale explicit when she ventures that she can envision Alice as a little girl living in Tel Kabbir and, like herself, wishing to run away from home: "[H]ad she [Alice] been living in north Tel Aviv, she would have not been compelled to run away."[286] One of the film's theme songs—"White Rabbit"[287]—reinscribes the various elements discussed here. This 1960s song with direct allusions to *Alice in the Wonderland* inspired the controversial American diary of a teenager's tale of drug addiction and implied rape—*Go Ask Alice*. The inclusion of this song already in the beginning of the film is the melodic equivalent to Bar-David's abovementioned voice-over pertaining to loss (the teenager died from drug overdose shortly after she had decided to discontinue her writing) and to her reflections about the fleeting nature of life.

This discussion of woman's presence is tangential to feminist articulations about the relations between place (cinematic or "real" space) and gender. Earlier, I concurred with Lubin's (1999a) analysis of *Jacky*'s feminist position, where the woman's physical presence is constitutive of the space the titular heroine occupies. Whereas Lubin (1998) employs the same argument in her analysis of *The South*'s female characters, my contention here is that the film's voice-over, aesthetics, and main theme, to which I have

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[286] This exchange with the filmmaker is instigated by a puppet show *Alice in the Wonderland* that Elinor is attending.

[287] Below are the lines from Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" included in the film:
"One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small
And the ones that mother gives you, don't do anything at all
Go ask Alice, when she's ten feet tall
And if you go chasing rabbits, and you know you're going to fall
Tell 'em a hookah-smoking caterpillar has given you the call
And call Alice, when she was just small."

already alluded, construct spaces that are formative of their characters and their relationships, not the other way around.[288] Indeed, the filmmaker concedes early in the film that although she has been trying to shake off her past in Tel Kabbir, it irreversibly set its roots deep inside her.

Men, playing only a peripheral role in *The South*, often exhibit the reverse paradigm to that which women cast in the film; instead of loss and wandering, they exhibit rootedness and ties to their place of residence, and, in contrast to women's existential perplexity, they are marked by certainty and discipline. Put differently, to some extent, men's domineering power translates in this film into some "feminine" qualities as the male characters become the beacons of home and belonging. In the opening voice-over, Bar-David tells of her abortive attempt to "get lost" when she was a young girl and of the father who slapped her for this misconduct so that "since then I could never again get lost." When Elinor reveals to her parents her sense of shame at the place where they all live and her desire to run away, the father, a construction laborer who is fully attached to his neighborhood of Tel Kabbir, maintains: "I would leave it only if Peres hands it down to Arafat."[289] Similarly, when the teacher discusses with his students the conspicuous gaps between the "northerners" and the "southerners," he

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[288] There are, however, two noticeable exceptions to this filmic trend. Early in the film, Bar-David reveals that for seven years her grandmother has not left her apartment even once. (The strong presence of the grandmother in her small apartment also stands in contrast to her life story that, otherwise, is marked by constant movement.) The other challenge is posited by Elinor's father, who dismisses his daughter's argument about the power, positive or detrimental, of the place one lives in; he convincingly tells her that it is her ethnic origin ("as long as you're a blackie…") that determines how people treat her, not her place of residence.

[289] In this conversation, the father turns his daughter's suggestion about the backwardness of the place on its head; for him, it is precisely her upbringing in the periphery that motivates her to excel and to prove to the more fortunate students her ability to succeed.

implicitly challenges the prudence of transferring students away from their neighborhoods. The teacher's posture in this scene, holding his hands behind his back as would a military man, signals authority and discipline. Immediately following this sequence, a brief scene with Orthodox Jews (Hasidim) solidifies the film's gender economy—the neat division it establishes between men and women. In their "missionary" trip to the southern suburbs of Tel Aviv, before they deliver candies to the neighborhood kids, these Hasidim are heard from the van's loudspeakers citing the fiat that "every woman and daughter lights Shabbat candles," in what amounts to another facet of men's regime of power and discipline, but also of (religious) rootedness.

Finally, the emphasis given in *The South* to the abovementioned towering institutions of Tel Kabbir further attests to the film's peculiar confluence of aesthetic-discursive elements in its construction of "masculinity";[290] the institutions are symbols of male might, but also, as the voice-over indicates, they demarcate the neighborhood territory (home) and are therefore somewhat domesticated. Returning to my initial argument in this section, where I suggested that the women of the film are subjected to, not constitutive of their environment, we can now add that this is precisely because the men in *The South* define both private and public space and are more attached to it than are its women.

To advance my discussion of intersectionality and the relations between gender and ethnicity in contemporary Mizrahi cinema, it is noteworthy that all the films

[290] Significantly, the nominals for these four places—institute, hospital, jail, and stadium—all take the masculine form.

discussed in this section feature an array of strong women—Jacky; *The South*'s Elinor, grandmother Ida, and filmmaker Bar-David; *Mirrors*' Zehavit; mother and daughters in *Sh'hur*; and, in *Turn Left*, Nicole, Simone, Sarah, Jeannette (the Moroccan mother) and Rahel (the Indian mother). Notwithstanding the previous allusions to the women's lack of rootedness and even ephemeral presence in *The South*, generally within the films' narratives and aesthetics (e.g., P.O.V.), not only are these women the motivating force, but occasionally, they are assigned an importance that transcends the confines of an individual tale. Like the treatment of the woman's death in Israeli classics such as *They Were Ten* (*Hem Hayu Asara*, Baruch Dienar, 1960) and *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (*Giva'a Esrim ve'Arba Eina Ona*, Thorold Dickinson, 1954),[291] in *Turn Left* the death of the Moroccan mother gains special meaning as it becomes a marker of a new era. As stated earlier, the landing of man on the moon is meant to relate the incident of death—an end of an era—to the beginning of a new chapter in human history. In *Turn Left* and its predecessors, all of which feature at least as many men as women, it is the woman who has the symbolic power (ironically granted to her only upon her death) to transform

[291] In *They Were Ten*, a film about the early Jewish settlement in Palestine, Manya lives with her husband and eight other men (hence the title) in a desolate hilltop in the Galilee area. As Shohat (1989) suggests, the death of Manya has mythical and national dimensions; it coincides with heavy rain falling after a long drought, and, more importantly, Manya dies as she gives birth to a new born *sabra*, thereby marking an end of an era and the commencement of a new one—the age of the new breed of Jew. *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* is a (fictive) story of four soldiers capturing a strategic hill at the outskirts of Jerusalem on the eve of the U.N. announcement of ceasefire between Jordan and the nascent state of Israel. All four die, but their sacrifice ensures the safe passage to Jerusalem in years to come. Whereas the film is structured around the narratives of the three male characters and elides the female soldier's voice (ibid.), her death is endowed with special honor. In the film's conclusion, the camera climbs from the body of the heroine clenching the Israeli flag to a dynamic aerial view of Israel. To mythicize her death, the closing title reads "The Beginning," again, to signify that the sacrificial death of the woman is an enabler of new life/a new state.

history or, at the very least, to be associated with it. Yet, a closer analysis will reveal the problematics of Mizrahi women's empowerment in these films.

Possibly with the exception of *Jacky* and *The South*, in these films not only are ethnicity-related dilemmas and sociopolitical critiques being subsumed within and overlaid by gender issues, but the empowerment or centrality of the Mizrahi women operate along gender lines only, not ethnic ones, and, therefore, this strategy frustrates any conceptualization or advocacy of intersectionality. Like *Jacky*, *The South* does not allow the subsumption of ethnic critique into a gender-related agenda, and yet, in accordance with all the other films analyzed in this section, *The South* fails to offer a true intersectionality; as I intimated earlier, the film offers two parallel commentaries—one concerning women and the other concerning *Mizrahiyut*—but the two never converge.

The preponderance of gender over ethnicity becomes apparent when we consider that, in all the films discussed here, women rarely stand alongside their Mizrahi men to resist the social/ethnic predicament to which they are all subjected. In fact, oftentimes, the father/"man" of the family is either absent or is reduced to a dysfunctional and insipid figure, which amounts to the same thing. Some of the most conspicuous examples for the absence or feebleness of the Mizrahi father/husband are Zehavit's spouse in *Mirrors*, the fathers/husbands in *Turn Left*, the passing away of Heli's father at the beginning of *Sh'hur*, Shlomi's banished father in *Bonjour, Monsieur Shlomi*, and the deceased Morris of the Mandavon family in *Desperado Square*. The diminished male figure in these and other films clearly resonates with the emasculation of Mizrahi men to which I alluded earlier.

Moreover, time and again women are pitted against men—spouses, partners, or fathers—and often, these films' central conflicts revolve around the war between the sexes. For example, Jacky struggles against Eli, her brother-in-law, and David, her boyfriend. In *Mirrors*, Zehavit and her husband have never been close to each other and, with the exception of the film's conclusion, every contact between them is charged with tension and disagreements (the patent manifestation of which is Zehavit's slapping her husband back). Likewise, there is not a single shot in *Mirrors* of the daughter Miriam and her father being together. In turn, the extremity of this daughter-father alienation enhances the centrality of the mother and her narrational power; she is the sole link between the two.

In *Turn Left,* women's comradeship is one of the film's main thematic threads. Indeed, other than the warm relationship and mutual respect between Jeannette and her husband, other strong and lasting bonds are those involving women only. Most noticeable in this context is the emotional and physical affinity between Nicole and Sara; it withstands all the upheavals the two adolescents undergo and constitutes one of *Turn Left*'s primary motivating forces. Comparing these relationships to those which include men, it is possible to argue that *Turn Left* renders stable and affective unions the domain of women only. It follows then that any attempt by the film to offer a social/ethnic critique—which, naturally, should engage both sexes—will be contained within the discursive and aesthetic boundaries of gender differences or disparities. Azulai-Hasfari's *Sh'hur* is the crudest in its pitting of men against women within the Mizrahi community. Concurrently with Pnina's rape outside her house (a revenge taken against her brother),

Hannah's father whips her with his belt for damaging the ceremonial ark he was building. As Niv (1999) observes, the intercutting between the two scenes—Rahel's noticing of her sister being raped as she is being whipped—and the intermeshing of the crying sounds of the two sisters imply Rahel's own rape by her father.

To conclude our discussion of the relations between ethnicity and gender, in the films discussed here the Mizrahi plight is often reduced to a critique of patriarchal hegemony. In turn, overlooking the structural origins of the ethnic dilemma facilitates the circulation of negative stereotypes about the Mizrahi community and its men. Specifically, these films largely fail to relate the Mizrahi man's alleged violence, or, alternatively, his emasculation and insipidity, to the broader social crises these heads of households experienced upon their immigration. Returning to the questions I posed at the beginning of this section, it is then clear that, instead of advancing notions of intersectionality (as advocated, for example, by Crenshaw and bell hooks), the films acquiesce to a breach between ethnic and gender-related issues. Furthermore, since in these films gender overshadows ethnicity and the oppression of women is foregrounded over that of the Mizrahi group, I would propose that, discursively, the Mizrahi woman is situated closer to Ashkenazi women than to Mizrahi men.[292]

[292] This is a somewhat surprising finding considering that in actuality, as I mentioned earlier, Mizrahi women activists split from the general/Ashkenazi feminist movement to form their own Mizrahi group "Ahoti" but maintain close ties with the Mizrahi organization of Hakeshet.

The Ethno-Class Dilemma

In the discussion following a special screening of *The King of Ratings* (*Melekh ha'Reting*, Doron Tsabari, 2001), an audience member challenged scholar and activist Yossi Dahan, one of the panelists, about his (and his fellow scholars') "obsession" with the Mizrahi issue and proposed to focus on class dilemmas instead.[293] Dahan responded by transposing the question into the American reality, saying it is doubtful anyone would seriously think of the African-American dilemma as one of class only, contending thus that, generally, the racial/ethnic issue cannot be fully subsumed within that of class. In this section I will explore the scholarly and then the filmic construction of ethnicity vis-à-vis class.

Veteran sociologist Smooha is reputed for his rejection of the co-optation/assimilation theoretical model[294] for its overlooking the structural marginalization of Mizrahim over the years and his studies often attend to the continuous predicament of Mizrahim to this day. In his essay (1995) on *Sh'hur* he bemoans, "[T]he Israeli discourse has been socially not ethnically-based.… In this non-ethnic social discourse there are no real conflicts nor conflicts of interests, hostility, or exploitation" (1995:62-63). In her seminal anthropological work on Israeli society, Domínguez (1989) broaches what is seemingly an opposite proposition, namely, that whereas in public discourse as well as in various scholarly writings, demographic, geographical, economic

[293] Event at the Tel Aviv Cinematheque, May 12, 2004. The film is discussed later in this section.
[294] See discussion in Chapter 1. Smooha lays out cogently his critique of the assimilationist model in "Jewish Ethnicity in Israel" (2004).

and religious groupings (and statistics) are widespread, class or social status appear much less frequently (6-7). The attempt to reconcile these two assertions will inform our discussion of contemporary scholarship on ethnicity and class and the manner in which Mizrahi cinema treats the relationship between the two.

It is clear that Smooha is fully cognizant of the omnipresence of ethnicity in discourse and as a lived experience. In his study of contemporary Jewish ethnicity in Israeli society, Smooha (2004) employs the sociological distinction between real ethnicity (elementary choices/limitations regarding occupation, areas of residence, etc.) and symbolic ethnicity (secondary, folkloristic elements). For Smooha, not only is it significant that symbolic ethnicity can last for generations, but more importantly, considering housing, occupation, and intra-ethnic vs. inter-ethnic marriage patterns in the context of the Mizrahi community, it is imprudent to suggest that real ethnicity has dissolved into a symbolic one. Similarly, what Smooha alludes to in his essay (1995) on *Sh'hur* is the problematics in the disassociation between the social and the ethnic. In other words, whereas it is fully acceptable for Israelis (and specifically for those in power) to broach symbolic Mizrahi ethnicity—its customs, languages, food, music, and geographical origins—it is rather a taboo to suggest a correlation or considerable overlap between ethnicity and class.

This is precisely what opponents of this "taboo" attempt to change in their writings. In their works and in their references to other studies, Smooha (2004), Ben-Zadok (1993), and Chetrit (2004a) reiterate the confluence of class and ethnicity. Similarly, sociologist Shenhav (2003) deliberately employs the term ethno-class in his

discussion of the Mizrahi group; it is meant to point to the overlap between a low social status/class and Mizrahi ethnicity. Granted, Israel has undergone drastic social changes in the last few decades—I already addressed the relative social mobility of Mizrahim after the 1967 War, the influx of immigrants mostly from Russia and the former Soviet Republics as well as from Ethiopia, and the employment of foreign laborers (often to take the place of Palestinian workers who are generally considered by Israelis a high security risk). Yet, what all the scholars I mention here suggest is the structural, rather than circumstantial lower social status of the Mizrahim. As Chetrit (2004a) maintains, notwithstanding that the Palestinians and foreign laborers now populate the very bottom of the social strata, within the Jewish population of Israel, the socioeconomic and educational gaps between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim have been widened (265-268).

To turn to Domínguez's (1989) observation about the omission of class, we may suggest that in Israeli public discourse this elision and, conversely, the recognition of (symbolic) ethnicity, are grounded in the same ideological sphere—namely, the denial of deep-rooted, structural ethno-social gaps. Affirming the existence of class disparity (and its reification in recent years) flies in the face of the socialist-Zionist ethos, whereas the acknowledgment of differences prescribed by symbolic ethnicity, or even "gaps," is often merely tantamount, to use Swirski's (1989) critique, to pointing at the need for the Mizrahi to undergo a "cultural upgrade." The significance and implications of these articulations are then twofold: first, we encounter here the "blaming the victim" strategy (i.e., Mizrahim's putative cultural inferiority is to be blamed for their "lagging" behind) and, second, this position turns a structural class issue into a generational one (according

to this discourse, the second or third generation of Mizrahi immigrants will acquire the preferred skills and mentality which would enable them to be fully co-opted into "first Israel").[295]

My probing of the seemingly opposite views Smooha and Domínguez express on the issue at hand proves then that ethnicity and class are a recto/verso pair and should, therefore, be explored in relation to each other. In other words, it is not simply a matter of whether ethnicity is broached, but of the context in which it is articulated and of its positioning in relation to class. My analysis below of *The King of Ratings* and *White Gold/Black Labor* is intended to reveal the importance of contextualizing any discourse on the class/ethnic dyad. As we shall see, whereas the former draws ethnic and class issues in two parallel tracks, not making the connection explicit, Shemesh's film strives to attend to class issues only. However, my analysis would suggest that, given the social reality of Israel, in both films the uncoupling of the "ethno-class" issue is bound to fail.

Case Study:

<u>The King of Ratings (Melekh ha'Reting, Doron Tsabari, 2001)</u>

The King of Ratings features Dudu Topaz, whose television program "Harishon Babidur" (lit. "The First in Entertainment") led the ratings list for nearly six years straight. The film follows Topaz in his public appearances and in the privacy of his home and family (e.g., his marriage, divorce, an intense week-long spiritual purification program he underwent, and his unsettling relationships with his two children from a

[295] See Swirski (1989:27-28).

previous marriage) over a five-year period. Tsabari sets out to explore the pompous designation, "Dudu is the people of Israel" (which refers to both his popularity and to his supposed representativeness of the Israeli mentality) and ends up portraying such a disturbing image of Topaz that this powerful TV star exerted his influence to forestall the scheduled screening of the film on television.[296]

Early on, the film reminds us of Topaz's demeaning reference to Mizrahim (specifically, supporters of the right-wing Likud party) as riffraff ("Chah'chahim") during his political campaign for the Labor party in 1981.[297] Topaz recalls the Mizrahi hostility that hounded him for years and he refers to those who bore the grudge as "zeroes." Considering this early introduction of the ethnic, the scene seems to delineate the direction the film will follow. In our interview, Tsabari revealed that his interest in making the film was motivated by the desire to understand Topaz's attitude toward the Mizrahi issue and people long after the effect of that political incident subsided. To his chagrin, Tsabari was unsuccessful in goading the TV star to address this issue, but then, after years of following him, Topaz spoke freely about that subject and made candid statements that clearly made their way to the finished film. Topaz flatly admits, "I'm a racist.… It is a fact," and he then elaborates on the childhood trauma that triggered his anti-Mizrahi sentiments—when he was about ten years old, a young Mizrahi man whose family had just moved to the Topazes' neighborhood made an excuse to hit and humiliate

[296] The film was shown in Israel's major cinematheques. Interestingly, the film is available in the Israeli The Third Ear video store chain free of charge; the filmmaker prefers not give Topaz any excuse to sue him on grounds of profiting from his "slander" in the film. (Interviews with Tsabari, 5/12/2004 and 7/27/2005).

[297] Late Prime Minister Begin fully exploited later in that year's campaign Topaz's slur to sway Mizrahi voters to support his Likud party.

Topaz's father. "A Godzilla." "An Arab…a 'Hamasnick'" is how he now remembers that young Mizrahi man. Topaz concludes emphatically, "the entire Mizrahim hate the Ashkenazim," and, relating his racist views to his life choices, he allows that it is because he is aware of his irrational racist sentiments toward Mizrahim that he tries to counterbalance or neutralize them by choosing Mizrahim to work with and, more importantly, by getting married to a Mizrahi (Bukharian) woman. (The marriage fell apart six months later.) Thus, the film includes a cluster of references to Topaz's position vis-à-vis the ethnic problem, but the rest of the film pursues other themes that, at least seemingly, do not directly relate (thematically or structurally) to these earlier scenes about the Mizrahim.

The King of Ratings tends to the social plight of rich vs. poor and center vs. periphery; these themes culminate in Topaz's trip to the southern development town of Ofakim. The trip is designed to be included in "Harishon Babidur" and is revealed to be a ratings scheme. Topaz's staff identified a newspaper article telling the story of a man, Shlomo Da'i, a landscaper for Ofakim's municipality, who is about to be laid off and lose even the minimum wage he earned to support his family, which includes two handicapped children. Topaz shows up with his crew at the Da'i house and starts showering the family with presents, gift certificates, money, and eventually a promise from the mayor to keep Shlomo's employment. (To be sure, the corporate donors are emphasized just as much as the items given.) At some point Shlomo declines a money gift, and he later candidly tells Topaz that his family has lived happily and dignifiedly

even with the limited means they have had.[298] Tsabari's camera does not flinch in this disturbing scene; it accentuates the uneasiness, even humiliation involved in this putative act of goodwill, and accordingly, the sequence concludes with the ironic caption "TV's exploitation of Shlomo Da'i received 25.5% rating" (and made "Harishon Babidur" the most watched program that week).[299]

The film then has one cluster of scenes pertaining directly to Topaz's view of the Mizrahim and another cluster, introduced later in the film, touching upon class issues, such as unemployment, center vs. periphery, and rich vs. poor.[300] Does the film indeed divorce the ethnic from the broader class issues? Seemingly, it does. And yet, we need to consider two elements that, at the very least, direct our attention to the ethno-class confluence. First, the "goodwill" trip to the Mizrahi family in Ofakim is tainted from the outset by our knowledge of Topaz's view of Mizrahim from the opening scenes. We are actually encouraged to read this scene as an encounter between the Ashkenazi Topaz and the Mizrahi Da'i family. (Is the Da'i family also the "zeroes" to which Topaz has previously referred? Do they, like all Mizrahim, hate Ashkenazim?) More importantly, the visit at the family's house is constructed as the orientalist journey to the "East." Specifically, the images and the verbal exchanges in that scene immediately conjure up the portrayal of Mizrahi in early Israeli cinema and in today's media coverage of Mizrahi

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[298] Later in the film this statement accrues additional meaning; when Topaz admits that his life is becoming miserable, we are impelled to think of this analogy between the two in terms of the miserable millionaire versus the contented poor.

[299] Importantly, Topaz arranged with Tsabari to have the latter's crew film the whole visit and to allow each party to use the footage for its purposes. Knowing that to a large extent the crew followed Topaz's directions further supports my argument below about the "colonialist look" of the scene at the Da'i family. (Information is based on an interview with Tsabari, 7/27/2005.)

[300] Various scenes reveal the exuberant wealth of Topaz and his milieu of friends.

communities with its emphasis on poverty, lack of education, an "iconography of backwardness," and the episodic rather than contextual and structural addressing of the community predicament.[301] The camera follows Topaz so that the scene is depicted from his point of view—he is exploring a new territory and people "stuck in time." Topaz, then, is the present-day Zionist savior/benefactor of the Mizrahim.[302] In accordance with Said's (1978) and Shohat's (1989, 2000a, and 2001a) conceptualizations of imperial knowledge and power, Topaz has the ultimate knowledge of and about the "natives"; after he introduces himself to the Da'i family, Topaz "guesses" who they are, boasts about knowing their ages, and he then adds haughtily, "You see, I know everything about you."

Case Study:

***White Gold/Black Labor (Zahav Lavan/Avoda Sh'hora*, Tali Shemesh, 2004)**

On June 9, 2004, Channel 2's news magazine "Fact: With Ilana Dayan" ("Uvda: Im Ilana Dayan") featured a special screening of Shemesh's film, followed by a studio discussion. The film centers on one of Israel's most reputable and profitable industries—the Dead Sea Plant, which for years has been associated with one of the most ambitious

[301] See my discussion in Chapter 1 of Avraham's (1993/2000) studies on the coverage of the periphery in Israeli media.

[302] There is a strikingly similar reference to Topaz in *White Gold/Black Labor*, which I explore next. In one of the scenes, the TV star is laying the cornerstone of the Topaz Center in the southern development town of Dimona. In his speech there, Topaz envisions a vast economic growth resulting from his Center's initiative (including a shopping center, a theme park, museums, etc.) and he spices up his Zionist harangue with a few catchy phrases from President Kennedy's and M.L.K's speeches. Three months later it was announced that the plans for the Center were shelved.

Zionist/Israeli industrial enterprises.[303] As part of the sweeping privatization trend of the last decades, the state sold the Plant in 1996 to private entrepreneurs. In 1999, these buyers offered the Plant for sale, and it took the Ofer brothers, whose wealth ranks them the second richest family in Israel, only 24 hours to seal a deal and purchase it.[304] *White Gold/Black Labor* reveals what has mostly been a hushed undercurrent in some sectors of the Israeli labor market—the hiring of low-skilled outsourced laborers (*ovde kablan*) to perform some of the most labor-intensive or hazardous tasks.[305] In the Dead Sea Plant, these non-unionized workers do not enjoy most of the social and financial benefits (e.g., retirement funds and overtime pay) employers in most sectors of Israeli society do.

In stark contrast to the poor employment conditions and the extremely low wages earned by the outsourced laborers (OLs), there are two other strata of workers in the Plant, referred to as Generation A and Generation B, both unionized. Generation A workers consist of the most veteran employees of the Dead Sea Plant, and they enjoy extraordinarily high wages and benefits. The film suggests that Generation A constitutes a class of its own; neither Generation B nor the OLs can join this privileged group. To demonstrate the internal status divisions, the film addresses the separation between Generation A workers and the OL inside the workplace and without, which affects even the workers' children.

If all of this seems merely unfortunate but not necessarily appalling, then one needs to consider the management's extreme exploitation of some loopholes in

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[303] The Dead Sea Plant is located in the southern tip of the Dead Sea (in Hebrew, the "Salty Sea") and produces potash, bromine, and magnesium.
[304] Information provided in the film.
[305] "Black labor" in Hebrew connotes primarily menial work.

employment laws (e.g., the hiring of some workers for periods as long as thirty years, where they are still considered by their employers "special project" or temporary workers). Furthermore, OLs have been threatened time and again by their employers not to unionize or make their conditions known to the public. Early on, Shemesh documents her failed attempts to interview the Plant's OLs, and the film reveals that they decline to speak with her out of fear that they would never be able to be hired again or receive last month's payment if they told their story to the camera. People's desperate need to work at the Plant and the OLs' willingness to acquiesce with their humiliating socioeconomic conditions should be understood in the context of the limited work opportunities in many development towns. As indicated in earlier discussions, the town is often dependent on only one major plant, and therefore, being barred from employment there likely means a prolonged unemployment. A few OLs eventually agree to portray their horrifying employment conditions and, with the exception of three of them, they conceal their identity by wearing a white mask. It is precisely this reality—where OLs are shunned by their employers and many in Dimona—that justifies the use of these specially-made masks; they imply the need to hide, but as importantly, attest to the OLs' condition as "present absentees" who have no face in the community in which they live.

Due to his close ties with the management, Armond Lankri, the Plant's union's chairman and a member of Generation A, is obliged to defend his employers and initially denies there are any OLs at the Plant.[306] His inverted rationale for that assertion

[306] "We need to understand that Lankri is playing the role that the management gave him. They provide him and his people with relatively good employment conditions and in return, he gives them 'industrial calmness' " (the filmmaker's voice-over).

somewhat redeems him—since, as he claims, these workers do not appear in the rosters the Plant keeps, practically speaking, they are non-existent. (Indeed, the Plant deals with subcontractors who provide the OLs.) When Lankri finally concedes that he is aware of the presence of the OLs, he belittles its significance both by minimizing its scale and by suggesting that the hiring is only for limited periods. (He moves uncomfortably in his seat when confronted with suggestions that some have been OLs for fifteen to eighteen years.) Despite repeated attempts by the filmmaker, the management, for its part, declines to respond: "[The Ofer brothers] are surrounded by cohorts of PR people, spokesmen, and lawyers."[307]

So far, my discussion here has elided any mention of ethnicity. Seemingly, *White Gold/Black Labor* is solely about class and social issues both in the narrow context of different rankings within one workplace and in consideration of the broader social dilemma of the polarizing effects of privatization in Israel. Is it not significant, though, that the film is set in Dimona, populated mostly by Moroccan Jews, and that half of this town's workforce is employed in the Plant? Or, is it not important that, based on names, appearance (of those unmasked), and accent, along with the filmmaker's attestation (interviews on 6/19/2004 and 6/4/2005), a large majority of the OLs are of

[307] The issue of the pernicious connection between fortune and political power (*hon veshilton*) is often addressed in Israeli critical socialist circles. Also the film alludes to it, but it underscores the related, detrimental connection between fortune and the academia in Israel. Ben-Gurion University postponed indefinitely the scheduled screening of this film due to pressure apparently exerted by one of the Ofers, Yuli (or his proxies), who is on this institution's board of directors. ("Reciprocally," Avishai Braverman, president of Ben-Gurion University, was until recently on the board of directors of the Ofers' corporation "Hahevra Leyisrael." Information is based on Sheli Yehimovitch's news program "Gilui Da'at, Channel 2 and on my interviews with Shemesh, 6/19/2004 and 6/4/2005.)

Moroccan/Mizrahi descent?[308] The film, however, does not have a single mention of people's ethnicity or geographical origins. What is then the significance of this structuring absence to our analysis of the ethno-class dilemma? I shared these quandaries with Shemesh who, in response, relayed to me a conceptual debate she had had with her editor. The latter believed the ethnic issue should be addressed head-on, whereas Shemesh thought it would diffuse the message and divert the film away from its main course. Furthermore, Shemesh suggested that most viewers will not mistake the ethnic origins of the interviewees and, specifically, of the OLs (nor, I would add, will they fail to identify the Ofers as Ashkenazi).

As we have seen, by the actual dynamics of repression, a structuring absence keeps alluding to that which an author or a society at large deems taboo and elides. I would argue that Shemesh's subtle dealing with race issues forces ethnicity with a vengeance back into the filmic realm. Does not the dark-skinned Mizrahi with a white mask conjure up Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*? The issue of blackness lurks time and again in this film, but it becomes explicit only once. A masked OL conveys the way the management and privileged workers at the Plant perceive him: "first and foremost, OL is not a man [Fanon again, "the black is not a man"?]; he is a blackie-Negro, we are the whites."[309] Remembering that "blacks" (*sh'horim*) used to be a derogative word referring to Mizrahi Jews, it is not an unreasonable leap to suggest that the film transposes the general race issue to the specific ethnic reality in Israel. Following the

[308] My discussion here is not suggesting that the Mizrahim of Dimona are all OLs; actually, many of Generation A and B employees, including Lankri, are Mizrahim.
[309] In the film, the term used for "blackie-Negro" is *kushi shahor*.

argument I make here, other, seemingly peculiar elements the film contains (read "contains" also as related to containment and confinement), become more legible and gain much significance.

In this final discussion about the film, I will tend to that containment of the incendiary racial/ethnic issue. Clearly, the film's title conjures up notions of slavery, and the white/black dyad alludes to the whites' exploitation of blacks in America and elsewhere.[310] Yet, it is worth noting that, notwithstanding its origin, in Hebrew "black labor" is a common term for menial work, not necessarily an address of people's ethnicity or color. The film thereby obscures its own references to ethnicity; this tension between the revealed and the concealed in this film is most apparent in the inclusion of the "Strange Fruit" song about blacks' lynching in the slavery era.[311] Over shots of a still

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[310] The allusion to the workers' slavery-like conditions cannot be mistaken. One scene delves on the preparations made by Dimona's residents for Passover (e.g., burning of the leavened bread) and the filmmaker's voice-over refers to the holiday by its less common name "The Holiday of Liberation" (Hag ha'Herut). Since the holiday commemorates the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt into freedom in the Land of Israel, the association between the two forms of oppression is called-for, except that the OLs, according to the film, do not enjoy any relief from their plight this holiday.

[311] The performer is Nina Simone, but the translation of the lyrics is based on Billie Holliday's original version; the two versions differ slightly. Below is the latter. In bold are the lines included in the film:

"Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,

local neighborhood of Dimona at sunrise and burning-red bare trees with a few cotton seedpods hanging down, some lines from that song play in the background and are translated into Hebrew. Clearly, this harshest denouncement the film posits can no longer be read as related to class exploitation only; "Strange Fruit" *is* about race[312] and therefore its inclusion implies the role of the ethnic in the construction of the film, despite the filmmaker's overt intention to attend to the social issue of class only. And yet, even this bold allusion to race/ethnicity is again broached in a non-Israeli context, and thus it further obfuscates the overlap between the ethnic (racial) dilemmas and class gaps.

Alliances and Inspirations

Despite its emphasis on intra-group differences and on the unique conditions of various sub-groups, scholarship on intersectionality is not meant to advocate internal schisms within groups, nor is the articulation of differences predicated on identity politics a goal in itself. Seemingly paradoxically, according to Crenshaw (1991) intersectionality can open up space for advancing the struggle of the group as a whole (e.g., women in general, not only women of color) and even for social and political alliances with other subaltern groups. As discussed earlier, Third World/global/critical race feminists assign much importance to the issue of intersectionality. In this section I want to extrapolate from these feminists' theoretical models and frameworks about gender-based alliances to my analysis of the Mizrahi. Accordingly, I will tend to the coalitions the Mizrahi group

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For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter cry."

[312] But again, even here, according to Shemesh's own admission (in an interview), the reference is lost on most audiences as they are not likely to be familiar with the song or its references.

in Israel has pursued, most noticeably, with the Arab/Palestinian "other," and I will focus on the modalities Mizrahi cinema confers onto such alliances and the spaces it carves out to contextualize it.

My starting point, then, for moving from the "atomization" involved in identity politics to the inclusiveness pertaining to inter-group alliances, is the articulation of intersectionality as a discursive and practical mechanism of connectivity rather than separation. In their different ways, Yuval-Davis (1997), Tong (1989), Sandoval (2000), and Crenshaw (1991) do not ask to reify sub-group identities or to demark a distinct space where gender, race, and class intersect, but to identify the strategic or tactic importance of intersectionality. Indeed, my use of the term "mechanism" is intended to allude to the conceptualization of identity politics as a means or vehicle to advance the sub-group's visibility, intervention, and struggle.

Guided by Audre Lorde, Tong (1989:237) concludes that "attention to difference," not its erasure, will bring about unity between various groups of women. Similarly, in her discussion of U.S. Third World feminism, Sandoval (2000) tends to the differential mode of consciousness that can potentially permeate social change and stronger affiliations between women's groups, irrespective of their different stands. As she envisions it, this mode operates like a car clutch, allowing us to move between different ideological positionings. It is therefore not despite, but because of the distinct gears/positionalities that power can be generated:

> The 'truth' of differential social movement is composed of manifold positions for truth: these positions are ideological stands that are viewed as potential tactics drawn from a never-ending

> interventionary fund, the contents of which remobilize power. Differential consciousness and social movement thus are linked to the necessity to stake out and hold solid identity and political positions in the social world. (60)

Postmodernist feminist Yuval-Davis (1997) employs the term "transversal politics" to offer a similar argument.[313] She contrasts "transversalism" with "'universalism,' which, by assuming a homogeneous point of departure, ends up being exclusive instead of inclusive and [with] 'relativism' which assumes that, because of the differential points of departure, no common understanding and genuine dialogue are possible at all" (130). Accordingly, Yuval-Davis maintains that one of the necessities for "transversalism" or for the formation of alliances and solidarity-based politics, is to be tuned and sensitive to the other while maintaining one's set of beliefs, values, and perspective; otherwise, these alliances run the risk of "uncritical solidarity." In the conclusion to her book, Yuval-Davis succinctly captures an argument regarding identity, positionalities, and struggle that I have broached throughout this work: "The boundaries of a transversal dialogue are determined by the message, rather than by the messenger" (131). Arguably, she employs "boundaries" because not "everything goes" and "message rather than messenger" because we should tend to positions and positionalities and not to assumed fixed identities.

In "Postmodern Blackness" (in *Yearning*, 1990) bell hooks provides a comprehensive account of the space our contemporary era enables for subaltern groups to

[313] Yuval-Davis indicates that she is borrowing "transversal politics," a term first introduced to her by Italian feminists from Bologna (1997:125).

coalesce around common goals and to challenge oppressive forces such as racism. hooks suggests that it is precisely the postmodern experience that enables these bonds: [314]

> The overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance. Radical postmodernism calls attention to those shared sensibilities which cross the boundaries of class, gender, race, etc., that could be fertile ground for the construction of empathy—ties that would promote recognition of common commitments, and serve as a base for solidarity and coalition. (27)

"Recognition," attended to by hooks and other theorists of gender and race, becomes a pivotal concept in Charles Taylor's (1994) theory, as is evident in his essay on the politics of recognition, which he relates to identity politics. Laying out his premise about the dialogical nature of identity, Taylor subsequently suggests that the others' recognition of us is an essential part of who we are. Indeed, Taylor assigns to recognition (and dignity) the paramount role the Foucauldian model attributes to power. For Taylor, the issue of recognition is more acute in modernity than it has ever been: "What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in

[314] bell hooks's preference of the radical postmodernist model is congruent with her view that essentialist positions are detrimental to the formation of inter-group solidarity. For her, (radical) postmodern thought avoids the problems marring essentialism—such as categorical differences and over-determination. hooks argues that alliances, based on shared sentiments and experiences of oppression, facilitate the conceptualizations of non-determined identities and subjects' agency. The utility of a postmodernist stand to the creation of space that facilitates solidarity and action is captured well in Bhabha's articulation of Third Space and the problems involved in reifying and essentializing the category of class at the expense of attending to others: "[T]he fragmentation of identity is often celebrated as a kind of pure anarchic liberalism or voluntarism, but I prefer to see it as a recognition of the importance of the alienation of the self in the construction of forms of solidarity.… The crucial feature of this new awareness is that it doesn't need to totalise in order to legitimate political action or cultural practice" ("The Third Space: Interview," 1990b:213).

which the attempt to be recognized can fail" (35). This difficulty or risk have evolved in the last few centuries and stem from the emergence of a "politics of difference"; we now ask of the other to respect the differences between us, not our commonalities.

Incorporating Taylor's (1994) concept of recognition into my earlier inquiry into potential alliances between various marginalized groups, I will now turn to an analysis of the Mizrahi/Palestinian coalition and will examine its manifestations and significance in scholarly work and in cinema.[315] In Chapter 3, I addressed the complex relations between Mizrahi identity and Arabness. I suggested there that the hyphen in "Arab-Jew," as it pertains to the construction of Mizrahi identity in cinema, can signify both a connector and a separator between the Mizrahi and his/her Arab cultural and historical origins. Here, I shift the focus from culture to politics and from the Mizrahi/Sephardi experience in the Arab world to the relations between the conditions of the Mizrahi and the Palestinian. The motive for this re-introduction of the Mizrahi/Arab issue is clearly the emergence of substantial scholarship and the relatively large number of recent films addressing the commonalities between the two groups. In accordance with my pursuit in this section, these works often articulate causes the two communities share, based, *inter alia*, on their otherization or oppression by the hegemonic Ashkenazi Zionism.

As indicated in earlier discussions, Shenhav (2003) identifies Zionist leadership's creation of interdependence between the Mizrahi and the Palestinian issues already in the first years following the establishment of the state of Israel. Among the historical events

[315] It bears noting that, unlike previous scholars discussed in this section, Taylor (and Calderon [2000], who applies that theoretical model of recognition to Israeli society), does not address the "coalitions of the oppressed"; rather, he focuses on legal and civil recognition of the aspirations of the marginalized groups by the society at large.

Shenhav recounts is the linkage created by Ben-Gurion's government between the confiscated property of pre-1948 Palestinians and that of the Iraqi-Jewish immigrants of the early 1950s. Importantly, the link (albeit, not necessarily as a unifying force) between the two groups also includes labor issues (the relative advanced social mobility Mizrahim enjoyed following the 1967 War when Palestinians from the territories took their place at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy), housing policies (the settlement of many Mizrahim in what used to be Arab villages and towns before the 1948 War), and administrative practices (the positioning of a significant number of Mizrahim, based on their knowledge of Arabic, in governmental and military posts which required daily contact with local Arab/Palestinian populations).[316]

It is clear that for all parties involved—Mizrahim, Palestinians, and Israeli authorities—this coerced linkage was not meant to provide the two subaltern groups the political basis for cooperation. Yet, this is precisely what many "New Mizrahim" attempt to advance in their contemporary academic, institutional, and community work. Ideologically, the "New Mizrahim" take a radical leftist stance, opposing not only ethno-social policies, but, just importantly, the Labor and Likud governments' stances vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue. Their involvement and desire to interrelate the Mizrahi and Palestinian dilemmas is unmistakable if we consider their affiliations with groups and organizations (oftentimes, as founders) such as Hakeshet[317] and The Edva Center for the Study of Equality in Israel, both of which strive to raise consciousness and effect change

[316] See Swirski, 1989 (mainly pp. 53-55); Shohat, 1989 (particularly, pp. 267-268); Ben-Zadok's "Oriental Jews in Development Towns: Ethnicity, Economic Development, Budgets, and Politics" (in Ben-Zadok, 1993); and Ben-Rafael, 1982 (Chapter 11—"The Jewish-Arab Case").
[317] See Hakeshet's platform in Introduction.

regarding unjust sociopolitical realities in Israel's judicial, executive, and legislative branches of government.[318]

It is not surprising then that Shohat (1997b) titles her essay on Mizrahi oppression—"Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims"—to echo Said's (1979) seminal essay "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims," where he offers a historical narrative of the conflict from the Palestinian perspective. Indeed, as I alluded to in my references to Shohat's work, her various publications often attend to the interrelations between the Arab/Palestinian dilemma and that of the Mizrahim, probably most noticeably so in her *Israeli Cinema* (1989). For Shohat, the hegemonic Zionist view "refuses to see that the same historical process that disposed Palestinians of their property, lands, and national-political rights was linked to the process that disposed Sephardim of their property, lands, and rootedness in Arab countries (and, within Israel itself, of their history and culture)" (267-268).

One of the most significant interventions in Shohat's (1989) study of Israeli cinema is her critique of the "Political Wave" filmmakers, who, while they were often considered dovish on the Palestinian/Israeli front, failed in her view to relate their

[318] It is noteworthy that this recognition by Mizrahim of the Palestinian predicament and the need for a political or civil mobilization to remedy the situation is not completely a recent phenomenon. For example, radical Mizrahim, such as Moni Yakim, Eli Hamo, Ella Shohat, and the late Mizrahi-feminist Vicky Shiran, were members of the forum Bimat Kivun Hadash (lit. Stage for a New Direction) which was founded in 1984. The forum expressed unconventionally dovish positions regarding the Palestinian people and a Palestinian state at a time when such views were often considered political heresy. Also relevant to this discussion is former Black Panther Charlie Bitton's affiliation with the communist, mostly Arab, party of Hadash from the 1970s through the early 1990s. For a further discussion of this issue see Chetrit (2004a, mainly Chapter 4 and Conclusions).

political agenda or to expand it to address the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi issue. In her discussion of this cinematic period and genre of the 1980s, Shohat observes,

> The films, in continuity with the general liberal discourse, now make a step forward recognizing a Palestinian entity, but in fact focus on *sabra* ambivalence in relation to that question while hermetically shutting off the Sephardi issue as an 'internal social problem' to be solved after peace is achieved. The intrinsic relations between the Palestinian and the Sephardi question form, in the 'Palestinian Wave' of films, a 'structuring absence.' (267)

The cinematic harbinger of the view interrelating the Palestinian and the Mizrahi plight is Igaal Niddam's *We Are All Arab Jews in Israel* (1977), which I discussed in Chapter 3. The oddity of his thesis at the time the film was made is best captured in an interview with Patricia Erens (Niddam, 1979/80). Although she is sympathetic to the film, Erens comments, "[F]or me, you really have two films: one on the situation of the Sepharadim in Israel and the other on the solution to peace in the Middle East." Niddam's called-for response is, "I have the right to decide these two issues are connected" (38).[319] Leaping into the present, the following will then explore the imbrication of the Palestinian/Mizrahi dilemmas as rendered in the narratives, casting, and iconography of recent Mizrahi films.

[319] We are reminded here of the comments made by various participants in recent films, such as *Ancient Winds* and *The Black Panthers Speak*, vehemently criticizing the imprudent, if not dangerous, discursive schism between the social and the political.

Zehava Ben: A Solitary Star (*Zehava Ben: Kokhav Ehad Levad*, Erez Laufer, 1996) and *Samir* (David Benchetrit, 1997)

Zehava Ben takes place during the precarious mid-1990s—after the signing of the Oslo accords and the peace treaty with Jordan, but a time also marked by increased terrorist attacks against Israelis. Zehava Ben, an Israeli popular singer of Moroccan descent, performs for Israelis and Palestinians enchanted by her Mizrahi tunes. (In the film's opening, Zehava Ben sings to an ecstatic Palestinian audience a song by the revered late Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum.) Her stage dream is to perform these songs all over the Middle East, a wish she also expresses in her conversations with the musician Felix Mizrahi in *Taqasim*. Beyond the shared musical tastes of Arabs and Mizrahim, to which *Zehava Ben* alludes, the film relates the private to the public and political; this performer's career and fortune are contingent on the prospects for an Arab-Israeli peace and the endorsement of Arab culture.

In Benchetrit's *Samir*, the possibility of Mizrahi-Palestinian coalition comes into a much sharper focus. In his conversations with Arab writers Emil Habibi and Ali Salem, renowned Jewish-Israeli writer Michael (aka Samir) draws a clear analogy between his inferior status in Iraq as a member of the minority Jewish group there and the predicament of the Israeli Arabs having been considered Israel's disloyal minority. When he reminisces with Habibi on the years they spent together in the communist party in Israel, Michael decries the harsh treatment both Israeli Arabs and Mizrahim have suffered at the hands of Israeli governments. Michael then elaborates on the brutality with which the Israeli government in the late 1950s crushed all Mizrahi attempts to organize politically and socially and on the ensuing sense of estrangement in one's own

country. This personal closeness and attestations to Mizrahi-Palestinian common political ground amount, according to Chetrit (11/22/1996) to a "film of forbidden encounters" (49); for him, these possible coalitions, which are predicated on the elision of the Ashkenazi-Zionist hegemony, are the latter's biggest fear. In my discussion of the "Political Wave" in Chapter 1, I suggested that the bond the Mizrahi establishes with the Palestinian counterpart and their consequent cooperation are not based on the Mizrahi heightened political consciousness but on circumstance, physical semblance, and shared cultural (often folkloric) features. Conversely, in the new wave of Mizrahi films such as *Samir*, the affinity between the two parties is encoded first and foremost on the basis of mutual recognition (an acknowledgment and cognitive faculty) and a shared sociopolitical agenda.

For Osnat Trabelsi, the producer of numerous television programs and documentaries on Israel's unrelenting occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, it is her work with and about Palestinians that led her to connect with her own past and, more generally, with the Mizrahi cause, not the other way around.[320] Trabelsi, an Israeli-born daughter of an Iraqi mother and a Tunisian father, embraces the Arab identity she had previously shunned and was ashamed of (e.g., when her mother listened to Arabic songs on the radio, she would turn it off and growl, "we are not Arabs here!"[321]). Trabelsi's "enlightenment" has the same underpinnings as those of Igaal Niddam's film—both filmmakers are cognizant that the Mizrahim are best positioned for Israeli/Arab rapprochement and that the erasure of the Arab culture of the Mizrahim is intrinsically

[320] The discussion here is based on my interviews with Osnat Trabelsi (6/8/2004 and 6/2/2005).
[321] Trabelsi (2002).

embedded in the ongoing oppression of Arabs/Palestinians. As is evident from earlier discussions in this work, Ashkenazi (Western) Zionism, with its outright rejection of the Orient, deemed both Mizrahim and Arabs/Palestinians as threatening others. Adding to Raymond Williams's coinage, Shohat (1995) proposes "*analogical* structures of feeling" (169, 177)—the overlapping collectivities and shared experiences that make intercommunal alliances possible. It is precisely these "analogical structures of feeling" Trabelsi attests to in her suggestion that, when Mizrahim (defined by consciousness, not origins) make films about Palestinians, there is no sense of otherness or superiority between the filmmaker and his/her subject. It is, therefore, all the more interesting to investigate the reverse perspective—the way a Palestinian filmmaker would articulate these relations between the Arab (Palestinian) suffering and the Mizrahi problem; Israeli Palestinian filmmaker Hassan purports to do precisely that.

Cut
(Nizar Hassan, 2000)

Hassan follows the story of Kurdish and Iraqi Jewish families to hint at the connection and analogy between the predicament of these immigrants—their forced settlement in what used to be, prior to the 1948 War, the Arab village Ajur[322]—and the Palestinian *Nakba* (lit. "disaster" in Arabic, a reference to the aftermath of what most Israelis call the "War of Independence"). From the outset, the film blames the Ashkenazi establishment for these groups' conditions and, in this sense, *Cut* may be interpreted as a cinematic space enabling the camaraderie of the oppressed. The "cut" signifies then both

[322] Israel changed the village's name to Agur.

the displacement/expulsion of Palestinians and the dislocation of Mizrahim who, oftentimes, did not wish to leave their Arab/Muslim homelands and immigrate to Israel.

Yet, this reading of the film can be challenged on several levels. Within the film's diegesis, it is implicit that a few of its main characters (some of whom are also committed right-wing Zionists) gradually begin to suspect that Hassan's motivation for entering their lives is to make a Palestinian nationalistic (read anti-Israeli) film. Other challenges to this interpretation of the film relate to extra- (or "semi") diegetic considerations. *Cut*'s overall sense of the solidarity of the oppressed and, especially, the film's apparent cinematic transparency which derives from its emphatic reflexive style—crew members are part of the *mise en scène* and address the camera, the microphone is often seen in the frame, and shots occasionally start with a visible slate—should not be mistaken for a frank "baring all" or an egalitarian directorial stand. In the last analysis, Hassan reverses power relations common in Israel's political reality—the filmmaker is the one who now calls "cut" (calls the shots)—and his authority over his subjects is unmistakable; they eventually admit, just as the film's co-producer does, that they don't really know what this film is all about. My argument here is not meant simply as a reiteration of the truism that the very setting in documentary filmmaking implies that the people in front of the camera are devoid of the power the makers of the film have. Rather, since the filmmaker becomes a representative or symbol of Palestinian nationalism, the mistrust and confusion developing among his subjects signify the broader impossibility of reciprocal recognition or the formation of coalitions between the two groups. In short, despite *Cut*'s overt purpose to relate the sufferings of one group to

the other, this film reinforces the mutual sense of otherness between Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed, in my interview with Hassan, he expressed little sympathy for the Mizrahim, who, he argued, desire to be fully co-opted into the Ashkenazi society and tend only to their victimhood instead of promulgating a radical anti-Zionist alternative.[323] As an indication of this quiescence, Hassan cites the little interest Mizrahim, mostly second-generation, have had in cultivating Arab culture among themselves.[324]

My analysis here is not intended to censure Hassan's film nor to suggest that, in general, Palestinian filmmakers share his stand regarding the Mizrahi; Hassan's film is actually the only one a Palestinian made about the Mizrahi community. Rather, what needs to be underscored here is an argument I alluded to at the beginning of this section, namely, that coalitions are always contingent and should be studied in reference to their particular contexts. Based on alliances discussed and promoted by women of color, I suggested that one's readiness to engage in an intercommunal coalition should not entail the surrender of his/her values and core beliefs. I will conclude my analysis here with these questions: Is it not possible that for Palestinians to enter a coalition with a Mizrahi there are markedly different implications than for the latter to pursue such an alliance? In other words, is it inconceivable that whereas the Mizrahi risks very little in forging these

[323] Interview on 6/20/2004. It should be mentioned, though, that the conversation I had with Hassan can hardly qualify as an interview. Initially, Hassan was interested in the direction my study takes vis-à-vis the Arab and Mizrahi issues, but later he concluded that "we lack a common ground and, thereby, have nothing to talk about." Cut!

[324] Consequently, Ilana Sugbaker Messika (2001) expresses her dismay about Hassan's criticism of Mizrahim. She maintains that, regretfully, Hassan's sentiments are shared by some Palestinian peace activists, including the Palestinian poet in exile Mahmoud Darwish.

ties, for the Palestinians the same act might be interpreted (in their eyes or in the view of their community) as sheer submission?

By its very definition, acting is constituted on a peculiar duality between the actor and the character he/she plays; on the one hand, it necessitates the mimetic separation between the persona (role) and the actor (otherwise the latter is not an *actor*) and, on the other hand, it involves some suitability, affinity, or resemblance between the two. Casting Palestinian actors as Mizrahi characters, including Muhammad Bakri, Makram Khuri, and Salim Daw, who play Mizrahi roles in, respectively, *Desperado Square, The Barbecue People*, and *James' Journey to Jerusalem*, provides a unique perspective on our inquiry into Mizrahi/Palestinian relations. It can be argued that these casting choices may signify Mizrahi/Palestinian interchangeability. Moving beyond the issue of representational "passing," the following discussion addresses casting considerations in the broader context of language, iconography, and discourse in order to investigate Mizrahi/Palestinian linkage.

The casting of the Palestinian actor Makram Khouri in *The Barbecue People* as the scheming businessman/lover Ezra Tawil, who usurps the story of his Iraqi-Jewish fellow—Haim Ida—about the Zionist underground cell in Iraq, is multivalent. On one level, Tawil's claiming a false identity (that he is the revered underground ud player) amounts to an act of displacement, only this time the Arab (in a Jewish role) is the perpetrator. That scene about competing narratives has, therefore, a mnemonic effect in referencing another struggle over history—the irreconcilable Palestinian vs. Israeli

accounts of the conflict. This suggestion becomes even more plausible if we consider that the rivalry between Ida and Tawil directly engages the Zionist endeavor; in a way, they contend for the fame of being the resolute or true Zionist. On another level, quite compatible with the last, yet allowing some room for Palestinian/Mizrahi commonalities, we may propose that this Mizrahi/Palestinian identity-related quandary is intended to obscure rather than underscore differences. Arguably, the Zionist historiography regarding Arab-Jews is constructed along the same lines as its construction vis-à-vis the Arab enemy—in both cases the story of the other has been marginalized or rejected.

In *Desperado Square*, even more than in *The Barbecue People*, the issue of passing becomes secondary once we tend to the film's bold "miscast." Avram, the brother of the deceased Morris, is played by the well-known Palestinian actor and filmmaker Muhammad Bakri, whose presence in this film, albeit as a Mizrahi character, immediately imparts to it political dimensions; Bakri has been known to Israeli audiences for his political consciousness and activism for the Palestinian cause.[325] In his first appearance in the film (and then again toward the end), Bakri carries an old suitcase as he visits the neighborhood he left years ago. Significantly, the suitcase, just like the olive tree and the house key, has a synecdochic virtue in Palestinian nationalism; all these properties attest to the longing, bond, and desire to return to the homeland. Therefore, from the outset, Bakri elicits a hybrid Mizrahi/Palestinian refugee-type, a daring

[325] About a year after the release of *Desperado Square*, Bakri made the controversial *Jenin, Jenin*, (2002). The film is a testimonial to the death and suffering of the residents of the West Bank town of Jenin resulting from a vast Israeli military operation there in April 2002. The film was banned in Israel until the Supreme Court deemed the ban unlawful.

proposition if understood also to stand in contrast to the iconic Wandering (Ashkenazi) Jew.

When Aharon the projectionist is asking Avram to borrow from him *Sangam*'s only available film print, which has been in his possession since he had left the neighborhood twenty-five years ago, he appeals to him, "let's relive our old dreams." Avram retorts with an Arabic expression (used occasionally by non-Arabic-speaking Israelis): "al'fut mut"—"the past is dead"—and then, for emphatic purposes, he repeats it. This exchange accretes special meaning since within the film's diegesis Avram is a Mizrahi, but he is a Palestinian/Arab in the extra-diegetic context, whereas his interlocutor, Aharon, is played by the actor Uri Gavriel, who is easily recognizable as Mizrahi. Thereby, the proposition to relive the old dreams of the past can be interpreted either as an impossibility ("the past is dead") implicated by the Zionist vision that has mostly been encoded on the eradication of the Palestinian national ambitions and Mizrahi culture, or, it can also be understood affirmatively as alluding to the cultural-lingual commonalities between Mizrahim and Arabs. In the literal and narrational sense, the film's conclusion supports this affirmative reading—against all odds, Avram, Seniora, and the community at large do relive their old dreams suspended by the closing down of the movie-house.

To conclude this section, we should also address suggestions in Mizrahi cinema about possible alliances or similarities between the ethnic struggle in Israel and racial and social struggles elsewhere in the world. In his analysis of the Mizrahi plight in present-day Israel, Ben Dor (2004) points to the significance of interrelating the local ethnic

struggle in Israel with worldwide social and racial conflicts. Consequently, I would also argue that allusions in films to other social movements involve more than simply broaching common grounds; they are subversive acts in themselves. One facet of the dynamics of the oppression of Mizrahim, as we have seen, has been based on the construction of the ethnic dilemma as an internal Israeli issue, particular to the history of this nascent state coping with mass immigration. These connections, which free the discourse about ethnic struggle from its local-circumstantial confinements, suggest, therefore, a structural rather than episodic oppression.

Similarly, in his analysis of Torati's work and specifically of *Desperado Square*, Chetrit (2001) coins the semi-oxymoronic term "the universal neighborhood" to address the film's astute ability to connect between the specific Israeli and general global social issues. The film implicitly proposes, if not actual coalitions between Third World/repressed people, then at least unity based on sympathy and on having similar experiences: "[T]here is such a thing as a universal neighborhood, here, in Italy, in Egypt, in India … and in many other 'southern' corners of our civilization.… In this era of fascist global economy, the inversion of this trend is the universalization of the neighborhood" (21). The imbrication of the local with the universal becomes evident in Chetrit's own film (with Hamo) *The Black Panthers (in Israel) Speak*. The film intersperses fast-paced montage sequences that include a rhythmic "African" drum beating in the audio-track and black-and-white still pictures of the Israeli and American Black Panthers movements, and of Malcolm X's rallies, the Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Muhammad Ali, and Martin Luther King. The effect of the rapid

succession of images—each still picture is on the screen for approximately 1/3 of a second, barely enough time to cognitively process the information presented in each image individually—with the accompanying sound is the fusion of all the components of the montage into one compound, thus again alluding to the structural (rather than specific) semblances between the struggles of various marginalized groups that rise up against their oppression.

Our discussion in this chapter of intersectionality and alliances was mostly an inquiry into the social boundaries pertaining to the Mizrahi group. Alternatively, throughout this work, my analysis of contemporary Mizrahi cinema engaged boundaries that set the Mizrahi group apart from others. Chapter 3 explored the cultural commonalities the Mizrahim share, Chapter 4 delineated the spatial boundaries inside which the Mizrahi is emplaced, and the political boundaries were Chapter 5's main focus. All these chapters have skirted around the ultimate question about boundaries: what, if any, are the features that distinguish the corpus of Mizrahi films?

Afterword: What is Mizrahi in Mizrahi Cinema?[326]

I returned to Israel at the end of June 2005 after completing the first draft of this work. In the three weeks I spent there I had the opportunity to watch some new films that were released since my prolonged research stay in Israel a year earlier, to collect more archival materials, and to conduct additional interviews with members of the film community. One of the interviews I conducted was with filmmaker Eitan Green, whose film *American Citizen* (*Ezrah Amerika'ee*, 1992) I analyzed at great length in the first section of what was then my chapter on representation. Ordinarily, I looked forward to each of these interviews, but I greatly dreaded the one I scheduled with this filmmaker; I employed *American Citizen* to reveal how even a filmmaker such as Green, whose films are often believed to be highly sensitive and humane by filmmakers and critics alike,[327] resorts to some of the most disturbing and demeaning representations of the Mizrahi in contemporary cinema.

American Citizen tells the story of Yoel, a frail and epileptic sports reporter in the small coastal city of Ashdod, who is an avid fan of his local basketball team. Despite initial friction, Yoel strikes up a strong friendship with Michael, a semi-professional (white) American player who signed a one-year contract with the local team to help it advance to the national league. Rahel, Yoel's sister, is an accomplished pianist who lives in the United States and is staying with her brother during her visit in Israel. Yoel introduces his sister to Michael, and the two fall in love. In mid-season, Michael suffers

[326] The title is inspired by Hall's "What is 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" (1995).
[327] For example, see Schnitzer (1994:346-347).

a disabling knee injury and the team's standing is going from bad to worse when financial problems and an embezzlement case involving the team manager, Amnon, draw the Ashdodians into crisis. Yoel's uncle decides to buy the team and be its manager. Michael is ready to play again and, in the final and hardest game, the underdogs from Ashdod win and the team does not slip to a lower league.

In my analysis of *American Citizen* I focused on the problematic dichotomous construction of ethnic identities where the strikingly negative character of Amnon—an unequivocally Mizrahi character (played by the well-known actor Haim Banai)—is positioned against, what I gathered, is an Ashkenazi family. Yoel, Rahel, and their uncle (who has taken the children under his care since their biological father passed away) are all amicable, empathetic, and overall positive characters. Along the lines of the Bourekas genre, I suggested, the Mizrahi in this film is manipulative and frenzied (Amnon has aggressive outbursts) in contrast to the Ashkenazi *sabras* who, broadly speaking, are industrious, goal-oriented, determined, and boldly sincere. Furthermore, I proposed that whereas the Bourakas films "lay bare" this construction, *American Citizen* is even more pernicious because, again, the humane undertone the film has succeeds in numbing our critical acuity. Ultimately, my critique identified the film's broader problematic paradigm; I found the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi dyad to be confluent with the "blackness"/"whiteness" and East/West opposites, where the first in each pairing is associated with evil. Most conspicuous in this binary construction is Amnon's physical appearance—his dark complexion and the black suits he wears (in contrast to Yoel's uncle)—and the black basketball player who "snatches" the girlfriend Michael had before

he met Rahel. Conversely, the "positive" family is associated with the Occident; both Yoel and his sister are talented pianists and are passionate about classical music—clearly markers of Western of "high-culture."[328]

Early in the interview with filmmaker Green,[329] he pointed out that Yoel's family is actually meant to be Mizrahi; not only are the uncle, Yoel and his sister, and their mother (who has an extremely small role in the film) played by Mizrahi characters, but the latter, based on appearance and accent, is clearly cast as a Mizrahi. In my original analysis of the film, I did address the issue that the siblings are played by Mizrahi actors, but I was more interested in their roles. I clearly utterly disregarded the mother's presence in the film and, as for the uncle, I mistook his pronunciation and fair complexion as indications of his Ashkenazi origin. For the remaining portion of the interview, I was preoccupied with my glaring blunder and I anguishedly envisioned how a week-worth of work on the analysis of this film would have to be swallowed by the "recycle bin" on my computer screen. Later, this encounter prompted me to replace the original section discussing *American Citizen* with an analysis of "the burden of critiquing."

Were there any lessons to be learned from this "misreading" of the text? How is it that what I considered cogent discussions and arguments presented in that section of my work were patently off the mark? Has my critical zeal to identify problematic

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[328] This seemingly innocuous portrayal of the characters' love for classical music is, again, a reminiscent of the stereotypically pervasive representation in Bourekas cinema in which piano playing is associated with the Ashkenazi (as a signifier of cultural sensibilities) and boisterous percussion instruments are associated with the Mizrahi.
[329] Interview on 6/5/2005.

representations of the Other not become *my* blind spot? In various sections I alluded to film critiques that were determined more by their writers' agenda than by the specifics of the film, thereby at times contriving to identify what is hardly in the films' text and eliding what is conspicuous in the film but may counteract the critics' claims. In my view, the main issue lies beyond the quality of scholarship involved. The dynamics we engage in this type of interpretive error is rather intriguing. In our critique of the works we consider as ethnically offensive and problematic, we reprove a film for representations that derive from certain assumptions about ethnic identities, cultures, and customs. But we fall into the same trap we are warning against; we maintain the problematic causal link between representation and ethnic identity, only to reverse it. Put differently, if filmmakers are critiqued for surmising that if a character is Mizrahi then certain features and representations should be assigned to it, our critical lapse is to infer ethnic belongings based on representations.[330]

Still, I knew there must have been another lesson to be learned here; my erroneous argument did not develop in a discursive limbo and, therefore, must have some significance. "Deconstructing" my analysis this way shifted the focus from what the misreading tells about me to what it can tell us about representation, specifically, that of the Mizrahi in contemporary Israeli cinema. Is it not curious that, to return one final time to *American Citizen*, whereas the "bad" Mizrahi is easily recognized as such, the ethnicity of "positive" Mizrahi characters is so obfuscated that we easily mistake these

[330] See my discussion in Chapter 2 where I suggested that although *Campfire* offers no specifics regarding the ethnic identity of the assaulter/rapist, Iris Mizrahi hastily reads him off as a Mizrahi character.

personas for Ashkenazim? Tangentially, throughout this work I tended toward a prominent feature of the filmic obstruction of the Mizrahi dilemma. Against this elision, indeed, the structuring absence of explicit rendering of the Mizrahi issue in many films, I attempted to wrench the ethnic and to point to the problematics when it is completely subsumed within the dilemmas of class, demography (center vs. periphery), immigration (veterans vs. newcomers), and gender (exclusive focus on women's condition when films feature a Mizrahi woman), and, against the beguiling effect embedded in the performative play on ethnicity, I pointed to the residue it leaves and to the re-inscription of the Mizrahi dilemma.

And yet, notwithstanding all the elements and studies that attest to the prevailing Mizrahi predicament—in the areas of education and employment, the scarcity of high-ranking Mizrahi executives in business and media, and the stalled rate of Ashkenazi-Mizrahi intermarriages[331]—it is outright foolish to draw clear boundaries between the Mizrahi issue and other social maladies, or, for that matter, to categorically demark the territory of Mizrahi cinema. In my interviews, some of the most prominent and prolific Mizrahi filmmakers shunned the label of Mizrahi cinema. Time and again, they alluded to the contrived nature of the construction "Mizrahi cinema" and to their preference of "Israeli cinema" instead, where the former is understood to be fully fused into the latter. (Anecdotically, when I called filmmaker Shemi Zarhin to schedule an interview with him and I mentioned that my study is on the Mizrahim [Easterners] in Israeli cinema, he

[331] See discussions in Chapter 1.

responded by asking, seriously, whether I meant a study of the Far East/Asians).[332] For example, filmmaker Eyal Halfon flatly rejected the self-designation of Mizrahi filmmaker and he was also skeptical about the utility of this designation in general.[333] When I referred to *Sh'hur* as a work possibly deserving the title of a Mizrahi film due to its exclusive focus on a Mizrahi community/family, Halfon wittily responded, "right now I'm working on a film about Philippine laborers in Israel; does it make it a Philippine film?" This assertion certainly concurs with the discussion in my introduction where I suggested that it is more prudent to employ the adjectival designation "Mizrahi" when we refer to the corpus of films which constitutes "Mizrahi cinema" than to identify a single film as such.

Lacking a viable, conclusive definition of Mizrahi cinema, we should then attempt to identify the thematic and aesthetic characteristics that may set it apart from "non-Mizrahi cinema." It is evident from the cumulative discussions in this work that the construction of (cultural) identities and space (Chapters 3 and 4) and the rendering of ethnic struggle (Chapter 5) in Mizrahi cinema do constitute a rather distinct corpus of works. But what of a distinct or alternative aesthetics? As Stam suggests, "[T]o address the question of *alternative* aesthetics, we first must address the question of the *normative* aesthetic" (2000:258, original emphasis). Considering that Israeli cinema is still in its infancy, the rapidly changing film scene in Israel (finance, institutions, and competing media outlets), and, finally, the varied aesthetic traditions immigrant filmmakers have

[332] Interview 7/3/2004.
[333] Halfon's father is from Tripoli, Libya, and his mother is Slovakian (interview on 6/2/2004).

infused, it is downright speculative to delineate the outlines of a normative Israeli cinema.

Another venue then in our undertaking to discern aesthetic characteristics of contemporary Mizrahi films will direct us to compare it with ethnic, "Third World," subaltern, or accented cinema elsewhere. A cursory address of some aesthetic commonalities or features that characterize these cinemas will further attest to the problem of attributing to Mizrahi cinema alternative aesthetics. Downing (1987) points to a practice among "Third World" filmmakers to engage the community in the filmmakeing process, and likewise, Naficy (2001) addresses the collective mode of "accented" filmmaking (including its distribution/reception strategies) and, guided by Deleuze and Guattari's "minor literature," he proffers the inventiveness of this filmmaking's cinematic language;[334] yet Mizrahi cinema rarely resorts to these practices nor has it devoped a "deterritorialized language." (If anything, the collective mode of production where film directors work as crew members in other directors' films befit much better the Personal Cinema genre of the 1960s and 1970s, which involved mostly Ashkenazi filmmakers engaging in "non-Mizrahi" themes.) Similarly, "Imperfect Cinema" (Julio Garcia Espinosa) and "Aesthetics of Hunger" (Glauber Rocha)[335] evince low production values, generally challenge the transparency of Hollywood-style filmmaking, and, conversely, champion formalist/Brechtian works that "lay bare the

[334] See Downing, pg. 314, and Naficy, pp. 26, 45-46, 87-95.
[335] For discussions of these cinematic trends see *Film and Theory* (Stam and Miller, eds., 2000, part VI), and Naficy's *An Accented Cinema* (2001:30-31).

means"; again, these are hardly common characterizations of contemporary Mizrahi films.

A case in point is Benchetrit's *Ancient Winds*—it is clear from my discussion in Chapter 5 that this film is one of the most radical, militant, subversive, socially committed films ever produced in Israel, yet, the aesthetics of this relatively glossy documentary is most conventional and non-reflexive. I am not suggesting here that subversive cinema (content-wise) needs to be aesthetically "untraditional," or conversely, that the employment of daring techniques, such in avant-garde cinema, is necessarily subversive; rather, my point is to reiterate that the features alluded to in regards to alternative cinema are far from typifying Mizrahi films.

But then what about the particular motif of journey in accented films? Naficy (2001) identifies journey—physical, psychological, or symbolic—as having a prominent presence in these films. Indeed, in a relatively substantial number of contemporary Mizrahi films, the journey is not only the film's narrational lead but, pertaining to our discussion of aesthetics, is constitutive of the film structure and form. In films such as *Galoot* (Hebrew for "exile," Asher de Bentolila Tlalim, 2003)[336], *Ancient Winds*, *The South*, *Taqasim*, and Kimchi's work in progress *My Father and Other Rabbis*, the journey into the past is physical; in most others, including *Bayit*, *Cinema Egypt*, *Mirrors*, *Maktub Aleik, A Bit of Luck*, and *The Barbecue People*, the journey is referential and constructed (e.g., when stage setting substitutes for the actual place). But even here there are marked

[336] The film follows the filmmaker's journey to the various sites/countries of exile where he, his wife and their families used to live. The exile—chosen or forced—includes Tangier, Morocco, where he was born.

differences between the general features of accented cinema and Mizrahi cinema. Naficy demonstrates throughout his book that accented cinema often revolves around the filmmakers' psychic schism that is encoded on the dialectics of emplacement/displacement regarding the two homes—the homeland and the new land—and that their journey is constructed as an attempted bridging or reconciliation between the two. Contemporary Mizrahi filmmakers, however, most of whom are native-born Israelis, rarely have qualms about where home is even when they vehemently criticize the national Zionist enterprise and the role it assigned to Mizrahi people and culture. Finally, journey as a pivotal thematic and aesthetic element is just as common in non-Mizrahi cinema,[337] which again, is undermining any attempt to set Mizrahi cinema apart from "normative" or "all-Israeli" filmmaking.

Does then contemporary Israeli cinema reflect the dissolution of real ethnicity into a symbolic one? Ultimately, the question is whether we should conceptualize contemporary Mizrahi cinema as a break from the cinematic traditions in Israel through the early 1990s or, alternatively, should Mizrahi cinema of the last fifteen years be understood as a continuation, even the reiteration of those traditions. The most overwhelming evidence to support the contention about the breach contemporary Mizrahi cinema renders is that now the coinage "Mizrahi cinema," albeit equivocal and controversial, is rather sustainable and tenable. In no other period or genre could this

[337] Some of the most notable examples in contemporary cinema of non-Mizrahi documentaries engaging journey in the manner discussed above are Israeli Palestinian Elia Suleiman's *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) and David Perlov's *Corrected Diary* (2001) and the feature films *Newland* (*Eretz Hadasha*, Orna Ben-Dor Niv, 1994), *Coffee with Lemon* (*Café im Limon*, Leonid Gorovets, 1994), and *Over the Ocean* (*Me'ever la'Yam*, Ya'acov [Yankul] Goldwasser, 1991).

term be viable and, with the exception of the Bourekas, the films produced could not be of sufficient magnitude to generate and allow a scholarly field of inquiry. In my review of the history of Israeli cinema, I alluded to the elision of the Mizrahi character in the early Nationalist Cinema, in Personal Cinema, and in Political Cinema, and, likewise, I pointed to the discursive problematics regarding the representation of the Mizrahi in the Bourekas genre. Just as important is the sheer number of Mizrahi filmmakers who are now members of the film community, some of whom, as we have seen, are engaged in cinema that is highly critical of the socio-political order in Israel. And yet, as this work has repeatedly suggested, presence in cinema or elsewhere is a necessary but insufficient condition for the Mizrahi to be a full and equal participant in the public and political arenas. Representation, with its dual connotation as both an act of "speaking for" and as depiction, should be assessed only within the broader system of power relations inside which it takes place, and a study of audiences' reception and institutional policies and frameworks must be integral to this inquiry.

To claim, as I do here, that contemporary Mizrahi cinema does not render a definite and categorical break from previous cinematic endeavors does not entail the maintenance of a status quo or the reification of the filmic practices of the past. The question I posited here in oppositional binary terms—continuity (fixity) or break—excludes a third possibility, namely, an evolutionary process where changes take place within the relatively stable system of power relations and along the same socio-ethnic structural paradigms.

The relations between cinema as a practice and cinema as a field of inquiry are intricate and multifaceted. Should we venture that, like the films made, contemporary critical works on Mizrahi ethnicity reveal a development that is generally contained within well-defined boundaries, e.g., the Zionist national framework? Doubtfully! Shohat's (1989) seminal work on Israeli cinema broke new ground in the discursive debate about Israeli cinema. My study is situated at the cusp of the dialogue she started; I wish *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel* to augment the substantial body of recent critical works on the Mizrahi condition. Ultimately, I hope this corpus of studies and the grassroots efforts in the fields of education, employment, and housing would yield institutional and social changes and raise public awareness of the Mizrahi dilemma to effect a "truth and conciliation" registry of sorts. As even the most radical Mizrahi filmmakers conveyed in our interviews, once these conditions are realized, scholars and activists should all move onward to tend to other social and political dilemmas that have plagued Israel and will cast a shadow over its future for years to come.

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- *My Travels with my Brother* (*Mas'otai im Ahi*, 1997). D. Rami Kimchi.
- *Newland* (*Eretz Hadasha*, 1994). D. Orna Ben-Dor Niv.
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- *Over the Ocean* (*Me'ever la'Yam*, 1991). D. Ya'acov [Yankul] Goldwasser.
- *Passover Fever* (*Leilsede*, 1995). D. Shemi Zarhin.
- *The Quarry* (*ha'Mahtzeva*, 1990). D. Roni Ninio.
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- *Samir* (1997). D. David Benchetrit.
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Field Interviews

- Alexandrowicz, Ra'anan (filmmaker)[338], 6/8/2005.
- Amar, Ronen (filmmaker), 6/20/2004.
- Azulai-Hasfari, Hannah (filmmaker), 6/2/2004.
- Basson, Assaf (filmmaker), 6/30/2004.
- Bat-Adam, Michal (filmmaker), 5/12/2004.
- Benchetrit, David (filmmaker), 6/24/2004.
- Bouzaglo, Haim (filmmaker), 6/17/2004.
- Dahan, Yossi (scholar and social activist), 6/10/2004.
- Dror, Duki (filmmaker), 6/17/2004.
- Fisher, David (director, The New Foundation for Cinema and Television), 6/8/2004 and 6/8/2005.
- Gabizon, Savi (filmmaker), **7/3/2004 and 6/9/2005.
- Green, Eitan (filmmaker), 6/5/2005.
- Halfon, Eyal (filmmaker), 6/2/2004.
- Hamo, Eli (filmmaker and social activist), 6/2/2004.
- Hassan, Nizar (filmmaker), 6/20/2004.
- Kahlili, Ron (TV producer), 6/10/2004.
- Kimchi, Rami (filmmaker), 6/8/2004 and 6/17/2004

Unless marked by [*] or [**], all these interviews were conducted face-to-face and were recorded.
* Face-to-face interview, not recorded.
** Phone interview, not recorded.
[338] The designation in parenthesis corresponds to the profession or capacity for which the interview was conducted; a significant number of the interviewees hold additional positions, not provided on this list.

- Laufer, Erez (filmmaker), 7/4/2004.
- Madmony, Yossi (filmmaker), 5/18/2004.
- Malessa, Orly (filmmaker), 6/27/2004 and **5/29/2005.
- Messika, Yamin (filmmaker and social activist), 6/8/2005.
- Messika, Yamin and Kadoshi, Yarmi (actor), 6/24/2004.
- Morad, Ya'acov-Ronen (actor) and Sigal Morad-Eshed (writer), 6/10/2004.
- Mossek, Nissim (filmmaker), 5/14/2004.
- Naveh, Ziv (director of the public multicultural fund Gesher), 6/12/2005.
- Nesher, Avi (filmmaker), 6/30/2004.
- Ofek, David (Taufik) (filmmaker), 5/12/2004.
- Peretz, Noam (director, Cinematheque Sderot), 6/20/2004.
- Shemesh, Tali (filmmaker), 6/19/2004 and 6/4/2005.
- Shemoelof, Matityaho (social activist), **5/29/2005.
- Shles, Julie (filmmaker), 6/30/2004.
- Torati, Beni (filmmaker), *3/29/2004.
- Trabelsi, Osnat (filmmaker and social activist), 6/8/2004 and 6/2/2005.
- Tsabari, Doron (filmmaker), 5/12/2004 and **7/27/2005.
- Yonah, Yossi (scholar), 7/1/2004.
- Zarhin, Shemi (filmmaker), **7/3/2004 and 6/14/2005.

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VITA

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