

Preface

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Israeli Defense Forces

In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations, and second and third order ones to boot. [...] They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are “something made,” “something fashioned” — the original meaning of *fictiō* — not that they are false, unfactual, or merely “as if” thought experiments. To construct actor-oriented descriptions of the involvements of a Berber chieftain, a Jewish merchant, and a French soldier with one another in 1912 Morocco is clearly an imaginative act... (Geertz, 1973, p.15)

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you!”

This is how Tzachi, my Israeli flatmate, responded when I asked him what was his real “job” in the IDF, on January 9, 2009, the day that I arrived in Israel in order to start my fieldwork.

At that time, the IDF was bombing the Gaza Strip during the Operation Cast Lead, and I didn’t know yet that my flatmate’s answer was a quote from one of the most popular Israeli movies, *Mivtza Savta*, an Israeli cult film mocking all the stereotypes of Israeli culture, including life in the *kibbutz* and the IDF.

By the end of the Gaza War, when Israel first declared a unilateral ceasefire on January 18, followed by Hamas announcing a one-week ceasefire twelve hours later, most of my limited Hebrew vocabulary was part of Israeli military slang. Most of the words that I had learned were actually from other Israeli cult movies dealing with the IDF, something else that I was still not aware of.

“If you want to understand what’s going on in the IDF, you must see *Givat Halfon!*”

Giv’at Halfon Eina Ona, literally “Halfon Hill Doesn’t Answer”, is a cult Israeli satirical movie about the IDF, which tells the story of a reserve company watching the Egyptian border in a remote army base in the Sinai desert.

The name of the film is a parody of the name of the Israeli patriotic film *Giv’a 24 Eina Ona* (“Hill 24 Doesn’t Answer”) the first Israeli nationalist-heroic film, which was directed by Thorold Dickinson in 1954.

The satirical version produced in 1976, ironically, was directed by Assi Dayan, son of Moshe Dayan, the fourth Chief of Staff of the IDF, who became a fighting symbol to the world of the what, at the time, was the nascent State of Israel, founded only in 1948.

From 1948 to date, the Israeli industry of cinema has grown up, developed and changed a lot, as has the state itself, and Israeli national identity.

In a country with universal conscription, which has been in a declared state of war since its inception, it should be of little surprise that the military has figured prominently in Israeli cinema.

What might be somewhat surprising is that the image and perception of the IDF have undergone profound changes in the cultural and social arenas. These changes have manifested themselves on the Israeli screen as well.

In the early years of the state, the IDF was regarded as the epitome and fulfilment of the Israeli dream, the people's army that manifested the strength and resolve of the young nation and its inhabitants, the New Jews.

Over the years, however, the army came to be seen increasingly as a necessity rather than as an ideal. Service in the IDF was no longer viewed as participation in a Grand National undertaking but as just another phase, a rite of passage that follows high school and precedes university, in the *cursus honorum* of Israeli Jews.

As the Israeli Studies scholar Eran Kaplan observed, in the early decades following Israeli independence, the IDF was a venerable institution that stood high above the fray, an Israeli "holy cow" of sorts (Kaplan, 2011, p.59).

But with time the army became the source of constant criticism and questioning, if not outright derision, as in the case of *Givat Halfon*.

Not surprisingly, when, finally, after more than two years of negotiations, Tzachi convinced his IDF unit commander to let me follow his unit during their army reserve duty, I realized what the commander meant when at the end of a speech he gave to the entire battalion he concluded saying: "And don't forget, here is not *Givat Halfon*".

And, finally, I learned to stop worrying about the IDF, which is not only an army, but also huge part of Israeli culture.

The IDF, in fact, is also known as *Tzava haam*, “the people’s army”, and it forms part of Israeli everyday life since childhood, starting from popular children books such as *Kofiko*¹.

The communal grip of the soldier is evident in all Israeli literature, poetry, art, cinema, and in fact any cultural domain in which the soldier is represented.

In the pioneering book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, published in 1980, the French Jesuit and scholar Michel de Certeau examined for the first time the ways in which people individualize mass culture, altering things, from utilitarian objects to street plans to rituals, laws and language, in order to make them their own.

The Practice of Everyday Life began pointing out that while social science possesses the ability to study the traditions, language, symbols, art and articles of exchange that make up a culture, it lacks a formal means by which to examine the ways in which people reappropriate them in everyday situations.

With no clear understanding of such activity, social science is bound to create nothing other than a picture of people who are non-artists (meaning non-creators and non-producers), passive and heavily subject to received culture.

Indeed, such a misinterpretation is borne out in the term “consumer,” therefore, in his work the word “user” is offered instead and the concept of “consumption” is expanded in the phrase “procedures of consumption,” which is further transformed to the term “tactics of consumption.”

In the last decades, several scholars from different disciplines started to analyze film in terms of “procedures of consumption”: an excellent tool with which to introduce the culture of a society to its own conflicts, dynamics, frustrations and hopes.

Like other cultural art forms, Israeli cinema portrays the basic longings that are the existential dilemmas of a people. Indeed, Israeli cinema has the unique quality of having grown and developed within a newly formed state. Israeli cinema, in fact, has been created within a national cultural context that has reflexively produced itself since its very beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, and is still very much engaged in the formation of an evolving national-collective identity in the second millennium.

¹ *Kofiko* is a series of children's books by Tamar Bornstein-Lazar that tells the tales of an Israeli monkey called Kofiko. The first book dates from 1954, and today still holds the record as the most popular children's series of all time in Hebrew. Kofiko experienced many adventures, travelling all around the world. In 1963's edition Kofiko joined the IDF. In the 1964 edition, he joined the special Paratroopers. In 1974, he carried out Reserve Duty, and in 1975 he joined the Army Band.

Israeli culture is the product of a utopian enterprise. Zionism, which started in the late 1890s, was conceived in the context of nationalism in Europe and realized in the land of Israel-Palestine as a pioneering endeavor, regarded by some contemporary historians and sociologists as a colonial enterprise.

As the scholars of Israeli cinema and culture Miri Talmon and Yaron Peleg argue, this newly created cultural identity used the new medium of film to convey the creative momentum of the new nation (Talmon M. and Peleg Y., 2011, pp. X-XI).

In the case of Israeli culture, Israeli films are certainly a paradigmatic medium through which we can follow the changes that took place in Israeli society since its birth.

If the early years of the film industry in Israel were characterized by Zionist, heroic, propaganda movies, over the years the movies have become more and more critical of Israeli society, showing both the strengths and weaknesses of Israel.

Therefore, in my work I aim to explore the specificity of film as a tool to follow the changes that have taken place in Israeli society since its beginnings, with the goal of following changes in the portrayal of the Israeli soldier in film. Through the prism of these changes, one can follow the more general changes that have taken place in Israeli society and culture.

Israeli culture has changed from being pure Zionism to a the culture of a country that allows itself to have doubts, to ask questions, and to criticize itself, like David, the biblical and mythological hero of Israel.

As Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik, both scholars of the Bible as Literature, highlighted in their transdisciplinary work *The David Myth in Western Literature*, of all the Biblical heroes, the character of David is perhaps the richest in paradox and also the most difficult to grasp.

David's life is crowded with more experiences than all the patriarchs together, and in that mass of experiences there are so many contradictions that no easy statement can be made about him.

David is the Biblical Man for all seasons. He is a warrior, a lover, a poet, a killer and a restorer: "his character is paradox: he's the Lord's anointed and the supposed author of the holy Psalms, as well as an adulterer and a murderer. [...] This is the story of living, breathing, passionate, fallible man, the mistake he made and the consequences of those mistakes (Frontain R. J. and Wojcik J., 1980, pp.1-2).

This elaborate and fascinating archetypal hero and his countless representations influenced and inspired me a lot on my journey through the representation of the Israeli soldier in Israeli cinema.

The exposition of my journey in the following chapters is going to be divided into three different level of “representation,” a word which, as the Israeli scholar on Cultural Studies, Ella Shohat argues, has aesthetic as well as political connotations (Shohat, 18987, p.3)

Here I will provide a brief organizational map of my work.

Following a methodological introduction exploring scholarly background on postcolonial, gender and film studies, I will analyze the representation of the Israeli soldier and his continuous metamorphosis, according to the most significant conflicts in the history of the Israeli State.

In the first chapter I will analyze the development of modern Zionism and the consequent establishment of state of Israel, from the First Zionist *Congress*, which took place in *Basel* in 1897, to the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948.

In the second chapter, I will explore the construction of the body of the nation from the 1948 War of Independence to the 1967 Six Day War.

In the third chapter I will analyze the dramatic turning point of the 1973 Kippur War and the , consequent political overturn of the 1970s.

In the fourth chapter, I will explore the explosion of violence characterizing the 1980s and 1990s, the time of the First Lebanon War and the beginning of the First Intifada.

In the last chapter, which deals with the last decade of Israel’s history, I will conclude by trying to explore the complex period of the Second Intifada and what I define as “the wars of the new millennium.”

Each of these chapters is divided into three paragraphs, with each one dealing with a specific level of “representation.”

In the first paragraph of each chapter I will analyze the relation between “nation” and “narration,” to quote the pioneering work of the Indian scholar in contemporary post-colonial studies, Homi K. Bhabha.

After describing the most significant period of the history of Israel, according to the Israeli narrative, in the second paragraph of each chapter I will explore the relation between “nation” and national “artistic” representation.

As the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz stated in his fundamental work “Art as a Cultural System” art is notoriously hard to talk about: “It seems, even when made of words in the literary arts, all the more so when made of pigment, sound, stone or whatever in the non-literary ones, to exist in a world of its own, beyond the reach of discourse. It not only is hard to talk

about it; it seems unnecessary to do so. It speaks, as we say, for itself: a poem must not mean but be; if you have to ask what jazz is you are never going to get to know” (Geertz, 1983, p.94).

According to Geertz, the talk about art that is not merely technical or a spiritualization of the technical, is largely directed to placing it within the context of these other expressions of human purpose and the pattern of experience they collectively sustain. What this implies, is that the definition of art in any society is never wholly intra-aesthetic, and giving art objects a cultural significance is always a local matter. Therefore, to study an art form is to explore a sensibility, which is essentially a collective formation, and a theory of art is at the same time a theory of culture (Geertz, 1983, pp.96 -97).

The exploration, through different historical periods, of the Israeli sensibility to produce and consume Israeli art, guided me in the third level of analysis of representation: the relation between a nation and its cinematic representation, which is explored in the third paragraph of each chapter, and which is also the heart of my ethnographic work.

To be more specific, my approach is, first of all *textual*. Rather than consider the films merely as historical reflections or social symptoms, I attempt to deal with them as films, seeing film as text, according to Geertz's definition of culture as “an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz, 1973, p. 452).

At the same time, my approach is also *intertextual*, dealing with the relationship between the film texts and other texts (filmic and non-filmic) that have preceded or influenced them.

In the case of Israeli Cinema, this includes the influence of non-Israeli films and the presence of non-filmic text in the films themselves, in the form of source–plays and novels adapted for the screen. In this sense, I am concerned with “translation” from medium to medium, with what Christian Metz calls “semiotic interference between languages” (Metz, 1974)

Politics and cinema, text and context, are intimately linked. For this reason my approach is also, *contextual*, analyzing homologies and allegory as a kind of bridge between text and context.

I am concerned, finally, with the *spectator-in-the-text*. According to Shohat’s definition, in fact, “the filmic experience is inevitably inflected by the cultural and political awareness of the audience itself, constituted outside the text and traversed by social realities such as nationality, ethnicity, class and gender” (Shohat, 1987, pp.8-10).

My work examines the discursive creation of the Israeli soldier through the prism of representation in Israeli cinema. To gain a panoramic view of how the soldier is represented, the work brings together different analyses of several ethnographic fields.

I will be concerned with representations of the soldier as discursive formations. These representations are constructed both in interview with people who described their felt experience to me and research on Israeli culture, history and cinema.

It is hoped that the diversity of these sources will add to the understanding of the extensive period covered in the study of the complex representation of the Israeli soldier.

As Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton suggested in their landmark work, *Film as Ethnography*, film is a rich instrument for communicating ethnographic knowledge. It suggests that images and words in this discipline operate on different logical levels; that they are hierarchically related; that whereas writings may encompass the images produced by film, the inverse of this cannot be true. The author argues for this position further by suggesting that the visual is to the written mode as “thin description” is to “thick description” (Crawford P. I., Turton D., 1992, pp. X-XII).

The term was used for the first time, as peculiarity of the ethnographic methodology, by Clifford Geertz in his fundamental essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

More than twenty years later, the Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod wrote “The Interpretation of Culture(s) After Television” (1997), which decisively contributes, with other essays collected in the anthology “Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt,” to the anthropological study of media and nationalism.

Referring to the British literary critic Raymond Williams’ hypothesis about the consumption of television as “dramatization of consciousness” (Williams, 1989) Abu-Lughod analyzed how mass media has made the melodramatic genre part of everyday life for most Egyptians, developing a certain “melodramatization of consciousness,” by offering up models for subjectivity and narratives of the self in the characters whose quotidian lives are emotionalized (Abu-Lughod, 2000, p.129).

Adopting Abu-Lughod (or, actually, Williams’) definition, my hypothesis about the representation of the IDF in Israeli cinema is that it produces a kind of “cinedramatization of the David consciousness” in the Israeli everyday life.

And after two years of fieldwork in Israel, although it might seem off for me to admit it, I realized that I was also influenced, by this kind of “cinedramatization of the David consciousness,” as we can see from my decision to divide the chapter of my work according to this kind of soldier-centric (and macho-centric, too) perspective: the directors of the films I examine are all men, and they express to a large extent the masculine, national worlds to which they belong.

Or maybe, I was influenced right from the beginning, when I first arrived in Israel in the middle of the Gaza War and the first movie I saw, sitting in the Tel Aviv's Dizingof Cinema, was *Waltz with Bashir*.

As the critical columnist of *Haaretz* Gideon Levy observed, talking about the Golden Globe which Ari Folman, the director of *Waltz with Bashir* won in 2009: “It deserves an Oscar for the illustrations and animation, but a badge of shame for its message. It was not by accident that when he won the Golden Globe, Folman didn't even mention the war in Gaza, which was raging as he accepted the prestigious award. The images coming out of Gaza that day looked remarkably like those in Folman's film. But he was silent. So before we sing Folman's praises, which will of course be praise for us all, we would do well to remember that this is not an antiwar film, nor even a critical work about Israel as militarist and occupier. It is an act of fraud and deceit, intended to allow us to pat ourselves on the back, to tell us and the world how lovely we are.”

Actually, it was while watching this movie that I started to learn not only how to stop worrying about, but even to love the IDF.

It's nevertheless true that, to conclude with Geertz's words, “ ‘the sense of beauty,’ or whatever the ability to respond intelligently to face scars, painted ovals, domed pavilions, or rhymed insults should be called, is no less a cultural artefact than the objects and devices concocted to “affect” it. The artist works with his audience's capacities--capacities to see, or hear, or touch, sometimes even to taste and smell, with understanding. And though elements of these capacities are indeed innate--it usually helps not to be colour-blind--they are brought into actual existence by the experience of living in the midst of certain sorts of things to look at, listen to, handle, think about, cope with, and react to; particular varieties of cabbages, particular sorts of kings. Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop” (Geertz, 1983, p.99).

The stories I will examine here are part of a shop which is still open, and of a history still in the making. Therefore, as I started my work with a question, I will conclude with another question mark, because, what I am going to suggest, is that the David of our time, too, is still looking for an answer.

Tel Aviv, September 2011