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The Postcolonial Function of Television's Virtual Space in '90s Israeli Cinema

Yael Munk

The reflexive mode of our postmodern era has demonstrated that a combination of the media in films can sometimes be critical in turning a seemingly innocent text into a subversive one. This essay examines the postcolonial role of television in Israeli fiction films made in the last decade of the twentieth century, arguing that the content of the television screen as it appears in these films functions as a Deleuzian *ligne de fuite* (line of flight) to the narrative. According to Deleuze these *lignes de fuite* enable their displaced heroes to escape the more rigid frames that circumscribe all the necessary formal stations in one's life such as school or university, as well as the more flexible frames that encompass those stations embedded in one's subjectivity such as love, longing, and daydreams.¹ An analysis of these television texts as juxtaposed to their respective narrative context seems to confirm the existence of a latent imaginary undermining the State's dominant culture, an imaginary related to the denied space of the Diaspora, which to date, has not been given the opportunity to appear due to the Zionist policy of negation of exile.²

As mentioned above, this essay's theoretical approach is a postcolonial one. However, as Ella Shohat contends:

Israel is not a Third World country by any simple or conventional definition [but] it does have some affinities and structural analogies to the Third World,

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analogies that often go unrecognized even, and perhaps especially, within Israel itself [. . .] European hegemony in Israel [. . .] is the product of a numerical minority in whose interest it is to downplay Israel's *Easternness*, as well as its *Third Worldness*.³

This specific conjuncture creates a certain form of internal colonialism for Oriental Jews,⁴ as they see themselves doomed to an internal exile in their own country. The post-Zionist critical discourse that appeared in Israel in the mid-eighties, deconstructs the Zionist "us" into its distinctive components, tending to relate to the several individual ethnic groups living within the State of Israel as imagined communities, bearing little or no relation to the existing hegemony.⁵ This tendency was well demonstrated in Israeli cinema in the 1990s, a decade clearly delimited by the end of the first Palestinian uprising (Intifada) in 1989 and the beginning of the second one (known as Intifadat El Aksa) in 2000.⁶ During this decade a number of Israeli films related to the television screen in an unusual way. Not only did the television's contents oppose the situation existing outside the film diegesis at a given time, but it also provided a space for the screening of the protagonists' subjectivity, sometimes offering enigmatic visions that were in fact his own encoded version of his critique of the surrounding reality. Finally, the television screen offered these imagined communities a glimpse into what is culturally referred to as "immoral" or "abject," being either the forgotten past in the Diaspora or imagined visions of an alternative political order in their new country. In fact, the films analyzed in this essay succeed in realizing their wish to invert this apparently official information channel and use it for their own purpose, converting it into a path of resistance to hegemonic oppression. Through the figuration of television in the films, the communities disengage from the State's official policy and establish the delineation of their new relationship to the State, a relationship limited only to their sharing of the same geographical territory.

The Micro-Politics of Television

The traditional function of television had been to serve as an organizing feature in homes, cities, and nations.⁷ However, by the end of the twentieth century, television had become a synonym of ambivalence. On the one hand, it brings the world into our most intimate spaces, but at the same time it also invites us to peep into other people's intimate worlds.⁸ This ambivalence has served as the basis for several successful Hollywood films, such as *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, US, 1998) and *Nurse Betty* (Neil LaBute, US, 2000).

Postcolonial theory has attributed yet a third function to television: the creation of a common denominator and a locus of identification for exiled communities.⁹ In fact, displaced communities that were forced to leave their homeland and therefore were doomed to a state of becoming (as in the

Deleuzian *devenir*) typical to minorities, have turned the television space into a line of flight, offering a certain degree of freedom to those located at the lowest level of the social and cultural hierarchy. This line of flight enables them to resist micro-politics, i.e., the way that power is embedded in the smallest units of everyday life, from their remote, sometimes forgotten, territories.

Cultural displacement and identities-in-becoming became the main feature of Israeli cinema in the 1990s. Focusing on coming to terms with a new hybrid identity as a form of political resistance, the discourse of this cinema recognizes in television a sort of secret ally. This is why the television contents represented in recent Israeli cinema do not have a complementary function with regards to the world (as they do in Hollywood cinema) but rather serve as a subversive alternative function that expresses, through images and ideas, all that cannot be expressed and/or represented in the film's realistic Zionist diegetic world. These contents' relationships to reality are deliberately distorted, sometimes using the fantastic genre, in order to reveal something that is beyond the recognizable time and space of the film.

This unique feature is particularly interesting in light of the tremendous number of dramatic events that took place during that decade in Israel and that did not find a way to representation on the fictional television screen. Examples are countless: suicide bomber attacks in Israeli cities, the antagonism to the government of many right-wingers, and most of all, the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

However, one important factor did find its way, albeit distorted, to cinematic representation, and that was the arrival of almost a million Jews as emigrants from the former Soviet Union. As opposed to many previous immigration waves to Israel, this massive group of immigrants whose ethnic identity is relatively homogeneous caused a revision of the politics of identity in Israel. The one-time notion of "the melting pot" that had been the guiding principle of the Zionist integration policy, seemed to these new immigrants to be a principle of segregation rather than assimilation. Thanks to these newcomers, Israeli cinema of the 1990s began a new quest for the repressed layers of identity amongst all its citizens, using various narrative and iconographic techniques. One of these was the appropriation of the television space as a mirror for the immigrant's repressed imaginary, or in Deleuzian terms—*ligne de fuite*.

This essay relates to three Israeli feature films made during that tumultuous decade: *Sh'chur* (Shmuel Hasfari, IL, 1995), *Hole Ahava BeShikun Gimel/Lovesick on Nana Street* (Shabi Gabison, IL, 1995) and *Klara HaKadosha/Saint Clara* (Ari Fulman and Uri Sivan, IL, 1998). Although differing in their styles and their narratives, these three films share some common features. First, all of them take place in a vague unidentifiable and nameless geographic space that serves as a background for the deconstruction of the Israeli subject as well as the investigation of the origins of his existential malaise. Second, in each film one of the protagonists is emblemized through the

Visions of a coming catastrophe: *Saint Clara*. Courtesy of Transfax Film Productions Ltd., Israel.

character of the madman or madwoman, made so as a result of either social exclusion or a longing for the homeland left behind. Third, the three films use the television screen in order to impose on it their subjective and contradictory feelings—namely the reconstruction of their Diasporic life inside the Jewish Promised Land, inside the Israeli nation-state. In doing so these films show how the medium of television can re-legitimize the individual's past and redefine the notion of exile, not in biblical terms—according to which life in the Diaspora will always be a form of exile—but rather in terms of an emotional subjectivity that renders one's longing for another country acceptable. In other words, the subjective appropriation of the television space is not merely a reflection of what is going on in the immigrant's mind, but rather the expansion of a visual space that enables a critical representation of what could or should have been these heroes' fate.

Though this appropriation of the television space can be seen as what Hamid Naficy called "narrowcasting,"¹⁰ the above-mentioned Israeli films tend rather to refer to a *ligne de fuite*, as this space is not limited to the representation of a cultural artifact from another time and/or another space but displays the hero's utmost encoded subjectivity. This is why, even though these representations have to be read as part of a new space created by the characters' imaginary outside the dominant ideology, they differ from the postcolonial critique as a whole, as they first of all express autobiographical sensitivities. The television screen thus facilitates the Deleuzian nomadic thought as well as the concept of de-territorialization that undermines the traditional hierarchies of power and enables a revolutionary form of resistance

to any form of oppression by the undoing of the identities' histories. In these three films, the presence of the mentally ill character, whose disease is symptomatic of his/her longing for another time and space, becomes the most dominant expression of the narrative's oppositional standpoint.

A Private Envisioning of the Past

The first interesting point about how these films represent television contents is that they ignore all external events. Instead, they appropriate the television screen in order to overcome the oppression inherent to their exilic identity inside the hegemonic space. This act of appropriation becomes a way to fight the policy of segregation in the electronic communication media that duplicates "... some of the oldest and most regressive structures of purification and exclusion."¹¹ Thus these heroes' weaknesses become their strengths as they tailor a private exile to their size. Through their private broadcasting of another history and geography, they succeed in resurrecting what they had been required to forget the moment they arrived in their Promised Land of Israel. The emergence of these haunting visions on their television screen therefore must be read as an effort to break through the invisible siege of the Israeli hegemonic culture.

However, these films systematically refuse to represent the realistic visions of the countries left behind.¹² On the contrary, they prefer to reconstruct their personal memories about their native land by means of metonymic fragments or encoded symbols. These are presented to the viewer as a riddle that will never be fully answered as it depends completely on one's subjectivity. However, doing so enables the filmmakers to invert one of the traditional functions of the television screen—which is to bring geographically remote events closer—and instead turn the familiar images into simulacra, that is, "a generation by models of a real without origin or reality: an hyperreal."¹³

Lovesick on Nana Street was the first film to employ this technique. Victor, the protagonist, is presented as devoid of any historical past as well as any geographical context. All the viewer knows about him is that he had had a deprived childhood, due to his late father's vague mental illness. In fact, the only trace of his father is encoded in three words that—for his neighborhood—supposedly echo events of the past: "Stones, Knives, Police." In the film, these three words prevent Victor from integrating into his social surroundings. One of the most remarkable things he does in order to blend in is to operate a cable television station that broadcasts Turkish melodramas to the whole neighborhood. By exposing the neighborhood to the underestimated culture of the Orient, he imposes the sounds of exile on the State of Israel. This typical case of narrowcasting is emphasized in the film text by a long shot of the buildings at night, with an extra-diegetic sound track in Turkish, symbolizing the inhabitants' remoteness from all national events. In other words, rather than watching the national news report as most people do in

the evening, Victor's neighbors choose to listen to the melodramatic Turkish voices, which do not relate in any way to Israeli national concerns. This subversive use of the television space is an introduction to Victor's manipulation of this powerful virtual space. Later in the narrative, Victor is hospitalized in a mental hospital as a result of his unrequited love for the blond Michaela. In the hospital too he appropriates the television space as he records his declarations of love for Michaela on videotapes that are then broadcast to the whole neighborhood. In other words, the same Victor who had begun by diverting his neighborhood's attention from the national broadcast now succeeds in orienting them to his own melodrama.

It is important to note that, in contrast to the two other films that this essay relates to (*Sh'chur* and *Saint Clara*), there the television screen is used to reflect the imaginary of the mad man or woman, Victor's acts affect the real world, as he uses cable television in order to address his community in an oppositional way, thus creating a broadcast channel in which the voice of hegemony is completely absent. He thereby takes revenge on those who have decided to exclude him and his neighbors from the nation's legitimate discourse.

Unlike the approach of *Lovesick on Nana Street*, *Sh'chur* presents the television screen as an extension of the mystical powers of the mad character, Pnina. This semi-road movie tells the story of Heli, a television talk-show host, who one day receives a phone call from her brother announcing her father's death. As she drives to her native city far from the hegemonic culture, she reconstructs her journey from the periphery to the center of Israel and realizes that she now has to cope with the past she thought she had left behind. The narrative is constructed as a series of flashbacks to a summer vacation sometime in the late 1960s at the end of which Heli, at the time still named Rahel, is sent to a boarding school in Jerusalem. The first flashback shows Rahel's older brother bringing home a television set. As the film is also set in a nameless small town in the middle of nowhere, the television screen is intended to bridge the gap between this town and the metropolitan areas in the center of the country where all decision-making takes place. This does not happen, however, and instead the television set becomes the space onto which dreams and visions are projected. While the young Rahel pictures "dancers in the snow" when there is interference on the screen, her mad sister Pnina can turn the television set on and switch channels by merely blinking; moreover, she can see the future through it. This is how Pnina discovers her sister's brilliant future as the glamorous host of a popular television show. Unlike Victor, Pnina's relationship with the medium of television deals with visions of the future and indirectly, with the success of her family to survive as such. These anticipatory visions need to be read as a form of resistance to the hegemonic voice.

Therefore, when Pnina recognizes her sister on the screen, she realizes that her fighting the hegemonic influence will not be easy. In contrast to Victor who "narrowcasted" himself to his peers, the young and ambitious Rahel

wishes to appear on national television broadcasts. This requires the shedding of old traditions and beliefs (one of them being the curse of the *Sh'chur*¹⁴ after which the film is named). Only a major event such as her father's death can actually take her out of the television space. This is exactly what happens in the first scene of the film, as Heli, who was once Rahel, prepares for the filming of her program. She reads the following headlines—"About the betrayal of the main *Histadrut* institutions (the largest workers' union in the country) and the national health care organization, about the failure of astrologists to predict their own future and about Yosef Zikerman, who decided to convert to Islam and move to the Palestinian autonomy so as to live with his long-time lover"—all denouncing the public's deception by the Zionist state. In fact, Heli unconsciously pronounces the victory of the non-hegemonic world via a national broadcast. Though she still does not know that within a brief moment she will be drawn out of her so-called protected environment, she already declares the failure of the world of which she has dreamt. In fact, these headlines are a kind of affirmation that the world inside the TV set is no more promising than the world she has left behind in her nameless hometown.

In *Sh'chur*, television becomes the way to connect between two incompatible narratives within the film plot. One narrative takes place in the film's present, and is introduced from its first sequence as we see Heli preparing for her show, as her face appears on the multiple screens covering one of the studio walls. The other narrative is rooted in the family's Diasporic past that has been displaced to Israeli periphery with the family's emigration. In the film's narrative this past threatens to invade the present the moment that the mad Pnina decides to turn the television screen into her ally. In the film's last sequence, when Heli's autistic daughter, who has inherited her family's mystic talents, succeeds in switching off and stopping the official broadcast, both narratives merge for a while and the past Diasporic knowledge triumphs over the modern world. The narrative framing with two television broadcasts leaves no doubt with regard to the relevance of this subversive non-hegemonic inter-text.

According to Lubin,¹⁵ "as a journey to self control, the journey to the deeper self in this film is a journey towards the control of television." The wish to control television in the film could have been a journey to hegemony. However, Pnina's powers of madness are stronger than the hegemonic discourse, and by the end of the film she shows that the medium of television is not controlled by her seemingly successful sister Heli but rather by herself, the mad woman from the nameless little town. By means of television, Pnina achieves her victory over the State and its invisible oppressors.

This is exactly the theme dealt with in the third film, *Saint Clara*. Just like *Lovesick on Nana Street* and *Sh'chur*, *Saint Clara* too takes place in an unidentified geographic area, in the near future. Contradictory signs and symbols create a new landscape in which a center for seismographic measurement is located right next to the swamps that the Zionist pioneers were supposed to

have dried up. This causes the film's young protagonists to dream about a catastrophe that would erase the entire place and allow them to rebuild everything anew, but in an entirely different way. In this film two distinct television contents are juxtaposed: the first one is the coverage of "Virus Zero," a catastrophe that may soon take place in this part of the country; it is described in graphic detail and with some irony: for instance in its homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (US, 1960), when the female announcer says that the virus can be deciphered in the rings of the tree trunk. Typical to the millennium catastrophic prophecies, the virus threatens to erase all traces of such factors as class, race, and gender. But the announcer's general tone is not really frightening. The scene is shot in a green forest hardly typical of Israel, the announcer is wearing outlandish clothes strongly reminiscent of Pedro Almodovar's *Kika* (ES/FR, 1993), and she seems to enjoy making terrible predictions about the future. Such a future will presumably erase all memories and will finally allow the Jewish people (who, according to the filmmakers, are afflicted by an excess of memory) a necessary measure of amnesia.¹⁶

This semi-ridiculous lady is not the only television text that figures in *Saint Clara*. Elvis, the heroine's mad uncle, also has a unique relationship with the television screen. In his European-style home he continuously watches the images of another catastrophe that had happened somewhere abroad and deprived him of his beloved and his sanity. These images—which resemble an earthquake or an atomic disaster¹⁷—are shown over and over again only on his television screen. Like Pnina in *Sh'chur*, Elvis too plunges into a past that may never have happened but that has become the justification for the suffering that should have ended when he came to Israel. The moment we meet Elvis, however, the Land of Israel, according to the film plot, is threatened by the same catastrophe and therefore only the forbidden memories of exile can prevent the sinking into a frightening future.

These three Israeli films, in which the representation of the television screen ranges from melodramatic oriental iconography to radical avant-garde imagery, use television not to reflect or reflect on outside events but rather to share the secret thoughts and nightmares haunting many displaced Jews living in Israel. These women and men who have renounced their native landscapes and languages and the privilege to die where they were born, turn to the space of television to share their fears of the future and repressed traumas from the past, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, also to share the familiar sounds of their cherished past in the Diaspora.

In all the above films, the space of television constitutes a metaphorical space through which all those spaces and times that people were forced to forget are reclaimed. It is a space in which the traumas of the past are reenacted and, for a moment, one can imagine a new future in which the very foundations of the national project will be revised. In other words, the function of television in the postcolonial context of Israeli cinema seems to offer

an iconographic *ligne de fuite*, which up till now had been limited to the constraints of realism and therefore was only rarely represented on film. In the above-mentioned films, television has been used to enrich the film text as well as to reinforce its critical context. The traditional function of television is subverted, paving a way back to exile, or, in Homi K. Bhabha's words, "to activate our roots to the 'exilic.'"¹⁸

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Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie: Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980).
2. The negation of exile concept was developed during the early years of the Zionist movement, at a time when the Jews who immigrated to Palestine believed that their only way to be reborn was by erasing the traces of their previous existence in the Diaspora. By doing so they invented the image of the new Jew, who like many modernist figures born at the turn of the twentieth century, sacrificed his past for his future. In the 1980s, the post-Zionist critique began a revision of the basic assumptions of Zionism, one of them being the revision of the negation of exile concept. (See Amnon Raz-Karkotzkin, "Exile in the Midst of Sovereignty: A Critique of 'Shlilat HaGalut' [The Negation of Exile] in Israeli Culture, Part 1," *Theory and Criticism*, no. 4 (1993): 23–55; "Exile in the Midst of Sovereignty: A Critique of 'Shlilat HaGalut' [The Negation of Exile] in Israeli Culture, Part 2," *Theory and Criticism*, no. 5 (1994): 113–132 (Hebrew).
3. Ella Shohat, "Sepharadim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation & Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Amir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 40.
4. Though Shohat relates in her paper to Oriental Jews, her remarks about exclusion and internal exile are completely relevant to at least one other demographic group—Jews from the former USSR who immigrated to Israel after the fall of the Soviet Union.
5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 6–7.
6. Yael Munk, "Major Trends in Contemporary Israeli Cinema," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modern Jewish Culture*, ed. Glenda Abramson (London: Routledge, 2005), 162–165.
7. David Morley, "Bounded Realms: Household, Family, Community and Nation," in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Films, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 151–168.

8. Peeping-Tom television programming is not limited to reality shows but also relates to an entire range of programs that intentionally blur the boundaries between real life and fiction, such as the mockumentary genre.
9. Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Culture: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
10. Hamid Naficy defines narrowcasting as essentially the development of a niche market through programming that is fairly homogenous and directed at the large commonalities within a culture (Hamid Naficy, "Narrowcasting in Diaspora: Middle Eastern Television in Los Angeles," in *The Media of Diaspora*, ed. Karim H. Karim [London: Routledge, 2003], 51–62).
11. Morley, "Bounded Realms: Household, Family, Community and Nation," 167.
12. The only exception is Zeev Revah's autobiographical film *Tipat Mazal/A Bit of Luck* (IL, 1992), which was partly shot in Morocco in order to re-create his protagonists' past as authentically as possible. All other autobiographical films either re-created the protagonist's land of origin or just referred to it through the use of language and/or cultural practices.
13. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.
14. The film title *Sh'chur* refers to the traditional magic practiced by some of the Moroccan Jews. It seems that it was chosen as the film title as it represents for the narrator, Heli, the main obstacle to her entering into the modern Israeli society.
15. Orly Lubin, "Sh'chur," in *Fifty Years to Forty-Eight: Critical Moments in the History of Israel*, ed. Adi Ofir (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 1999), 423–431 (Hebrew).
16. The concept of cultural amnesia would become the central issue of Ari Fulman's next film *Made in Israel* (IL, 2001).
17. These images echo the Chernobyl atomic disaster in April 1986 that had an enormous influence on the Soviet population, including the Jewish immigrants who arrived in Israel at the beginning of the 1990s. *Saint Clara* seems to be aware of this fact and therefore blurs the lines between fiction and documentary regarding this specific television content.
18. Homi K. Bhabha, "Arrivals and Departures," in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), vii–xii.