

Nir Cohen. *Soldiers, Rebels, and Drifters: Gay Representation in Israeli Cinema.*
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Nir Cohen argues that representing gay men on the Israeli screen is not necessarily a queering of identity. Instead, he claims that representations of gay (and by this he means male homosexual) identity occur within the framework of the traditional mainstream Zionist narrative. Though the first forays into the depiction of homosexual behavior—often merely hinted at—remained the province of the Mizrahi male, who was already constructed as feminized and outside the bastions of hegemonic Israeli masculine identity, this soon gave way to self-professed gay directors directing gay characters within a frame of the national-masculine norm. In time, two clear pathways emerged—that of Amos Guttman, whose protagonists exist in the seedy nightlife of secular Tel Aviv, often encountering violence and prejudice, isolated from the collective defined by Cohen as a “segregationist” perspective; and the alternative, more mainstream representation, featured in the Hollywood style cinema of Eytan Fox. For Fox, being gay is a sexual preference—but does not limit involvement in mainstream secular Israeli soci-

ety. This “integrationist” representation places gay men within many of the mainstays of Israeli society, such as the army and Tel Aviv urban life, and Fox uses the mise-en-scène through settings in public spaces and during daylight hours to counter Guttman’s view of gay life as underworld. Rather, gay life is part of Israeli life, in its most modern and popular forms.

Cohen’s proposal is fascinating because of its resonance with contemporary attitudes towards gay life in Israel. The rhetoric of Tel Aviv as the “world’s best gay city” in 2012 following an American Airlines poll in which Tel Aviv beat out New York for the title, functions within a discourse of openness, tolerance, and acceptance that has been associated with the first Hebrew city. Cohen reminds us that Tel Aviv is rare in that its gay districts are not segregated “villages,” as is common in other metropolitan areas, but rather homosexual life is integrated into the city’s life. Yet Cohen also reminds us that for some, the price of this integration and acceptance has been the obfuscating of responsibility towards representing issues,

diversities, and complexities within the gay community. Among other issues, he argues that Fox's decision to use mostly straight actors for gay roles "denies gay self-representation" (p. 118)--though it might also be argued that Fox is attempting to make gay mainstream by choosing actors associated with the hegemonic elite, which is in keeping with Cohen's previous arguments about Fox's decision to present gay as mainstream and "integrationist."

Unlike the queer theory work undertaken by Raz Yosef--in which he claims, "queerness is an essential structural element in the construction of Zionism--a structural element that must be disavowed. This abjected identification threatens to destabilize and unveil the self-establishing structural presumptions of the heterosexual male subject"[1]--Cohen argues that the homosexual male is not in conflict with normative order, but through the evolution of gays on screen comes to embody it: "Even though, at first, the gay movement had certain elements of queer resistance by opposing the heterosexist, militaristic values Israeli society was based on, they gradually vanished from its agenda. Instead, members of the gay community have internalized these heterosexist norms, hoping for social acceptance rather than social change, and allied themselves with the fading Ashkenazi (a term referring to Jews of Central or Eastern European origins) elite that stood behind them. The establishment's acceptance of the gay community resulted from an understanding that, in the current state of affairs, a minor sexual 'deviation' was less threatening than the danger presented by other minority groups that have gradually gained political power over the past couple of decades, among them Orthodox Jews" (p. 10).

Cohen outlines a history of the development of gay characters on screen, from the early years of the Mizrahi "deviant" whose boundary crossing includes issues of sexuality, through the marginalized and isolated protagonists of Guttman's films,

to the hypermasculine heroes of Eytan Fox's *Yossi and Jagger* (2002) and *HaBuah* (The Bubble, 2006). In chapter 4 he lays out changes in contemporary filmmaking, and the rise of the confessional and biographical genres that are no longer contained by the frame of feature films and TV series, but now include documentaries and hybrid filmic forms.

Cohen sets Israeli gay filmmaking on a world stage, demonstrating trends that are international, and their influence on many Israeli filmmakers. "[N]ew formal means have been tested in order to undermine conventional, fixed categories of sexuality and identity in general" (p. 181). This trend in international gay documentary filmmaking has had a corresponding development within Israel. Cohen demonstrates that gay cinema is not restricted by genre and as Yosef has also argued, it is often bound up in broader discussions about the representation of gender and sexuality on the Israeli screen. Though Yosef takes this debate in a postcolonialist direction, Cohen focuses on the issues of race and religion within the Israeli polity. Nevertheless, both would seem to agree that "Tel Aviv [is] a site where normative identifications with the state are contested" (p. 5).

Shifting from the queerness explored by Yosef, Cohen argues that his book separates out the elements of gay and queer. As he argues of Fox's films, they "manifest the current social status the gay community has achieved for itself: gayness is perceived as a legitimate way of life, and even desirable, as long as it does not transgress the rigid boundaries of Israeli hegemonic culture" (p. 16). Thus there is a separation between men who lead a normal life but happen to prefer homosexual partners, and those who live a "gay" life which by its very nature becomes deviant. Yet this positivist and elitist depiction of gay men and gay life in Israel, is undone in chapter 4. In his final chapters, Cohen argues that in recent years, less well-established film makers have tried

to broaden the definition of gay discourse in Israel today.

Moving away from the Ashkenazi male secular discourse, the newest wave of filmmaking complicates the experience of gay men in Israeli society. As Cohen writes, “Now that homosexuality in itself is not as controversial an issue as it once was, many filmmakers attend to stories, either fictional or nonfictional, in which the protagonists’ sexuality is, though important, often just another identity category. In many of those films sexual matters illuminate other modes of oppression, in and outside the gay community, related to ethnicity, gender, and, progressively, religion” (p. 189). Dividing his subject matter into films that explore familial reactions to “coming out,” the Mizrahi experience as distinct from that of the Ashkenazi elite previously explored, lesbian filmmaking, and interracial relationships--this chapter presents the material least well known among the general public, but in many ways the most cinematically interesting.

Cohen shows “the diversity of gay, lesbian, and queer experiences in contemporary Israel. By exploring different identities and groups within what is often perceived as a homogenous gay community, [his work] challenges the existence of such a community beyond its discursive, imagined borders” (p. 180). It is these films which really challenge the stereotypes of gay and Israeli, dispelling the notion of the successful and open Israeli attitudes to gayness embodied by Tel Aviv, in the media, and internationally. Choosing foreign workers and foreign locations within the filming also reinforces the questions of marginalization that hark back to Guttman’s earlier forays into Israeli filmmaking about the gay community. Furthermore, several pieces that examine AIDS in Israel also push at the boundaries of social taboos. In what in many ways is the most original chapter, Cohen forces us to reexamine our ideas about what constitutes gay in both Israeli cinema and society.

Nevertheless, lesbian representations on screen, and of women in general, receive minimal treatment by Cohen. Where he does tackle the representation of women, he often uses the subject as a foil for the male gay narrative--thereby frustrating his explication of women’s role within gay films. Even in his introduction Cohen highlights the discrepancy between tackling the topics of gay men and lesbians. The former he sees in a cinematically dialectical relationship with the Zionist hegemonic discourse, and particularly the muscle ideology of the New Jew. Lesbians, transsexuals and other subgroups, he argues, are already outside the heteronormative national narratives--and therefore constitute a separate and distinct area for exploration. With few films exploring these other topics, their very absence highlights the extent to which gay (and masculine) cinema remains framed within the dominant discourse of the “male experience in Israel, epitomized in the image of the heroic warrior, and the relatively marginal status given to women.... Gay men ... have had to respond to scorn from male-dominated and militaristic Israeli society. Consequently, they have had a greater need to create their own cultural and social circles from which they could reimagine themselves and their community. However, since at the same time they have enjoyed the privilege of belonging to the dominant male group they have had better means to achieve that” (p. 18). This is pronounced in Fox’s oeuvre, and particularly in *Yossi and Jagger*. “As a gay couple, Yossi and Jagger adjust themselves to the heteronormative model, and they succeed in doing so more than their heterosexual counterparts. The latter are conventionally stereotyped: the colonel abuses his power and the female soldiers are either whores or virgins. Thus, they become a grotesque representation of male chauvinistic norms” (pp. 113-114).

Yet while Cohen remains profoundly sensitive to depictions of male homosexuality on screen, such as in his discussion of a Palestinian and Arab-Israeli couple working in prostitution whose

engagement with Israeli male clients, often serving in elite political and military roles, reveals layers of power play, when dealing with lesbian subjects his treatment is frequently superficial, such as in his analysis of *Ha-Sodot* (2007). This film, which layers issues within the ultra-Orthodox community about the expectations for women, and the attitude towards female education, presents a lesbian relationship as a further abnormality for women already engaged in several other acts of deviance (including an orgasm over a cabbalistic manuscript, and the performance of witchcraft). Here, the lesbian relationship serves not as a model of women's sexual interaction, but as a projection of male heterosexual fantasy about forbidden female spaces. Similarly, his reading of Fox's *Song of the Siren* (1994) argues that Talila Katz serves as a stand-in for the single, financially independent and successful gay male—rather than reading the image as one of an empowered modern woman.

This book is an important exploration of the gap between representing gay men and gay relationships on screen, and queer culture. Cohen reveals a chasm in Israeli cinema in which gay is constructed through its dialogue with the masculine Zionist narratives as a sexual orientation but not necessarily as a mode of difference. This is most keenly highlighted in his analysis of Eytan Fox's works and particularly *Yossi and Jagger*: “*Yossi and Jagger* is anything but a queer work. The film was made by a gay activist filmmaker known for encouraging famous Israeli artists to make their sexuality public, yet it only shows how prevalent heterosexist norms are to the extent that they have become internalized by members of the gay community itself” (p. 115)

Note

[1]. Raz Yosef, *Beyond Flesh* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 5.

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