The Other Brother in Arms

The Representation of the Gay Solider in the Films of Eytan Fox

Amir Locker-Biletzki

Introduction: Analysis, Discipline, and Structure

The Israeli film *Yossi & Jagger*, directed by Eytan Fox and written by Avner Bernheimer (2002, Israel, Lama Films), finds gay[1] love in the most unlikely place – an Israeli military outpost on the Lebanese frontier, where the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) has been battling the Lebanese Shi'a organization *Hezbollah* since the ill-advised 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon to this very day.

The current article analyzes the above-mentioned film, an earlier film by Eytan Fox titled *After*, written by Fox along with Natan Brand (1994, Israel, Ronit Ben Menachem), and finally *Yossi*, the sequel to *Yossi & Jagger*, written by Itay Segal (2012, Israel, Lama Films). The following analysis of these films is informed by three theoretical frameworks: The

* Amir Locker-Biletzki is a cultural historian of Israeli society. While dealing mainly with the history of Communism in Palestine/Israel, his work also touches upon themes such as Israeli cinema and aspects of Israeli militarism.

1 This article uses the terms gay and homosexual interchangeably in reference to men engaging with other men in a wide range of homosocial to homoerotic acts, including but not limited to same-sex acts. Another term used in this article is "queer", which refers to a non-normative sexual identity. Lesbian soldiers in the IDF – whose circumstances are more complex due to the army's gendered division of labor – are not the focal point of this work. Tellingly, there are no depictions, to the best of my knowledge, of gay female soldiers in Israeli cinema. I use these terms while remaining mindful of the insight offered by Jasbir K. Puar who notes "the inadequacy of all these terms, because they are both excessive and simultaneously too specific." Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Duke University Press, London 2007, p. 230.

first is Queer Theory, generated by both Israeli and non-Israeli queer theorists; the second is homonationalism, which is associated with the queer theorist Jasbir K. Puar; and the third is the critical study of film history in Israel by Israeli scholars Ella Shohat and Yosef Raz.

Using these interpretive concepts, I analyze the narratives of these films as well as their key scenes. The purpose of this study is to elucidate how the films in question create a homonormative and homonationalist liberal discourse that rejects more dissident queer interpretations of the place that soldiers and the army occupy in Israeli society, and that, to a certain degree, negates the possibility of queer radical politics in the Israeli context. In generating this discourse, the film becomes part of Israeli "pinkwashing" – a tactic meant to portray Israel as a Western liberal democracy while averting any criticism regarding the role of the Israeli army in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and furthering the ongoing violent engagement between Israel and her neighbors. This aspect of the study and its context will come to the forefront in my discussion of several recent cases during which radical queer politics was attempted in Israel.[2]

The films of Eytan Fox – the primary cinematic texts in question – are significant for several reasons. First, being well-reviewed box office successes, they represent mainstream Israeli cinema made by an important filmmaker. Second, the clear thematic link between the films makes them a kind of cinematic triptych. Last, the films chronicle the way gay soldiers, and gay men at large, are viewed and received by

2 Reflection on heteronormative aspects in Eytan Fox's films can also be found in the work of Nir Cohen. In his thesis, Cohen contrasts Fox's films with the groundbreaking films of Amos Guttman. Contrary to Guttman's emphasis on the isolation and otherness of his characters in Israeli society, claims Cohen, Fox makes "narrative choices in which the gay story often 'succumbs' to heteronormative, mainstream conventions, reflecting gay men's dependence on hegemonic culture rather than their equal standing." Nir Cohen, "Different Shadows: Gay Representation in Israeli Cinema", PhD Diss., University College London, London 2006, p. 152. This article therefore coincides with the crux of Cohen's contentions regarding Fox's films, but differs in its theoretical frameworks and exclusive discussion of films dealing with the gay soldier narrative.

general Israeli society and by one of its core institutions: the army.

This article does not assert that there is a complete contradiction between queer identity and Israeli nationalism. In fact, the relative lack of contrast between the two is evident in IDF policies that have admitted queers into the ultimate standard-bearer of Israeli nationalism, the army, since the 1980s.

Additionally, the article does not seek to repudiate the homonormative phenomenon, but merely to offer a radical critique of some of its aspects. Borrowing a leaf from Lisa Duggan's work, I will point to a link between the new homonormative discourse and neoliberal economic practices. In her article "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism", Duggan elucidates "the new neoliberal sexual politics" that "might be termed the new homonormativity – it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutes but upholds and sustains them."[3] This assumption is an extremely pertinent one in the context of this work, as Fox's films can be seen as an Israeli variant of the discourse Duggan references, though they are more sophisticated compared to the materials she analyzes.

Queer Theory

Queer Theory is rooted in the Homophile Movement, which was primarily founded in Germany by German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, but spread to the United States by the 1920s. It can also be traced to the post-1969 Stonewall Riots, Gay Liberation Movement, and Lesbian Feminist Movement.[4]

Queer Theory emerged parallel to the deconstructionist phase of Western thought, drawing on the theories of Jacques Lacan, Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Althusser, Judith Butler,[5] and most notably, Michel

3 Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in: Russ Castronovo and Dana .N. Nelson (eds.), *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, Duke University Press, London 2002, p. 179.

4 Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, New York University Press, New York 1996.

5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*,

Foucault and his seminal work *History of Sexuality,* Volume 1.[6]

The disruption of normative and non-normative sexual and gender identities implied in the works of Foucault and Butler[7] gave rise to the definition of "queer" as that which "problematizes normative consolidations of sex, gender, and sexuality."[8] "Queer" seeks to destabilize and disrupt all political, identity-related, and communal concepts that are deemed "natural".

Homonationalism

The following analysis of *After, Yossi & Jagger*, and *Yossi* is informed by the works of American gender and sexuality theoretician Jasbir K. Puar, who coined the term "homonationalism" in her seminal work *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.[9] In this text, Puar discusses how the neoliberal discourse of empire and consumerism coalesces into homonationalism as a cultural and political practice.

Delving into the development of gay tourism, Puar unearths the subtle link between American patriotism, consumption, and queer identity.

Routledge, London 1990.

6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* volume 1: *An Introduction*, Vintage Books, New York 1990.

7 Of special interest for this study, which deals with the performative art of cinema, is the theorization of gender by Judith Butler in her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble*. Butler concludes that, "The inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that gender can be neither true nor false, but is only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of premier and stable identity", Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 99. The understanding of gender as a discursive product with no naturalized substance leads Butler to see political efficacy as arising from subversive bodily acts. In the context of the early 1990s, she recognizes drag as a parody of heterosexual femininity. Thus, "The parodic repetition of gender exposes… the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance." Ibid., p. 200.

8 Jagose, *Queer Theory*, p. 99.

9 Puar defines the term as "understanding the complexities of how 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated." Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 336.

Analyzing how gay-orientated tourism businesses reacted to the 9/11 attack, she observes that "National identity is being reoriented toward excellence in consumption… gay tourists are representatives of a form of U.S. exceptionalism expressed through patriotic consumption."[10] Exploring the institutionalized infrastructure of gay tourism, Puar asserts that it was mainly gay men who were drawn into the post-9/11 patriotism expressed through consumerism. Her portrayal of gay tourism is very conscious of the fact that "The industry in general is uninterested in the consumption practices of queers of color, queer women, and working class queers."[11]

Examining the American Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* – a 2003 case that struck down Texas' sodomy law, making same-sex legal across U.S. territory – Puar unearths how the verdict's expansion of "privacy" to include gay sex in the private domain of the home is "a racialized and nationalized construct, insofar that it is granted not only to heterosexuals but to certain citizens and withheld from many others and from noncitizens,"[12] creating an acceptable model of a gay citizen that is white, middle class, and liberal. The U.S. Supreme Court ruling, perceived as progressive for its expansion of gay rights, is in actuality quite conservative. It narrowly defines who can be admitted into full citizenship.[13] The same mechanism is at work in Israel, where the army, a marker of full citizenship, is hailed as progressive for its acceptance of gays while effectively excluding many alternative and diverse gay identities.

Puar's rendition of homonationalism as a convergence of liberal tolerance, patriotism, and neoliberal consumerism is highly pertinent to the film analysis in the current work. The movies discussed in this text construct the gay Israeli subject as a Zionist (i.e., patriotic) solider

10 Ibid., p. 252.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p. 124.

13 "Citizenship" in this context does not refer to the formal bureaucratic concept, but rather to access to public goods. For instance, while Palestinian citizens of Israel are formal Israeli citizens, their ownership of land is extremely restricted, as the State clearly prefers Jewish land ownership.

engaged in neoliberal consumption; within this structure, Israeli liberal society is able to extend tolerance to a privileged part of the LGBT community. Using the conceptual tools of homonationalist theory, I trace these elements within the cinematic narrative of the films in question.[14]

The Queer Soldier and Death

Cultural Militarism in Israel

Soldiery and armed force are a core theme of the Zionist nation-building enterprise in Palestine.[15] Baruch Kimmerling characterizes Israeli militarism as a form of cultural militarism:

> Wars are perceived as necessary and unavoidable societal processes – with respect both to internal and foreign affairs. Each major societal goal – education, industry, technological advance, science, the arts or even leisure – are perceived to be enlisted to serve the "homeland"; and the military is viewed as the purest and most conspicuous embodiment of the "motherland".[16]

14 Nir Cohen asserts that behind the gay "revolution" of the 1980s – when gay rights were largely recognized by the state and the gay lifestyle was accepted into the mainstream – stood a conservative alliance. It was an alliance between the LGBT community and the depleted, old Zionist Ashkenazi elite. This elite, he states, is increasingly threatened by "ethnic, cultural, and religious groups that have undermined its once undisputed reign" and therefore, cannot afford to "turn its back on lesbians and gay men". (Cohen, "Different Shadows," p. 118). Many gay activists internalized the heterosexist heteronormative norms of mainstream Israeli society in return. This alliance is reflected in the films of Eytan Fox and provides a wider social context for the basic premise of this article.

15 This article asserts that militarized violence is central to the Zionist and Israeli nation building enterprise. However, in considering this statement one should remain mindful of the complexity of Zionism. Zionism, among other things, is a movement driven by the revival of Hebrew culture and the intricate societal building of class and capital in Palestine/Israel. While alert to these aspects of Zionism, the current article is primarily concerned with the Israeli army, and therefore, in its context there is greater pertinence to stressing the violent aspects of Zionism.

16 Baruch Kimmerling, "Patterns of Militarism in Israel," *European Journal of*

Kimmerling demonstrates the prevalence of Israeli cultural militarism in spheres of social life outside of the army, where continued conflict on one hand and periodic wars on the other become part of individual and familial experience, constructing the soldiers' world and identity not just as part of the collective, but as individuals.[17]

The Gay Man and the Army

Zionism was not just a political and national revolution but a sexual revolution as well, meant not only to transplant Jews from Europe to Palestine but also to recreate the Jew himself. As shown by Michael Gluzman and Daniel Boyarin, early Zionism strove to disassociate the new Zionist body from the anti-Semitic perception of exilic Jewish men, all while implicitly rejecting the possibility of this body's homosexuality.[18] Colonial imitation as a way to reshape Jewish manliness is intertwined, as Boyarin demonstrates, with violence: "colonial imitation can be [a] bloody pursuit".[19]

The official policy of the IDF regarding homosexual soldiers has changed since it was first formalized in the early 1980s. Generally, it moved through gradual liberalization until gay soldiers were allowed into the army in 1998.[20] Despite this liberalization of IDF policy, the treatment of queer soldiers varies from unit to unit and is highly dependent on the social surroundings in the place of service. For the most part, gay and straight soldiers sparingly refer to sexual orientation,

Sociology, 34 (1993), p. 202.

17 Ibid., p. 134.

18 Michael Gluzman, "*Hakmiha Lehetroseksualiyut: Tsiyonut Veminiyut be'Altnoyland* [Longing for Heterosexuality: Zionism and Sexuality in Herzl's Altneuland]," *Theory and Criticism*, 11 (1997), pp. 145-162. and Daniel Boyarin, "*Neshef Hamesibot Hakoloniyali: Tsiyonut, Migdar, Hikuy* [Colonial Drug: Zionism, Gender, and Mimicry]", ibid., pp. 123-144.

19 Boyarin, ibid., p. 139.

20 For a detailed historical account see Aeyal Gross, "*Miniyut, Gavriyut, Tsava ve'Ezraḥut: Sheyrut Homo'im veLesbiyot Betsahal Bemishkafaim Hashva'ati'im* [Sexuality, Masculinity, Army and Civics: Gay and Lesbians IDF Service from a Comparative Perspective]," *Plilim*, 9 (2000), pp. 141-142.

abiding by a tacit agreement of "live and let live".[21]

In his groundbreaking book *Brothers and Others in Arms*, Danny Kaplan describes the reality of gay soldiers undergoing IDF service. Based on interviews with combat soldiers[22] who served in the IDF from as early as 1980 through the early 2000s, respectively, he reconstructs the lives of gays in the IDF. The crux of Kaplan's argument is that gay Israeli soldiers adjust well to the masculine culture of the army. For a variety of reasons, the soldiers in his study identify with the IDF and revel in male bonding and homosocial interaction.[23] However, their attachment to IDF masculine culture does not merely assume the form of positive enthusiasm.[24] The bond with the IDF is also strengthened by war making at its most brutal, as depicted in the story of Shaul from the Nahal (Hebrew initials for *Noar Halutzi Lohem*, lit. "Fighting

21 Danny Kaplan and Amir Rosenmann, "Presence of Openly Gay Soldiers in the IDF does not Undermine Unit Social Cohesion," *Research Report Submitted to the Michael D. Palm Centre* (2010), pp. 1-18.

22 Most soldiers in the IDF do not serve in combat roles. As of the early 2000s, "Less than 20% of the men on active duty serve in definite combat roles." See Danny Kaplan, *Brothers and Others in Arms: The Making of Love and War in Israeli Combat Units*, Southern Tier Editions, Oxford 2003, p. 116. The clear divide between frontline and rear echelon soldiers is expressed well in military slang: a noncombat solider is called a *Jobnik* (roughly translated as someone with a job, implicitly, an easy job), as opposed to *Kravi* (one in combat). This article focuses specifically on combat soldiers. This choice is naturally dictated by the films at hand, whose main protagonists are in active duty as well as veteran combat soldiers. It also stems from the way combat service is structured. For combat soldiers, the relatively long periods spent with their units as well as harsh training and living conditions, ensure that their primary group is other male soldiers, all at a formative age in terms of sexual identity. In contrast, noncombat soldiers, mainly those who spend more time at home than the base, retain more connection with civilian life, and are more free to express their sexuality in sites outside the army.

23 Kaplan, *Brothers and Others in Arms*. Homosocial refers here to a set of acts of male physical closeness that can be overtly sexual while not engaging in actual same sex acts.

24 Danny Kaplan and Eyal Ben-Ari, "Brothers and Others in Arms: Managing Gay Identity in Combat Units of the Israeli Army," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 29 (2000), p. 400.

Pioneering Youth") Brigade,[25] as he recounts his experiences from the First Lebanon War in 1982:

> I recall another event. There were Israeli lookouts near us who were snipers. And they would watch the houses all day. If they saw someone, they would shoot. So one time I went to visit them… One of them said to me, "Come here; I want you to see something." I looked, and I saw two *mehablim*, one fucking the other in the ass; it was pretty funny. Like real animals. The sniper said to me, "And now look". He aims and puts a bullet right into the forehead of the one that was being fucked. Holy shit, did the other one freak out! All of a sudden, his partner died on him. It was nasty. We were fucking cruel. Cruelty – but this was war.[26]

This extreme case uncovers the depth of the soldier's attachment to the IDF's masculine culture of war, as, although he is himself gay, Shaul refers to the Palestinians on the opposite side – who presumably share his desires – as animals. Additionally, gender hierarchy is preserved in the story, as the Palestinian on the "feminine" side of the sexual act is slain, another clear motif of this culture and its narrative. As I later show, it is the same attachment to the masculine culture of the Israeli army, albeit in a softer iteration, that permeates the films analyzed in the current work.

Israeli Cinema Theory and Queer Theory

Israeli filmmakers have had a long and creatively prolific relationship with war and its main instrument, the army. The current film critique is informed by the works of cultural critic and scholar Ella Shohat,

25 The Nahal infantry brigade was established in 1948 after the dismantling of the Palmach (Heb. initials, lit. "strike force"), which was identified with the Zionist left. The brigade was formed as a way to preserve the unique character of the Palmach, in which youth movement members combined settlement activity with military duties. The brigade is largely identified with the left, although in recent years the IDF has tapered off the traditional model whereby soldiers spend half of their 3-year service in a settlement and half in deployment, replacing it with a regular infantry model.

26 Ibid., p. 58.

primarily by her work *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, and the scholarly analysis of Israeli films by cinema researcher Yosef Raz in *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema*.

Ella Shohat's pivotal work, which analyzes Israeli cinema along an East/West axis, is herein used as an analytic point of departure. Influenced by the discursive critique of Edward Said's European Orientalism,[27] Shohat recognizes three main genres typical of the Israeli film industry that emerged in post-1948 Israel: the heroic-nationalist genre, the "*bourekas*" films,[28] and personal cinema, which includes a wave of anti-Occupation political films from the 1980s.

The films in question largely belong to the heroic-nationalist genre and to personal cinema. The years following the establishment of Israel in 1948 were characterized by films "focused on the virtually mythic Israeli heroes: Sabras, Kibbutzniks, and soldiers."[29] The Zionist hero of the heroic-nationalist genre is described as one motivated by idealism, a dreamer (Heb. *holem*) who actualizes the Zionist nation-building enterprise, and a tough warrior (Heb. *lohem*) fighting to defend the Zionist enterprise against hostile Arab and Palestinian surroundings. Post-1967 films on the other hand, depict "greater emphasis on the 'negative' quality of toughness".[30]

By the early 1960s, the heroic-nationalist genre began to decline with the rise of capitalist consumer culture and more individualist concerns among Israelis, making way for personal cinema. To great extent,

27 Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, I.B.Tauris, New York 2010, and Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Random House, New York 1978.

28 "*Bourekas*" films, named after a Mizrahi pastry, are a genre of popular comedies that were a great commercial success in Israel from the 1960s to the 1980s. They usually depict the exploits of a male Mizrahi protagonist as he manages to undermine the elite Ashkenazi social order. The films, mainly those featuring Israeli actor Ze'ev Revach as their star, are not without subversive sexual messages and gay characters do appear in them, albeit in effeminate, stereotypical form. See Cohen, "Different Shadows," pp. 24-25.

29 Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, p. 55.

30 Ibid., p. 101.

the genre of personal cinema was a reaction to the demise of heroic-nationalist films and the commercial success of "*bourekas*" films. Most personal films were "hermitically introspective within an intimate, understated style".[31]

Film scholar Yosef Raz further developed and elaborated on Shohat's theories. In his study of representations of the queer body in Israeli films, he sets out to explore the "crucial role played by Israeli cinema in the construction of heterosexual masculinity". Raz argues that the invention of a Zionist heterosexual body was only possible as part of an "attempt to marginalize, sequester, discipline, and normalize queerness in Israeli national masculine identity".[32] In addition, Raz claims that the construction of a Zionist-heterosexual-corporal self, one perceived as Ashkenazi (European-Jewish), is only possible through the disavowal of Palestinian and Mizrahi bodies as well as the exilic Ashkenazi body.[33]

Raz describes heroic-nationalist military films in the wake of George Mosse[34] as "concerned with constructing a myth, which would mask death in war and emphasize the meaningfulness of fighting and sacrifice."[35] He further elaborates on the "military band movies" of the late 1970s and 1980s, addressing their critical political content,[36] but prefers to anchor his understanding of these films in the concept of masochism. Through "the masochistic practice", claims Raz, male soldiers "seek pain and passivity as a way to act out their queer identification with other soldiers."[37]

Queers as Cinematic Soldiers

How are the ideas discussed thus far expressed in the diegeses of the films *After*, *Yossi & Jagger*, and *Yossi*? *After* opens with a shot of the

31 Ibid., p. 179.

32 Yosef Raz, *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema*, Rutgers University Press, London 2004, p. 1.

33 Ibid.

34 George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990.

35 Raz, *Beyond Flesh*, p. 49.

36 Ibid., p. 20.

37 Ibid., p. 56.

Israeli flag, identifying the film's locality while corresponding with the patriotic motifs of the heroic-nationalist genre. The film unfolds the relationship between Yonatan (Hanoch Re'im), a young recruit, and his commanding officer Erez (Gil Frank), and is set in the early 1980s as the First Lebanon War rages. There are two parts to the story. The first takes place in the army base where Yonatan and his company are undergoing basic training with the tough Erez. Yonatan, who has a friendship with another solider named Ido (Benjamin Jagendorf), is singled out and hazed by his officer. The second part of the film takes place in Jerusalem, where Yonatan and his company take a short leave on their way to a rumored deployment in Lebanon.

One scene in the first part of the movie echoes the tent scene from another military band film, Uri Barabash's *One of Us* (1989, Israel, Israfilm), in which the main protagonists huddle together in a tent, sharing a moment of homosocial intimacy. In *After*, Yonatan recounts the pleasantries of home to Ido, as they share a homosocial relationship akin to that which Danny Kaplan describes in his work.[38]

The second part of the film, while revealing the "gay secret" to the viewer, also gives it an ethnic, class-related, and political context. On the bus ride to Jerusalem, a loud political argument erupts between Ido and a group of overtly Mizrahi soldiers about the war raging in northern Israel. At one point, a soldier named Gazoli (Uri Mauda) shouts angrily, "Forget them, these north Tel Aviv leftists, they do not understand," thus ascribing to Ido and Yonatan the affluent neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, identified with the left. This class marker is also an ethnic one, signaling that the two are Ashkenazi. This is an element at the center of all three films at hand: the ethic and elite-class background of their heroes. Such characters are the products of the Zionist sexual revolution. In the discourse reflected by these films, the type of man who is "allowed" to be a gay IDF solider, and thereby enjoy full membership in the Israeli body politic, is Ashkenazi and middle class. The films therefore reject the possibility of non-militaristic participation in Israeli society, and marginalize other queer identities – Mizrahi, Palestinian, and

38 See Kaplan, *Brothers and Others in Arms*, pp. 219-247.

transgender – that do not fit the aforementioned norm. Comparable to the legal definition of citizenship that Puar describes,[39] here citizenship defines gay men and is awarded to them through military service. On Erez's orders, the argument is cut short and Yonatan, who plays guitar, sings a melodic song.

As the company arrives in Jerusalem, Yonatan drifts through the city in a vain attempt to call his mother. At one point, he witnesses a political argument, as Israeli political debates usually become shouting matches, between antiwar demonstrators and other citizens. In both this scene and the above-mentioned bus scene, Yonatan remains essentially uninvolved, preoccupied with his personal voyage of sexual and personal self-discovery. This detached, apolitical motif will present more overtly in the following films, linking them to the personal cinema of the late 1960s and 1970s, which disregarded the wider Israeli context in favor of personal and artistic expression. In this sense, *Yossi & Jagger* and *Yossi* are also concerned with the personal journeys of their heroes more so than the social and political context that is faintly reflected in their diegeses.

As he drifts through the city, Yonatan spots Erez in Independence Park, a known gay cruising spot, and becomes a voyeuristic witness to Erez having sex with an older man in the public bathroom. As he goes to leave once his officer has gone, he finds the latter's military I.D. card. When Yonatan is late getting to the bus, he is once again hazed by Erez. He breaks down, shouting "Enough!" at his tormentor and object of attraction, and shows him the card, revealing their secret. Erez stops the abuse, and while still taking away Yonatan's weekend leave he softens toward him. As the soldiers climb onto the bus, Erez takes back his card. While they drive through the night, the song Yonatan played earlier is heard on the radio. Erez turns to Yonatan and says, "Miller [his last name] do you hear the song?" When the pensive Yonatan does not reply, he calls, "Can you hear me Yonatan?" The film ends upon the bus's arrival at the border fence between Israel and Lebanon.

Yossi & Jagger, set in a snow-covered Israeli outpost on the Lebanese frontier, tells the tragic love story between Yossi (Ohad Knoller), a

39 See Note 14 supra.

tough Golani[40] commander, and his junior officer Lior (Yehuda Levi), nicknamed Jagger for his rock-star good looks. The tension at the core of the film is Jagger's desire to come out with their affair, expressed in his wish to go on a joint vacation in the southern Israeli resort town Eilat. Yossi, on the other hand, is afraid that if discovered, their relationship will undermine his ability to command the company. Yossi identifies with the army so fully that he is unwilling to be discharged with his lover when their service comes to an end, as Jagger teasingly says in one of the key scenes of the movie: "Why are you staying in this army, when you've already got yourself an officer?" Yossi drills and re-drills his soldiers and diligently prepares for the fatal ambush at the culmination of the film. Jagger, who at first seems more casual in his relationship to the army, still greatly identifies with it. When Yaeli (Aya Steinovitz), a female solider who is secretly in love with Jagger, unaware that he is gay, tries to confess her love while he is on guard duty, he removes her while citing military regulation in a harsh tone. Jagger thereby marks the outpost a masculine space in which female presence is limited. The identification with the military depicted in the film corresponds with Kaplan's findings, evincing that gay soldiers feel a strong bond to the army.

Yossi & Jagger presents a moment of gender performance, such as that which Butler describes, without subverting the conservative military gender binary. Yossi and Jagger are two contrasting types. Yossi is "a typical national man. Task oriented, rugged, introverted, at times violent. He is a stable man who bears the all-Israeli name 'Yossi'." Jagger, on the other hand, is "another kind of man. Open, sensitive, a bit of an actor, a bit campy."[41] The contrast between the two lovers can be seen in one of the key scenes of the movie, during which Yossi and Jagger patrol around the outpost. In a series of rapid shots, the two heroes

40 The choice to reference the Golani Brigade is not accidental. In contrast to its Brigade archrival, the Paratroopers – who traditionally recruit Ashkenazi kibbutzniks and young men of the urban middle class – Golani has enlisted young Mizrahi immigrants, giving the unit a less disciplined and more "masculine" character.

41 Yaniv Ron-El, "Wyoming/Warrior Stories: Homosexuality, Masculinity and Nationality on Screen" (presentation, Sixth Other Sex Conference, Tel Aviv, Israel, June 4-6, 2006).

throw snowballs at each other, then fall to the ground and make love in a scene described by *Ha'aretz* film critic Uri Klein as one whose sense of "daring" "would not shame American-youth films of the 1950s."[42] After the act, Jagger brings out a radio-set and turns to a channel playing the song *Bo* ("come"), which was originally popularized by Israeli singer Rita, an LGBT community and Israeli transgender icon, and later performed by the openly gay singer Ivri Lider. The song speaks to one of the film's central motifs: the courage to expose oneself. As he dances suggestively, Jagger playfully and coyly alters the movie's theme song, replacing one of its lines, "It is easier to be afraid together," with "It is easier to get fucked in the ass" (in Hebrew, the lines rhyme), to which Yossi replies, "You're such a faggot with your musical taste." Jagger retorts in an exaggerated masculine voice: "This is 'radio straight', we are here with Yossi, a tough guy, a company commander that takes it up the ass, who would like to listen to Meir Ariel." The reference to Meir Ariel (1942-1999) – a singer and a *kibbutznik* who served in the army as a paratrooper and expressed overtly homophobic views – serves to enhance the gender performative moment. However, the performative moment is not a subversive one: the whole scene is shared only with the viewers.

The film as a whole lacks political context; as indicated above, it does not blur sexual binaries to challenge the centrality of the IDF's masculine, heteronormative culture of war in Israeli society. As Yosef Raz noted, the film is part of the LGBT community's "politics of normalcy", which "do not challenge the hegemony of these institutions (i.e., the IDF)." The political line he describes promotes inclusion of "an exclusive group consisting mainly of Jewish, middle class gays and lesbians" in the IDF.[43] The conservative essence of *Yossi & Jagger* did not escape Uri Klein – one of the few critics who were not won over by the presumed daring and progressiveness of the film. Klein wrote that the movie "represents a reaction that pretends to be subversive" and can

42 Uri Klein, "He didn't Know his Name," *Ha'aretz*, September 13, 2002.

43 Yosef Raz, "*Hapolitika shel Hanormali: Min ve'Uma baKolno'a haHomoseksuali ha'Isra'eli* [The Politics of Normality: Sex and Nation in Gay Israeli Cinema]," *Theory and Criticism*, 30 (2007), p. 160.

construed as part of the patriotic wave that swept through Israel in the wake of the Second Intifada.[44]

Ever the obedient officer, Yossi gives in to the pressure of his regimental commander and takes his exhausted soldiers to execute an ambush. After quarreling with Jagger and refusing to reveal their affair, he leads his soldiers to the fatal ambush. When an explosive is detonated near them, Jagger is killed, dying as the stunned Yossi professes his love to him. The fatal ambush scene highlights the absence of Arabs from the film: the only time the enemy appears is as a *deus ex machina* in the form of a bomb. The absence of the Arab Other is also expressed in the opening shots of the film, as Israeli helicopters sweep across a barren, empty landscape with no signs of human activity. This elimination of indigenous presence from the landscape is characteristic of settler colonial societies such as Israel. Consider the impressions of explorer-surveyor Thomas Mitchell as he travelled through the Australian landscape in 1838 and saw "an empty landscape… the indigenous inhabitants remained a presence only detected by reference to 'camp-smoke', or to 'camp-litter' that was left behind."[45]

The film ends in the home of Jagger's family, where the introverted and traumatized Yossi cannot bring himself to share his and Jagger's love story with the grieving parents. Instead, Yaeli claims that she was Jagger's girlfriend. Thus, the secret is buried with Jagger's torn body, while the heteronormative order remains intact.

The film *Yossi* catches up with the character of Yossi, once again played by Ohad Knoller, ten years after the death of his lover. *Yossi* is set in a hospital in a Tel Aviv-adjacent location, and in the southern city of Eilat. Ever closeted, Yossi is now a successful and dedicated cardiologist, whose life consists of work, microwave dinners in his uncongenial apartment, masturbation to gay internet porn, and falling asleep in front of the TV. In a comedic scene, Yossi attempts a gay, internet-facilitated one-night stand, and suffers humiliation from an

44 Klein, "He didn't Know his Name."

45 Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2010, p. 83.

arrogant hyper-masculine partner. However, a chance meeting in the hospital with Jagger's mother (Orly Silbersatz-Banai) reopens old wounds, and Yossi comes to visit his dead lover's house and reveals their secret to his parents. Following his confession, he finds rejection rather than acceptance, as the stunned mother asks him to leave. However, in a cinematic quote taken from Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005, United States, River Road Entertainment), Jagger's father (Raffi Tavor) allows him to see the deceased soldier's room.

While his personal life is in turmoil, Yossi's professional life suffers as well, and he mishandles an important medical procedure. Emotionally drained, he departs for a vacation in the Sinai Peninsula. On the way, he picks up a group of young soldiers who missed their bus to Eilat. One of them, Tom (Oz Zehavi), a beautiful, blond young man, catches Yossi's eye. The car ride to Eilat becomes the site in which the film marks the difference between Yossi and his new love interest Tom, and the Mizrahi and Arab Others. As they make their way to Eilat, one of the young, Mizrahi-looking officers asks Yossi to play some music. When the CD player utters Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5,[46] the soldiers demand that Yossi stop playing "Mozart" and start playing Mizrahi music. The only one who defends Yossi's musical taste, which includes old Israeli songs, is Tom – who also knows Gustav Mahler's full name. As in the previous films, this short scene designates the heroes of the film as Ashkenazis who are familiar with "higher" and more "profound" European culture. Finally, a suitable CD is found and Yossi and his newfound companions enter Eilat to the sound of Israeli superstar Eyal Golan's song *Jungle*, whose associations with colonialist European images of "primitive" Africa fit well with the repudiation of the non-European in the scene.

In the same scene, when Yossi tells his hitchhikers that he is driving to Sinai, they answer, "Are you crazy? Haven't you heard all the warnings? They will kill you out there, it's dangerous there." Yossi shrugs off their

46 The film references Thomas Mann's novel *Death in Venice*, which deals with an older man's infatuation with a younger boy. In one scene, Yossi is seen reading the book near the pool. Mahler's music references Luchino Visconti's masterpiece adaptation of the novel (1971, Italy/France, Alfa Cinematografica).

cautionary words, claiming that Sinai is as dangerous as the highway they are driving on, but the next scene proves him wrong. After dropping off his newfound companions at their hotel, Yossi arrives at the Egyptian-Israeli border. As he stops his car near the checkpoint, he surveys his surroundings. While the Israeli flag waves overhead, signifying national territory, the PA system sounds security instructions, the last of them, tellingly, in Arabic. He glances at two security men operating the checkpoint, then turns his car around and heads back to Eilat. Through these images and the use of diegetic sound, the scene gives concrete expression to the fear of the Arab Other, the fear articulated by the soldiers during the car scene.

The elimination of the Arab Other from *Yossi* as well as *Yossi & Jagger* stands in contrast to the treatment of Palestinian/Arab presence in other Israeli films. The most prominent example is Daniel Wachsmann's *Ḥamsin* (1982, Israel, Hamsin Film Production), the story of a relationship triangle between Gedalia, a Jewish farmer, his Palestinian farmhand Khaled, and Hava the farmer's sister. The love story between Khaled and Hava unfolds against the background of nationalist tensions, as Jewish farmers and their Palestinian neighbors struggle over land rights. While not expressly shown in the film, "Gedalia's close relationship to Khaled can be seen in a homoerotic light."[47] When the Palestinian protagonist crosses the racial divide, implicitly betraying the homoerotic bond as well, his punishment is to be killed by Gedalia. While this violent rejection reinforces the socioeconomic and national subordination of the Palestinian native to the Jewish settler, serving the film's radical political message, it still endows the Palestinian character with corporality and agency, precisely the elements which are absent from *Yossi* and *Yossi & Jagger*.

Back from the border, Yossi arrives in Eilat, which is portrayed as a kind of neoliberal paradise. The hero's entrance into the hotel – an artificial marbled structure with deep blue pools – can be interpreted as an act of patriotic consumption. Yossi is going to spend his vacation in this Israeli capitalist dreamland under the national flag rather than

47 Raz, *Beyond Flesh*, p. 127.

outside of national territory. Along with the Eilat dream world comes Tom, his Hebrew name meaning "innocence", who represents a hybrid figure. When he is with his comrades in arms, he appears at ease with their homosocial jokes, which revolve around sexual encounters with each other's family members and homosocial roughhousing in the pool. Although he is the only one to defend Yossi's musical taste in the car, which ascribes to him the same class and ethnicity as Yossi (one further highlighted by his blonde, European appearance), he still has no qualms with Mizrahi music and even appears knowledgeable about it. Above all, he is openly gay, and his homosexuality is treated by his friends as a matter of fact – reflecting the indifference of many servicemen in today's IDF toward the subject.

Like its prequel, *Yossi* allows for a few moments of gender performance, and like the heroes of *Yossi & Jagger*, Yossi and Tom represent two different types. Yossi is still an introverted, heavyset man. Tom is young, full of daring and life, and to some extent, childlike. The scene that marks the start of their courtship takes place at the hotel bar. Yossi watches a group of female singers wearing slightly over-the-top colorful clothing and makeup, reminiscent of drag, sing cheesy love songs on a stage. Tom sits next to his love interest, echoing the singers while placing a cocktail umbrella behind his ear. In an effeminate voice, he asks, "What did I miss?" As the film progresses, Tom slowly tears down the walls of isolation surrounding the traumatized Yossi, culminating in an intimate love scene. The film ends with the two lovers at the beach drinking beer. Tom asks Yossi when he is due back at the hospital, and Yossi replies in two or three days. Tom asks whether he *wants* or *needs* to return. Yossi answers, "Look around you; do you think this is real life?" When Tom suggests that they stay in their neoliberal dreamland, Yossi asks about the army, to which Tom answers that they can do without him. After thinking about it for a short while, Yossi makes the surprised Tom an offer to stay forever, implying a long-term commitment between the two.

How does Eytan Fox himself perceive his films? In an interview conducted just before the release of *Yossi* with one of his harshest critics, the aforementioned Uri Klein, the filmmaker openly discussed different issues ranging from the politics of his films to their place in Israeli cinema. Fox explicitly places his films at the center of the LGBT politics

of normalcy. The tragedy of *Yossi & Jagger* "is not just the loss in battle of a handsome, promising young man, which corresponds with the Israeli myth of the dead soldier, but that at the end of the film Yossi cannot say 'I am a war widow; look at me'."[48] His films are meant to depict his own experience as an Ashkenazi, middle-class *kravi* (combat) soldier:

> I decided that I would be the next homosexual director. I would show the Israeli flag at the opening of *After*. I would present soldiers in my films. I would portray more mainstream families. I want my life to be stable, to have a family.[49]

This acceptance of the central institutions within the Israeli militarist patriarchy – the reproductive family and most notably the army – places Fox's work at the center of the limited liberal discourse of inclusion. His characters, hailing strictly from a narrow class and ethnic stratum, make his films palatable to wider audiences. While discussing his film *The Bubble* (2006, Israel, Uchovsky Fox), which portrays a love story between two men, one Jewish and one Palestinian, he comments:

> *The Bubble* was too difficult a story for the Israeli audience. Two Zionist men in the Israel Defense Forces; that, the Israeli audience can see. But an Israeli and a Palestinian man, that was too much.[50]

Asked about the political efficacy of his films, Fox locates it squarely within the mainstream of LGBT official politics. As stated in his interview with Klein, he is "proud to be part of the change that happened in Israeli society… presenting models of gay love has generated some social change."[51] When considering his place within the various genres of Israeli cinema and his relation to earlier Israeli films, Fox denies any link to the heroic-nationalist genre. However, the place he does claim in the Israeli cinematic context effectively rephrases this very genre. When asked by Klein whether *Yossi & Jagger* would have been successful as a story about a man and a woman, Fox answers:

48 Uri Klein, "What does '*Yossi*' Say about Israel in 2012," *Ha'aretz*, May 18, 2012.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.

> The story represented in Israeli cinema in films like *He Walked in the Fields* or *Siege* is false. Not because what is depicted is a lie, but because the national and historical narrative portrayed is untrue. It is a narrative that paints us as a strong, just people who engage in defensive battles in which men defend women… making the two heroes men allows a reconnection to the national and historical narrative from a different and more authentic place that challenges the myth on which it is based.[52]

The historical and social moments depicted in the films at hand might help us to further understand Fox's work in its context. *After*, made in 1990, reflects the stormy 1980s, an era that saw Israel go from plunging into the Lebanese quagmire to engaging in open confrontation with the Palestinians during the First Intifada. As Israelis painfully learned the limits of Israel's military prowess, iconoclastic elements that would challenge certain long-held beliefs began to form. In this sense, *After* can be observed within the broader context of the rise of post-Zionism in the Oslo era. As certain Israeli coteries began to take a harder look at issues such as the Palestinian *Nakba* and Israel's treatment of its non-European Jewish citizens, the possibility of talking about sexual minorities, even in the IDF, emerged.

Yossi & Jagger, as noted by Klein, is a reflection of the Second Intifada period. As a wave of nationalist neo-Zionism washed over the cultural tendencies of the 1990s, the film, with its definitive patriotic undertones, sought to include gays in the new national and cultural mood. *Yossi*, on the other hand, mirrors the escapist tendencies of Israeli society under the long rule of Benjamin Netanyahu's successive governments. Ever mistrustful of the Palestinians and supported by a right-wing electorate, Prime Minister Netanyahu was able to convince many Israelis that the conflict can be "managed" and they can turn inward, disregarding the root cause of their plight. *Yossi*'s nearly absolute focus on a gay love story in a neoliberal, manufactured paradise echoes this moment in Israeli history.

52 Ibid.

Roads not Taken

The films *After, Yossi & Jagger*, and *Yossi* represent the Israeli-Ashkenazi, secular-liberal mainstream, which accepts gay culture so long as it couched in militaristic, homonormative, middle class sensibilities and eliminates Palestinians along with queer "Others". Transgender and Palestinian queer identities are marginalized in the cultural politics of representation and are not afforded any visibility. Is there an alternative politics of culture and representation that could counter the images depicted by the films in question? In the final part of this text, I examine some alternative representations of queer politics. Although the moments, events, and bodies discussed cannot achieve the same resonance among wide Israeli audiences as the films of Eytan Fox, they can point to the possibility of more radical queer politics, which can perhaps find expression in Israeli films.[53]

The fact that an alternative, radical queer identity has indeed formed in various sites and spaces, suggests the possibility of images that can counter the mainstream homonormative and homonational discourse at the center of Eytan Fox's cinematic imagery. The ongoing debate about queer voices from within the LGBT community that challenge the politics of normality, and the attempt to marginalize them, exposes the disapproving undertone of the militaristic and conservative discourse discussed in the current work.

In her article "Performative Politics in Israeli Queer Anti-Occupation Activism", Israeli queer theoretician Amalia Ziv describes a short-lived queer political organization, *Black Laundry*, which, in the midst of the Second Intifada, "inaugurated the queer moment in Israel". Using means such as "direct local interventions in the public arena, a

53 Nir Cohen notes a new sensibility that began to develop in the mid-2000s in the works of young Israeli documentarians regarding Mizrahi and Palestinian queer identities. (Cohen, "Different Shadows," pp. 154-205. Part of this trend is Jake Witzenfeld's *Oriented* (2015, Israel, Conch Studios), which depicts the lives of three gay Palestinian Israelis living in Tel-Aviv. However, Israeli mainstream fiction film has yet to portray stories of queer identity that go beyond the homonationalist and homonormative norms depicted in Fox's films.

preference for performative practices, and a confrontational 'in your face' approach",[54] they sought to disrupt the official LGBT community's tendency toward "longing for assimilation and implying a republican notion of citizenship as premised on contribution to the common good."[55] Their aim was to disrupt the evolving Israeli consensus regarding an LGBT culture that can be palatable to large segments of the mainstream. Despite the obvious limitations of *Black Laundry* politics – the lack of a stable organization, the limited pool of activists, their young age, Ashkenazi and middle class orientation, and the fact they could not include Palestinian queers as these were unable to expose themselves publicly – its activity unearthed possibilities of political and cultural activism that had never been previously exploited.

The first transgender "refusenik" Aiden Katri, a 19-year-old activist and blogger who identifies as a woman, delivered another queer-activist challenge to the Israeli consensus regarding gender roles and the military. Katri shared her misgivings about serving in the army, likening it to "a white man with an outdated point of view".[56] When the time for her induction finally came she decided to refuse, citing her objection to the Israeli Occupation as stemming from "a feminist and humanist worldview".[57] After briefly incarcerating her in a men's prison, the army decided to discharge Aiden on the grounds of a mental condition. Aiden's charge that the IDF was thereby branding her "as mentally ill instead of dealing with my ideological statement against the Occupation" was met with a response that represents the limits of the IDF's liberal discourse regarding the LGBT community. The IDF responded that the discharge is authorized by "certified officials and based on medical and professional considerations only… dozens of transgender persons serve in the IDF, receiving, when necessary, aid from relevant institutions. If she chooses

54 Amalia Ziv, "Performative Politics in Israeli Queer Anti-Occupation Activism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 16 (2010), p. 538.

55 Ibid., p. 539.

56 Aiden Katri, "Transgender Young Adult Hesitations regarding my Army Service," *Ha'aretz*, June 6, 2015.

57 Tammy Riklis, "Transgender, Mizrahi, Refusenik," *Haokets*, April 10, 2016. http://www.haokets.org/2016/04/10/.

to volunteer, her voluntary service will be taken into consideration."[58]

A short time before Aiden Katri challenged the interaction between LGBT soldiers, the IDF, and the fundamentals of Israeliness, another case surfaced that emphasized the collusion between the gay establishment and the Israeli state. As the Israeli Gay Pride festival approached, the LGBT community rose up against the Ministry of Tourism's campaign to bring gay tourists to Israel. The generously funded campaign, which included painting an airplane belonging to the national airline, El Al, with a rainbow flag, roused a wave of indignation across social media.[59] LGBT officials and organizers argued that the state starves LGBT organizations financially while seeking to profit from Israel's reputation as a gay-friendly destination.[60] The claim, justified as it may be, disregarded the government's pinkwashing ploy to bring gay tourists to Israel. It also emphasized that the Israeli LGBT community had become part of the neoliberal matrix of not only gay tourism, but Israeli society itself. The backlash against the government plans prompted it to scale down the campaign, while the leaders of the LGBT community – like in many sectors of Israel's privatized society – were promised funds by Minister of Finance Moshe Kahlon.[61]

As the story of LGBT soldiers in Israel unfolds, one can only wonder whether Israel's gay cinema will develop to include those who defy the norms of Israeli society. Will an Israeli filmmaker emerge to describe the lives of Mizrahi and Palestinian gays and transgender persons, those who do not serve in the army? Or will their place in Israel's cinematic imagination remain a road not taken? This remains to be seen.

58 Gili Cohan, "The Transgender Conscientious Objector Aiden Katri was discharged from the IDF for Mental Reasons," *Ha'aretz*, April 4, 2016.

59 Ilan Lior, "Protest in the Gay Community: The State Invests in Tourists and not in Promoting LGBT Rights," *Ha'aretz*, April 17, 2016.

60 Ibid.

61 Ilan Lior, "Kahlon Met with the Heads of the Gay Community and Promised to Increase Funding to LGBT Organizations," *Ha'aretz*, May 9, 2016.