

The Sabra was born from the modern Zionist movement. An image of the Jew born on the Promised Land (Palestine, at the time), the Sabra was half propaganda-piece, half collective-glue: both a promise of what the land had to offer, and a figure to be rallied around by those already there. The Sabra was an embodied figure—an individual—showing up on posters, in literature, and in film. But to be represented in individual bodies, Sabra-ness had to be defined. Was being born on the land sufficient? Would any Jewish body born on Palestine be a Sabra? As it turned out: no. The Sabra accumulated the values that the founders of the Yishuv (and later Israel) saw in him— “him,” because the Sabra’s manliness was one of those values. The Sabra was meant to represent the Israeli collective as a figure to aspire toward. But in figuring a collective within an individual body, hegemony was instilled: the Sabra became the ideal Israeli, the top of the social hierarchy. Over time, the “cult of the Sabra” (as Rubinstein calls it) was weakened, in large part because of its exclusion of specific bodies. Yet, its legacy has remained. I argue that this legacy can be seen in the cinema of Israel, which has long reflected the structures of Israeli society. In this paper, I consider the role of cinema in shaping/challenging Israeli ideals/hegemony, starting from the institution of the Sabra. My discussion summarizes the conclusions of authors who have written seminal works on the topic, where they critique most of the Israeli film canon. Then, I turn to my own analysis of two movies (released after the publication of most of my sources): *Zero Motivation* and *Waltz With Bashir*. These films continue the tradition of military-centric Israeli cinema, but subvert some of its common tropes: the latter considers militaristic brutality rather than heroism; the former portrays a group of women soldiers on a military base, rather than men on the front lines. As such,

the films are ripe for comparison, especially in the context of the military films that came before. Juxtaposing these films shows that Israeli cinema is still working to subvert the hegemony first inscribed by the Sabra, yet is simultaneously perpetuating pieces of it.

Early Zionist films played a crucial role in developing and disseminating the image of the Sabra. By allowing a literal projection of Herzl's Zionist vision, film naturally served to entrench normative images. "We can use the images of light to [...] prove to [the Jewish people] that it is possible to accomplish much in *Eretz Yisrael*," said one early Zionist reporter (Yosef 21). The Zionist Movement desired to showcase the potential of a Jewish settlement on the land of Palestine. In film, Sabra characters represented the potential for individual development on the land. Contrasted to contemporary depictions (put forth by Carl Jung, for example) of male European Jews as feminine, weak, and homosexual (Yosef 17), the men in Zionist film were overtly and overly masculine (Yosef 22): "tall, handsome, muscular, tanned, strong, brave." From the start, then, the Sabra was rooted as a male, heterosexual, masculine, able-bodied figure. Moreover, the Sabra was developed by Ashkenazi Jews for Ashkenazi Jews. The Orientalist overtones this instituted are evidenced in filmic representations of the land of Palestine itself. Because of Zionism's intimate ties to the land, early films sought to establish the Sabra ideal in conjunction with the land—again, in opposition to the diaspora Jew. Along with showing the potential for individuals (or, rather, men) immigrating to the land, films showed the potential of the land by problematically misrepresenting its "natural" state. The land prior to Zionist settlement was often depicted as "diseased [...], empty, wild, [and] uncultured," starkly contrasting the "blooming" land tended to by the Sabra (Yosef 37). Besides further emphasizing the

masculine fertility of the Sabra, such representations instituted Orientalism: Palestinians on the land were either depicted as weak and diseased or ignored altogether. This illustrates a crucial feature of normative forces: exclusion.

The figure of the Sabra is complicated and destabilized through its dependence on excluded groups. Although exclusion is unavoidable in a normative paradigm, it's also paradoxical. For example, the Ashkenazi-ness of the Sabra makes it impossible for non-European (Mizrahi) Jews to achieve a "true" Israeli identity in the eyes of Ashkenazi Israelis. As Yosefa Loshitzky points out, the idea of a collective Israeli identity is therefore dependent on country of origin— a contradiction to the concept of *Israeli* nationhood (78). Considering also the exclusion of women, LGBTQ men, and disabled folks from Sabra status (among others), the Sabra's codification of Israeli identity gets further problematized. Film didn't help address the paradox of normative identity: faced with it, filmmakers tended to avoidance, which required simplifying their representations. Yosef describes this phenomenon as Zionist cinema's "construction of whiteness" (39). In early Zionist film, all Ashkenazim were depicted as white, ignoring their actual ethnic variations; all Arabs and Mizrahim as brown, ignoring theirs. These castings racialized non-Ashkenazim: turned them into racial Others in a society of white Ashkenazi men. As Yosef puts it (39): "Ashkenazim [in early Zionist film] are not of a certain race or ethnicity, they are just Jews or Israeli." These films thus brushed aside the paradoxes by insisting: the Sabra really is the only true Israeli. Ironically, such insistence required the exclusion of some Ashkenazi bodies from Ashkenazi roles in films, and the reduction of all non-Ashkenazi bodies into props to define Ashkenazi identity against. To exist, the Sabra needed the Others to exist.

Therefore, the Sabra—as instituted through film—was an inherently fragile ideal. Those excluded were bound to resist, and those included had no solid ground from which to defend themselves. What could possibly make an Ashkenazi more Israeli than a Mizrahi? And—if Israel is a democracy—what about a Palestinian inside the state? Indeed, pressures on the Sabra ideal slowly eradicated its mythic presence in the Israeli consciousness (Rubinstein 182), but the cultural hegemony it engendered persisted, as reflected in film.

Israeli film in the decades following independence shows how the ideals associated with the Sabra were shaped—and largely maintained—over time. By 1948, the “cult of the Sabra” had been established (Rubinstein 163), leaving society to determine its ultimate fate. Almost immediately, the Sabra’s privilege was reconfigured. Shohat points to a primary characteristic of Israeli cinema between ’48 and the mid-to-late sixties (53): it “focused on the virtually mythic Israeli heroes: Sabras, kibbutzniks, and soldiers.” This “heroic-nationalist genre” demonstrates the elevation of the latter two groups to Sabra-like hegemonic status. I suggest that this is a first—and rather natural—challenge against the Sabra’s cult. Kibbutzniks and soldiers occupy roles comparable to the Sabra’s: they uphold ideals of masculinity, but aren’t necessarily born on the land (or “from the sea”), for example. Of particular importance (for this essay) is the heroic-nationalist films’ elevation of the soldier, which helped entrench militarism in the core Israeli identity. In heroic-nationalist films, the military began to be portrayed as a solution for national problems, and its soldiers’ deaths as a necessary sacrifice for the country’s survival (Yosef 48). Considering the persistence of this discourse through today, the influence of heroic-nationalist film should be taken seriously. Moreover, the hyper-masculinity of the soldier

began to be juxtaposed to effeminate representations, ingraining the Otherness of the queer body (Yosef 57). Thus, even as the Sabra's centrality was being eroded, the hegemony associated with it was carrying forward.

Film helped maintain Ashkenazi hegemony as well, as seen in the continued problems with the portrayal of Arabs and Mizrahim. Heroic-nationalist films, for example, continued to portray Arabs as weak and villainous, and refused to portray—if even acknowledge—Mizrahi Jews (Shohat 69). In fact, Mizrahim were often cast as Arabs in these films, refusing Arabs/Palestinians the right to self-representation (Shohat 69). When Mizrahim were portrayed, Ashkenazi directors always made them antagonists to heroic Sabras or soldiers (Shohat 109). At the same time as these films were being released, resistance by Mizrahi Jews against their social oppression was intensifying. Rubinstein describes literature by Mizrahim decrying the Sabra, and Shohat describes the rise of the Mizrahi Black Panthers (118). This resistance led to the first wave of Mizrahi self-direction and self-representation in film: the genre of “boureka [slapstick-style] films” starting in the mid-sixties. These usually capitalized on the social exclusion of Mizrahim, showing stumbling Mizrahi protagonists attempting to work within systems that oppressed them (Shohat 115). Although these offered comic relief to Israel's Mizrahi population, they reinforced Orientalist, racist tropes. Shohat describes two of the most common resolutions to the boureka film (121): either a Mizrahi protagonist manages to trick an Ashkenazi antagonist, or a Mizrahi and an Ashkenazi character become a couple. Both perpetuate hegemony. For an Ashkenazi viewer, the former validates racism: it confirms the stereotype of the conniving, unenlightened Mizrahi. The latter offers reconciliation and equality, but

implies that it can only be reached when a Mizrahi becomes “Ashkenized” (Shohat 122). The sense of resolution is thus false: the films upheld the racist system while implying that inequality was decreasing (when precisely the opposite was the case). Naaman considers this phenomenon of reinstated hegemony more broadly (270): as she sees it, films that represent an Other as equal “end up positioning the [dominant] viewer back in a comfortable place within mainstream Zionist ideology.” In essence, such films attempt to present a fundamental democracy in Israeli society, but in doing so ignore its stratification. This is “comfortable” to the normative viewer, but useless to the oppressed: it simply reinstates hegemony. In the case of Palestinian representations, this phenomenon is even more rampant: Ashkenazim have historically directed most films with Palestinian characters, and have usually resorted to the hegemonic perspective, sometimes inadvertently (Naaman 261). It is especially important to consider this phenomenon as I move into my own analysis of two recent Israeli films. The films I’ll look at belong to the genre that Shohat calls the “personal” film (213). Such films take the soldier-as-hero and Sabra-as-hero of the past, and turn them into more carefully developed subjects. Because it considers the interiority of its characters, this cinema has the most potential for challenging the normative Israeli ideals—or at least showing why they’re not so ideal.

Through its woman-centric cast and plot, *Zero Motivation* satirically challenges the masculine norms perpetuated by the IDF. Talya Lavie’s film, released in 2014, follows a group of women soldiers based in the Negev as they take on the duties relegated to them: office work. By focusing her lens on women, Lavie already challenges the norms established through decades of film. The paradox of women’s exclusion from the Sabra ideal is

immediately addressed: of course women are present and Israeli. Yet, their status on the base speaks to the persistence of chauvinism. The film's first depiction of men takes place in an officers' conference (4:38). Introduced through a homophobic joke—laughing at the “faggots” on a military base—the men are shown to reinforce heteronormativity and masculinity. As the camera pans left across the table, each officer is seen, including the one woman, Rama, among nine men. She is the only officer not intently watching the joke-teller, clearly not enjoying it like the others. When the joke is over, the camera cuts to the base commander at the head of the table. He questions Rama about the status of coffee—upholding the stereotype of “household duties” belonging to women. She's forced to leave the meeting—as the officers start to discuss real content—to check on her soldiers, who are supposed to be making the coffee. They're all women, too. The insidious violence of male-centric ideals sets the tone for the rest of the movie: women must labor invisibly, but painfully, to keep the base running for the men in charge. For them, the women represent little more than sexual objects. Moreover, Rama, one of the few women with power on the base (as recognized by the men), must exert it by taking on masculine traits: disciplining her soldiers repeatedly, demanding that they meet the exact expectations set by the men above her. For the other women, the only power available comes in resistance. But such resistance always has a price, and doesn't always bring about change. Most dramatically: Tehila literally cuts a man's name off her body, symbolically excising his masculine influence over her (22:30), but ends up dead. Although other characters say she's died by suicide, a suicidal intention isn't made explicit: from the blood on her bed (25:16), it's clear that the only cut she made was to get rid of the tattoo. Her misdirected attempt to

escape a sexist paradigm takes her life. Instead of worrying about the social circumstances leading to her death, the people on the base worry about how it'll reflect on them. In a comparable scene, Zohar's final resistance on the base—refusing to do anything but play *Free Cell* (1:34:09)—successfully unsettles both men and women, but the men resolve the situation by putting her out of sight in the infirmary—literally picking her up and carrying her there. The film thus seems to question what it would take—or if it's even possible—to extricate the sexism that was first entrenched in Israeli identity through the Sabra.

The bleakness of *Zero Motivation* can further be seen in its critique of militarism, which ultimately falls short: it takes the role of the IDF for granted, reinstating its hegemonic status. Although the film's Kafkaesque bureaucracy indicts the IDF on many fronts (for one: the base's most inefficient soldier in Part 1 has become an equally inefficient officer by part 3), it refuses to confront militaristic violence head on. The violence of the military, instead, gets lumped into its feminist critique: the women on the base are portrayed as its main victims. They certainly *are* victims, as most vividly demonstrated in the near-rape of Zohar. But the film refuses to confront a Palestinian presence, leaving them as an unnamed backdrop. The critical problem with this is most easily recognized in Part 3, where war has broken out. Though we hear multiple times over that “there's a war on,” the violence of the statement is limited to the women soldiers. This phrase is wielded as a weapon: it curtails individual emotions, prioritizing the Israeli collective (the IDF serving as metonymy). A ranking officer scolds Daffi “there's a war on” (1:22:40) to minimize her personal frustration; Daffi then uses the same phrase to minimize Zohar's joy (1:23:25). But what about those being directly targeted by the war?

Palestinians are nowhere in sight, speech, or gesture. By failing to address the Other while turning war into a backdrop, the film effectively validates the IDF in a too-general way. It's an assertion of the form: "although so much is wrong with this structure, this sudden war evidences its fundamental necessity." This is similar to the phenomenon discussed by Naaman: the viewer whose military support may have been unsettled ends up back in comfort, thus perpetuating hegemony.

Waltz With Bashir offers a critique of Israeli society with a similar motivation as *Zero Motivation*: it shows the damage that Sabra ideals have leveled on individuals, but with particular focus on Jewish men. Ari Folman's autobiographical film tells the story of his own experience in the First Lebanon War. *Waltz With Bashir* follows an animated version of Folman 26 years after the war, as he tries to piece together the memories and traumas that have been repressed. He interviews other soldiers who were there, who also struggle to remember. Despite having a template similar to a heroic-nationalist film—a male Ashkenazi protagonist in combat, supported by a nearly all-male cast—the film successfully subverts the genre. While heroic-nationalist films are a spectacle of masculinity, *Waltz With Bashir* is a testament to its destructiveness. Like in *Zero Motivation*, masculinity is established early on as one of the film's crucial themes. The film's opening montage follows a pack of stampeding dogs as they race through the streets. The pack increases from a single dog to 26, the anger of the first serving as a model for the collective. The dogs exhibit features of masculinity, reflecting those of soldiers: speed, anger, sense of duty. The symbolism is more clearly established as the dogs trample over a street sign of a child and adult (1:58) and then around a mother grasping her child (2:08), as if the dogs are asserting a masculine

dominance over familial structures. Boaz, the veteran who is dreaming the dogs, attributes the trauma to his killing of dogs during the war. But the masculinity they represent haunts him—along with the other soldiers—just as much. Carmi, another interviewee, recognizes this explicitly (16:55): “[It was important to me to enter combat because I had] masculinity problems. So, I had to prove to everyone that I was the best fighter and some big hero.” Normative masculinity led Carmi to war. The ensuing trauma drove him out of Israel, to Holland. Even the scene that gives the film its title problematizes masculinity (1:00:00): Frenkel, another interviewee, breaks out of a trench and begins to dance amid raining bullets. The “waltz with Bashir” is an outburst of femininity, placing him in contrast to his masculine dance partner: his shooting gun. A piece of Frenkel’s identity, repressed to conform with social norms (and, more urgently, military norms), comes out in a “trance,” leaving him vulnerable to death. Folman is thus concerned with the damaging effect of normative forces not only on those excluded, but on those forced to conform. By building on the tradition of militaristic heroic-nationalist film, Folman succeeds in subverting its entanglement of militarism, heroism, nationalism, and masculinity.

The success of *Waltz With Bashir* in challenging the Israeli narrative about its military is undeniable, but a critique of its treatment of the Palestinian Other ought to be considered. Part of what allows this film to subvert hegemony successfully is the way it situates normative forces (like masculinity) within a larger context of Israeli history and memory. The film isn’t simply about challenging militarism or masculinity, but about considering the way these interact with the Israeli national narrative. The events that have been repressed—the Sabra and Shatila massacres—are moments of collective trauma. As an

undeniable instance of innocent Palestinians being slaughtered en-masse (with no excuse), and of a failure by the IDF, the events threaten the stability of the collective Israeli narrative. This threat comes from the contradiction of accepted norms that underpin the larger narrative, such as the morality and heroism of the masculine IDF soldier. Yet, there is something strange about the film's subversion: the soldiers are the ones reconfigured as the central victims of faulty hegemony. The lens is focused on their struggle in the face of an oppressive system, despite the fact that they're the most privileged in the system. It's true: they do suffer, as the film convincingly argues. But by making soldiers the focus, the Palestinians of Sabra and Shatila, the victims who faced the harshest fate, remain as Others. The film, however, seems to recognize this and makes an effort to re-center the Palestinian victims. Its ending shifts from animation to historical footage, showing the actual massacre's effects. In doing so, it does what none of the early Israeli films did: gives Palestinians radical self-representation. The shrieks of mothers, the images of murdered children leave the film's last impression, unapologetically forcing an Israeli viewer into the eyes of the Other.

Juxtaposing *Zero Motivation* and *Waltz With Bashir*, the ongoing efforts to deconstruct Israeli hegemony from within are evident. So are the difficulties of doing so. Using the same medium that established certain norms to challenge them risks reinforcement. While both movies offer a scathing critique of masculinity—one of the most entrenched Israeli ideals, stemming directly from the Sabra—they falter in other areas. Some they attempt to address, such as militarism and Arab inferiority, but others (like Mizrahi inferiority and able-bodied-ness) are left untouched. Nevertheless, the current wave

of Israeli cinema offers hope that self-critique will continue to erode the country's oppressive systems. (So long as the government doesn't get in the way, as Miri Regev tried to do to *Foxtrot* in 2017.) So far, at least, film has augmented the scope of Israeli identity. No longer are Sabras the only Israelis. In *Zero Motivation* and *Waltz With Bashir*, Israeli-ness has no simple set of defining feature. When Folman rises from the sea, naked, bathed in gold (*Waltz With Bashir* 8:20) he is, in some sense, reborn. No longer bound to the Sabra, as when Elik was born from the sea. Bound only to his memory, his trauma, himself.

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