

# Nightmares of a Nation: Israeli Horror-Satires *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves*

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**Abstract:** The recent emergence of horror-satires marks a new moment in cinematic representations of Israel/Palestine. Rather than violence of war, these films foreground structural violence within privileged segments of Israeli society through tropes of infectious diseases and solitary sociopaths. This article examines two widely acclaimed films, *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves*, to argue that cynicism has replaced reverence over Israel's foundational myths and institutions. A younger generation of filmmakers and audiences is willing to consider Israel's role as both victim and victimizer; their horror-satires replace fears of outside dangers with fears of attacks inside individual and social bodies.

More than a dozen horror films have been produced in Israel since 2011. Their emergence is not without irony, given the prevalence of horrifying violence in Israel/Palestine, beginning with Palestinian dispossession by Europeans in 1948; through military attacks by Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in 1967; and continuing today. Supernatural horrors might seem superficial by comparison to these very real horrors. The release of these films thus marks a new moment, both in Israeli film history and in the history of cinematic representations of Israel/Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Israeli producers and distributors may be taking advantage of horror's global popularity, but a new generation of Israeli filmmakers is reworking global horror tropes and figures to address local concerns. Rather than revisiting historical traumas, such as European anti-Semitism or the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict, they rework horror conventions to satirize, however cynically and ambivalently, the banality of everyday violence as it consumes

1 Studies include Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989), rev. ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); Yosefa Loshitzky, *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Miri Talmon and Yaron Pelag, eds., *Israeli Cinema: Identities in Motion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Raz Yosef, *The Politics of Loss and Trauma in Contemporary Israeli Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Raz Yosef and Boaz Hagin, eds., *Deeper Than Oblivion: Trauma and Memory in Israeli Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

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Israeli society from the inside. The violence is highly stylized and antirealist, yet it nonetheless represents contemporary social order as a form of violence that is very real and increasingly self-destructive.

The films' primary audience is a generation of Israelis born after national ideals shifted from radical equality of the kibbutz to structural inequality within a labyrinthine bureaucracy. It is hardly surprising, then, that the films of this generation shift from realist representation of ostensibly external dangers, such as Palestinian resistance fighters and Arab military invasions, to satirical representations of internal dangers, coming from within the social body. For international audiences, the films bring the novelty of familiar horror conventions into an "exotic" new location. Because genre films from Middle Eastern countries are less widely known in North America and Europe, an understanding of Israeli horror-satires requires contextualization, so as not to reproduce familiar discourses of Israeli exceptionalism.

In this article, we look at two films directed by the team of Aharon Keshales and Navot Papushado, *Kalevet (Rabies)* (2010) and *Mi mafakhed me-ha-ze'ev ha-ra (Big Bad Wolves)* (2013), which received popular and critical acclaim at home and abroad, conveying the transnational appeal of their horror and the national appeal of their satire. We investigate how these films deploy sociopathic violence to capture nightmares of a nation through social satire. The films' satire suggests political criticism of the masculinities produced by militarized culture, which in turn determine the kinds of relationships allowed in a society. They signal a moment of self-critique among young Israeli filmmakers, particularly of the institutions often associated with Israeli exceptionalism in the Middle East, yet they also signal a growing social complicity with the militarism that enables right-wing politics.

**Recognizing Horror and Comedy in the Middle East.** Despite prejudices against genre films for their antirealism and "excessive" qualities, even those films dismissed as popular genres, such as comedy and horror, have the potential to make political critique and can do so more forcefully than so-called quality modes.<sup>2</sup> In Hollywood, horror combines with comedy to parody horror conventions, a practice that dates to the 1930s. Such conventions were emulated in Mexico as a means of parodying US cultural imperialism. In Hong Kong, horror-comedy developed as an integrated genre. In the context of the Middle East, many audiences might presume that horror defines the region and comedy eludes it. Both assumptions are inaccurate, as is the very term "Middle East," which emerges from an entangled history of European colonialism and US imperialism.<sup>3</sup>

In a study on humor in Middle Eastern cinema, Gayatri Devi and Najat Rahman point to the "shared experience" of European colonialism, both direct and indirect, as

2 Linda Williams recuperates horror, melodrama, and pornography as potentially feminist; see her "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 2–12. For horror and other genre conventions as critiques of US racism and xenophobia, see Dale Hudson, *Vampires, Race, and Transnational Hollywoods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 2.

3 Timothy Mitchell, "The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 74–118.

a factor uniting much of the region.<sup>4</sup> The State of Israel was founded by Eastern European Jewish émigrés, whose reasons for settling in Palestine are distinct from those of other European colonizers. Partly because of the Israeli state's role in controlling film for nation building, comedies appeared relatively late in Israeli cinema compared to commercial film industries elsewhere in the Middle East. For instance, Egyptian comedies often targeted the ruling classes, including the former colonial elites, as in *Salama fi khair* (*Everything Is Fine* aka *Salama Is Safe*; Niazi Mustafa, 1937), which features Raqiya Ibrahim (née Rachel Levi) and stars legendary stage actor Naguib Al Rihani. Comedies also flourished in popular Iranian and Turkish cinema during the mid-twentieth century. Horror, however, was less common and less visible to outsiders. Many were low-budget films for domestic consumption, notably Turkey's Yeşilçam ("green pine," the colloquial name for Istanbul's commercial film industry).<sup>5</sup> Egyptian horror films date back at least seventy years with *Safir gohannam* (*Hell's Ambassador*; Youssef Wahby, 1945) and include favorites like *Al-ins wal jinn* (*Human and Jinn*; Mohamed Radi, 1985). Over the past decade, Arabic-language horror films have begun to appear in greater numbers, particularly from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, but they are also found throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia.<sup>6</sup>

From the outset, the Israeli film industry shunned genre films, mainly because of state conceptions about the purpose of cinema. Before 1948, film was used for fund-raising and to recruit Jewish immigrants from Europe to Palestine. After 1948, it became an important tool of education and socialization—a means of consolidating national identity with a preference for "quality" dramas. "Quality" is Israeli shorthand for socially conscious and issue-oriented films that strengthened state institutions. During the 1960s, some films countered official narratives and conventions, exploiting popular tastes and aiming not to enlighten audiences but to make them cry, laugh, or dance. The so-called *bourekas* were "ethnic" (i.e., Mizrahi) melodramas, comedies, and musicals that often satirized social prejudices, although they invariably played on racism against Mizrahim (Arab Jews).<sup>7</sup> They offered "temporary situational reversals of cultural power dynamics."<sup>8</sup> However, not everyone appreciated their "ethnic humor." For Mizrahi audiences, the humor reinscribed anti-Arab prejudices even as it satirized Ashkenazi and diasporic Jews. Later, other genres have appeared, such as the thriller

4 Gayatri Devi and Najat Rahman, eds., *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 3.

5 Pete Tombs, *Mondo Macabro: Weird & Wonderful Cinema from around the World* (New York: St. Martin's / Griffin, 1998).

6 Such films include *El shabah* (*The Ghost*; Amr Arafa, 2007) and *Warda* (Hadi El Bagoury, 2014) from Egypt, and *Ouija, al ghorfa al khamesa* (*The Fifth Chamber of Ouija*; Maher Al-Khaja, 2009) and its sequels from the United Arab Emirates. Some are directed by non-Arabs, including *Kandisha* (Jérôme Cohen-Olivar, 2008) in Morocco and *Djinn* (Tobe Hooper, 2013) in the United Arab Emirates. Others include *Zibakhkhana* (*Hell's Ground*; Omar Ali Khan, 2007), produced and set in Pakistan, and *Under the Shadow* (Babak Anvari, 2016), shot in Jordan but set in Iran. India's films that might be labeled "horror" include Tulsi and Shyam Ramsay's B-grade productions, notably *Do gaz zameen ke neeche* (1972), and contemporary A-grade films, such as *Bhoot* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2003) and *Creature* (Vivek Bhatt, 2014). Because Western genres are incompatible with popular cinema in India, *Bhoot bungla* (Mehmood, 1965) could be labeled a "horror comedy."

7 Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 105–163.

8 Elise Burton, "Ethnic Humor, Stereotypes, and Cultural Power in Israeli Cinema," in *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema*, 108.

and the teenage comedy, followed by religious Jewish cinema, which includes films made for Orthodox (i.e., gender-segregated) audiences, low-budget Mizrahi melodrama (e.g., films by Yarni Kadoshi and Yamin Masika), and Russian-Israeli films by immigrant directors that reflect their culture and language.

Over the past forty years, film has also become a means of presenting Israel to the international community as what Israel's advocates would call "the only democracy in the Middle East." Wittingly or unwittingly, Israeli cinema thus continues to participate in state propaganda. Somewhat like Iranian art cinema, the Israeli film industry detracts from criticism of state policies by permitting dissent to be expressed on-screen. Israeli filmmakers also participate in liberal Zionist "pinkwashing" by presenting Israel as queer-friendly amid allegedly homophobic and transphobic Muslim neighbors.<sup>9</sup> The high production values and Western-friendly narratives of Israeli art films that circulate on the international festival circuit also benefit and add value to the "Brand Israel" neoliberal program that Israel began in order to counter effects of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement.

With their antirealist conventions, indifference to production values, and focus on unruly bodies that cannot be assimilated into nationalist mythologies, horror films are harder to reconcile with such ideological missions, yet their ambivalence makes them easier to dismiss as nonpolitical, as "just entertainment." Horror scholars often approach horror cinema as an engagement with national traumas that haunt past and present.<sup>10</sup> Horror reveals national insecurities by exposing "terrors underlying everyday national life and the ideological agendas that dictate existing formulations of 'national cinemas' themselves."<sup>11</sup> Although such approaches are valuable, critics of trauma studies argue that focusing on national trauma minimizes forms of violence experienced by the poor, marginalized, and dispossessed, that is, citizens who cannot claim full access to the benefits of national belonging. Lauren Berlant argues that a privileging of exceptional moments of trauma distracts attention from the everyday instances of traumatizing systems of power.<sup>12</sup> Canons of national horrors, such as "Vietnam" and 9/11 for the United States, exclude the trauma experienced by nondominant groups: the dispossession of indigenous nations and Mexicans, enslavement of Africans and African Americans, and servitude of Asians and Asian Americans. These groups have historically been denied a place within national history and a right to narrate their own stories. In the Israeli/Palestinian context, Edward Said's poignant statement on the permission to narrate is especially relevant, as is Ella

9 Sarah Schulman, *Israel/Palestine and the Queer International* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). Academic studies on Israeli cinema often highlight its appeal to LGBTQ+ audiences, as in Raz Yosef's *Beyond Flesh: Queer Masculinities and Nationalism in Israeli Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004) and Nir Cohen's *Soldiers, Rebels, and Drifters: Gay Representation in Israeli Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011).

10 Applications of national trauma range from Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), to Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

11 Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2008), 9.

12 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

Shohat's scholarship on the exclusion of Arab Jews from Israel's foundational myths, precisely because they have been victims of these myths.<sup>13</sup> Israeli films mostly exclude or minimize the perspectives of minoritized groups. Dominant groups enjoy the privileged—usually inherited as opposed to earned—experience of a nontraumatizing, or “normal,” life as a result of benefits bestowed by structural inequality. The privileged members of Israeli Jewish society live in a different relation to multiple traumas than do white Western Christians, given Israel's roles as victim and victimizer. At the very foundation of Israel is the trauma of the Holocaust and the so-called Arab-Israeli conflict. In the past twenty years, Israel has increasingly delegitimized Palestinian resistance by misidentifying it as terrorism, thus contributing to a national sense of existential danger and a siege mentality. Since the 1982 war against Lebanon, known as “Israel's Vietnam,” Israeli society has struggled with its responsibility for atrocities committed in its name, a responsibility narrated, if not interrogated, in the “Lebanon” films of the past decade.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Israeli films have turned to stories set in 1948 that contribute to the debate about Israel's role as perpetrator of violence against Palestinians rather than attempt to persuade audiences that Israel has been only the victim of violence.

Less visible is the systemic violence that affects not only Palestinians under the Israeli occupation but also Palestinian citizens of Israel, Arab Jews, Ethiopian Jews, and even certain groups of European Jews, such as post-Soviet Russian immigrants.<sup>15</sup> In the past decade, racism against asylum seekers from parts of Africa has shined a spotlight on a society structured on racist prejudice, not unlike other Western democracies. Progressive Israelis are increasingly disenchanted with the economically liberal and politically right-wing Likud government for its policies of mass incarceration of Palestinians, checkpoints, curfews, and illegal settlements. They are increasingly aware of censorship and possible retaliation against critics and activists. The combination of increasingly oppressive governments controlling the Israeli state and the coming of age of more progressive, if also more cynical, Israeli citizens open space for films like *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves*, which straddle Western genre conventions of horror and comedy.

Horror and comedy can seem incompatible or inappropriately compatible. Theorizing narrative devices in both horror and humor, Noël Carroll points to a discrepancy or incongruity (whether of monsters or of comic situations) that paradoxically forms a common territory between two seemingly different genres.<sup>16</sup> Other scholars agree that despite their distinct emotional effects, “both comedy and horror depend on the shock of the unexpected: the subversion of the audience's expectations.”<sup>17</sup> William

13 Edward W. Said, “Permission to Narrate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 27–48; Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*.

14 See, e.g., Yael Munk, “From National Heroes to Postnational Witnesses: A Reconstruction of Israeli Soldiers' Cinematic Narratives as Witnesses of History,” in *Narratives of Dissent: War in Contemporary Israeli Arts and Culture*, ed. Rachel S. Harris and Ranen Omer-Sherman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 300–317.

15 See, e.g., Olga Gershenson and Dale Hudson, “New Immigrant, Old Story: Framing Russians on the Israeli Screen,” *Journal of Film and Video* 60, nos. 3–4 (2008): 25–41.

16 Noël Carroll, “Horror and Humor,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 145–160.

17 Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, introduction to *The Laughing Dead: The Horror-Comedy Film from Bride of Frankenstein to Zombieland*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xiv.

Paul suggests that both comedy and horror can have a “gross-out” effect resulting in a “festive” communal release for the audience.<sup>18</sup> A recent wave of popular horror comedies allegedly demonstrates the appeal of “the mixture of comically grotesque mayhem, visual absurdity, and mordant dialogue” embodied in these films.<sup>19</sup> Although *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves* seem to satisfy such definitions of genre, we approach them here as horror-satires, which we define as a particular kind of horror-comedy that delivers social commentary to Israeli audiences while also appealing to international audiences.

Satire is notoriously difficult to define, but most theorists agree that what distinguishes satire from humor is the former’s sense of purpose.<sup>20</sup> That purpose, by many accounts, is a social, political, or moral criticism, possibly with a corrective intention. In the 1970s, Edward and Lillian Bloom called it “affirmative criticism.”<sup>21</sup> As they point out, “even the angriest declamations may be constructively motivated.”<sup>22</sup> Following social protest in the 1960s, such criticism was hardly subversive or revolutionary. Although it would be naïve to expect social change to result directly from the satire, scholars suggest that its effect lies in consciousness raising rather than activism, in its ability to unmask and deconstruct the existing powers.<sup>23</sup> Hence the humor scholar John Morreall quips, “Satire is not a weapon of revolutionaries.”<sup>24</sup> Because of their high production costs, narrative feature filmmaking often relies more on cynicism and ambivalence than on oppositional politics.

Still, in some contemporary media contexts satire has a strong potential to constitute rather than comment on a political climate as it engages audiences with political issues and even helps them to imagine an alternative vision of the world. For instance, in the United States, given the different production schedules and requirements, subversive voices appear more frequently on television and web series than in theatrically released film.<sup>25</sup> The Western orientation of Israel makes the role of satirical strategies from US film and television all the more influential for young Israeli filmmakers.

**Israeli Horror, from Precursors to the Current Scene.** Although *Rabies* is widely considered the first Israeli horror film, there were several precedents that are important to consider in order to understand *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves* in context. Shot in 1971

18 William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

19 Miller and Van Riper, introduction to *Laughing Dead*, xviii.

20 Leonard Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1967); Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, *Satire’s Persuasive Voice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979); Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Psychology Press, 1994); Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

21 Bloom and Bloom, *Satire’s Persuasive Voice*, 18.

22 Bloom and Bloom, 31.

23 Bloom and Bloom; Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*.

24 John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 101.

25 Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 6, 42; Henry Jenkins and Stephen Duncombe, “Politics in the Age of YouTube,” *Electronic Journal of Communication* 18, nos. 2–4 (2008): <http://www.cios.org/www/ejc/EJCPUBLIC/018/2/01848.html>.

and briefly released five years later, *Hamalakh haya satan* (*The Angel Was a Devil*; Moshe Guez, 1976) is a low-budget horror movie about a deranged female mass killer. *Adam* (Yona Day, 1973) can be read as a psychological horror-thriller. Both films feature universalized themes and characters with almost no Israeli specificity beyond the most superficial level of names and locations. Both were written, directed, and privately funded by one-off filmmakers; both are marked by low production values and are today remembered only by specialists.<sup>26</sup> Later films and television made use of horror tropes. The romance *Hadybbuk b'sde hatapuchim hakdoshim* (*The Dybbuk of the Holy Apple Field*; Yossi Somer, 1997) and a television film *Tzazit* (*Frenzy*; Yossi Forkush, 2003) both tell a story of possession by a *dybbuk*—the spirit of a dead person in Jewish tradition and folklore. Five episodes of the thirteen-episode series *Sipurim le-shaat laila meuheret* (*Late Night Stories*; IBA, 1987–1991) featured horror plots. Only *The Dybbuk of the Holy Apple Field* and *Frenzy* make a nod to Jewish tradition, insofar as Jewish rabbis rather than Christian priests conduct their exorcisms. Other films and television productions present universalized plots and characters influenced by the established conventions of horror on US television and film.

The first horror film that engaged with explicitly Israeli subjects was *Hayal ha-laila* (*Soldier of the Night*; Dan Wolman, 1985). The protagonist is a modest salesclerk by day but a murderer by night, when he dons military uniform. In the end, he goes on a shooting rampage at an army base, drowning the screen in blood. *Soldier of the Night* was the first film to comment on Israeli militarist culture using elements of horror. The most recent horror precursor to the current wave of horror films is *Yamim kfuim* (*Frozen Days*; Danny Lerner, 2005), set in dangerous urban spaces, back alleys, and public toilets. It is shot in black and white and features nightmarish neo-noir *mise-en-scène* and lighting. The protagonist of the film, a mysterious young woman named Meow (Anat Klausner), is shown predominantly at night, dealing drugs or having nightmares. After she gets caught in a terrorist bombing outside a nightclub, she undergoes a strange transformation into “Alex,” adopting the identity of a man wounded in the attack with whom she previously had a romantic encounter. The audience’s confusion over the identity of Meow/Alex is never quite resolved in the plot. The film thus evokes the instability of identity in the face of trauma, drawing on conventions of “body horror” in which individual or social bodies implode, explode, or otherwise revolt against themselves, thus unsettling psychological and social distinctions between interiority and exteriority, as Philip Brophy argues—or between Self and Other, to cite an earlier moment in critical thinking.<sup>27</sup> In *Frozen Days*, the threat is brought about by an explosion—and such explosions were a fact of Israeli life during the early 2000s—but the horror stems from within the character’s mind and body rather than from an external source, as it does in “quality” Israeli dramas about suicide bombings.

26 After years of oblivion, *Angel Was a Devil* today enjoys a cult status as “the worst Israeli film ever,” according to Meir Schnitzer, *Ha-kolnoa Ha-israeli: Kol Ha-avodot, Kol Ha-alilot, Kol Ha-bamaim Ve-gam Bikorot* (Jerusalem: Kineret, 1994).

27 Philip Brophy, “Horrority—The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films,” *Screen* 27, no. 1 (January–February 1986): 2–13, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/27.1.2>.



All these earlier films were not considered horror, although today they are being reevaluated as such.<sup>28</sup> Israeli films promoted as “horror,” both domestically and internationally, began to appear only in the current decade. In addition to *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves*, as of this writing, such films include *Khatulim be-sirat pedalim* (*Cats in a Pedal Boat*; Yuval Mendelson and Nadav Hollander, 2011); *Basar tutakhim* (*Cannon Fodder*, 2013) and *Yeldei ha-stav* (*Children of the Fall*, 2016), both directed by Eitan Gafny; *Goldberg & Eisenberg* (Oren Carmi, 2013); *Ulam akher* (*Another World*; Eitan Reuven, 2014); *JeruZalem* (2015) and *The Golem* (2018), both directed by Doron Paz and Yoav Paz; *Mesuwag harig* (*Freakout*; Boaz Armoni, 2015); *Mishpakha* (*Family*; Veronica Kedar, 2017), *Ha-muadon le-sefrut yafa shel ha-geveret yankelova* (*Madam Yankelova's Fine Literature Club*; Guilhad Emilio Schenker, 2017), and *Mekulalim* (*The Damned*; Evgeny Ruman, 2018). Israeli horror production during this period also includes the television series *Hatzuia* (*Split*; HOT, 2009–2012) and *Juda—arpad yehudi* (*Juda—Jewish Vampire*; HOT, 2017), a children’s film *Abulele* (Jonathan Geva, 2015), and several short films, such as *Mur’alim* (*Poisoned*; Didi Lubetzky, 2011), as well as numerous student films. More films are in production or preproduction.

This horror cycle suggests that Israeli cinema is orienting itself toward more globally conscious audiences, both at home and abroad. What speaks to this new development is not only the number of films but also that the filmmakers producing them constitute a distinct community, united by their belonging to the same generation and arguably the same cultural milieu. Born between the late 1970s and early 1990s, most are men. They grew up in an era of home video and cable television, which was introduced in Israel in 1992, watching international genre films along with local productions. As Neta Alexander notes, this generation was influenced by offerings of commercial multi-channel television (and not by theater or literature, as previous generations), including “South Korean horror movies, Egyptian melodramas, European New Extremism films, and . . . American ‘Indiewood’ and horror film.”<sup>29</sup>

Israeli horror films enter new markets. General circulation networks for Israeli narrative films include film festivals, theatrical release in Israel, and, in the best case, limited release in the United States and Europe. New horror films appear in new circulation networks, such as international film festivals for genre films, new markets (e.g., *JeruZalem* was sold in the Philippines), and new channels of distribution. Compared to other Israeli films, horror films are more likely to be found streaming on Amazon, Netflix, and other international streaming services. It helps that several Israeli horror films also have English dialogue or are dubbed in English, which would have been unacceptable in the “Hebrew only” Israeli film industry of the past.<sup>30</sup>

28 See, e.g., Ido Rosen, “The Birth of Hebrew Horror,” *Rue Morgue* 122 (2012): 30–32; and Ido Rosen, “Shtikat Ha-tsabarim: Eikh Ve-madua Hefsik Ha-kolnoa Ha-israeli Lefakhd Mi-sirtei Ima,” *Pas Yatsira: Ktav Et Le-kolnoa Ve-televizia* 6 (2014): 37–55.

29 Neta Alexander, “A Body in Every Cellar: The ‘New Violence’ Movement in Israeli Cinema,” *Jewish Film and New Media* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 9.

30 This nonstigmatized use of English in Hebrew is comparable to Hinglish in contemporary Bollywood films, where it is no longer a marker of diminished (Hindu) Indianness but one of Indian global aspirations, as Rita Kothari argues in “English *Aajkal*: Hinglish in Hindi Cinema,” in *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish*, ed. Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011), 112–127.



**Rabies.** *Rabies*'s title is a metaphor for a societal violence that spreads like an infectious disease, affecting an unknown sociopath, a group of privileged twentysomethings, and representatives of Israeli institutions alike. "We wanted to make an entertaining film, like horror films that we grew up with, but we also wanted an additional value," the filmmakers explain. "We wanted to talk about the society that we know, that quickly turns to violence as a solution to the problem. And we felt that the symptoms of this society . . . correspond perfectly to the actual disease."<sup>31</sup> This disease is not represented literally, as in zombie films; in fact, no one on-screen gets bitten or infected with rabies. Instead, the film evokes the dangers of complicity in normalizing or ignoring everyday violence in today's Israel.

*Rabies* is a satirical reworking of several horror figures and tropes, including lone-wolf sociopath, deadly attraction, teenage sexuality, and hazardous woods. The film uses its genre-savvy humor to achieve a cynical critique of Israeli society: every institution is rotten, top to bottom. The film's opening sequence avoids the typical visual elements that establish a setting in Israel and instead begins with the disorienting image of a young woman, Tali (Liat Harlev), seen through a small rectangular hole in the ground. She is imprisoned inside an underground pit. She looks up to her brother, Ofer (Henry David), who kneels over the hole as they frantically contemplate ways to free her. The claustrophobic frame-within-a-frame device of this opening shot–reverse shot sequence is emphasized by symmetrical and frontal framing of the two siblings. They are tightly framed, so that the context of their surroundings is lost. The effect is disorienting, as is the later revelation that the siblings are lovers. The opening scene situates the film within the generic trappings of torture porn, such as the *Saw* franchise (James Wan and Leigh Whannell, 2004–2017), thus potentially disrupting expectations about Israeli cinema.

The film then shifts to a group of friends—Mikey (Ran Danker), Pini (Ofer Shechter), Adi (Ania Bukstein), and Shir (Yael Grobglas)—as they drive to a tennis match. In the car, they flirt and tease one another about virginity and sexuality, somewhat viciously, until they see a shadow and hear a thud when Mikey runs over Ofer, who had hurled himself into the middle of the road in an effort to gain their attention. Pini initially suspects that they have hit "a waiter," given Ofer's black trousers and white shirt. Dazed and confused, Ofer attempts to comprehend what has happened, asking them to confirm that they actually ran over him rather than stopping to help him. Pini responds sarcastically, "What gave us away?" Despite their unpromising introduction, Ofer convinces Mikey and Pini to go with him to rescue his sister. Adi and Shir wait with the damaged car and thus become potential victims for the unnamed sociopath (Yaron Motola) in military overalls who earlier on abducted Tali.

These scenes highlight disconnections between Israelis of ostensibly the same class and generation. The characters do not recognize one another as fellow citizens or members of a community and exhibit only suspicion and sarcasm. Unlike former generations of on-screen Israelis, whose Hebrew was either "native" or accented for comic relief, they speak English-inflected Hebrew. They thus appear outwardly oriented to a globalized

31 See *Hagiga le-einain: Sipuro shel ha-kolnoa ha-israeli* (*Hagiga: The Story of Israeli Cinema*; Channel One, IBA, 2015).

culture of defiant individualism but with nods to their Jewish Israeli identity. Pini wears a gold necklace with a Star of David pendant. In a scene when he is frightened, he even holds it while he prays, similar to how Catholic characters hold on to crucifixes in horror films produced in Christian-majority states. This image playfully subverts both the familiar horror convention and an Israeli cultural stereotype. In Israeli popular culture, wearing a Star of David pendant is associated with Mizrahi working-class nationalism, as exemplified by the character of a Moroccan thug in the musical *Kazablan* (Menahem Golan, 1973) and more recently by the popular Israeli rapper Subliminal.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to its sarcastic dialogue and teenage cast, the film's setting evokes paranoia about constant danger. The physical environment is literally full of traps. As Mikey, Pini, and Ofer search for Tali, Pini steps into a bear trap. Bears are not indigenous to Israel/Palestine, so the trap's presence is inexplicable other than as a playful reference to a cinematic trope reinforcing the theme of danger in the woods as in the reboot of *Friday the 13th* (Marcus Nispel, 2009). The scene suggests how satire is used to wink at audiences who recognize the genre codes and conventions. But even more than making allusions to previous horror movies, this prop indicates that woods are redolent with danger in ways that cannot be anticipated or explained.

Another set of characters is introduced around these young people to indicate that systemic violence cannot be blamed on lone wolves. The forest is protected and managed by a ranger, Menashe (Menashe Noy), who arrives at his ranger's shelter with his nonhuman partner, a German shepherd. Despite the suggestive breed, the dog is named ironically Buba ("Doll" in Hebrew), and instead of protecting Menashe, Buba is brutally murdered by the sociopath. Undermining our expectation from the film's title, the rabies infection will come not from the dog but from a violent human.

In addition to the park ranger, the story includes other representatives of the state. Police officers Danny (Lior Ashkenazi) and Yuval (Danny Geva) are introduced in a comedic exchange that undercuts their authority and credibility. They banter aimlessly while sitting in a patrol car that displays a dangling pine-tree deodorizer emblazoned with the design of the Israeli flag. As a reminder of the state, the deodorizer is cheap and, ultimately, disposable, conveying an ideological distance from the Zionist founders of Israel. The prop also suggests that the stench of contemporary Israeli society cannot be masked by patriotic symbols scented by perfume, and that it has been reduced to an empty emblem of a past that might have been remembered as more heroic than is warranted. The very foundation of the state of Israel is predicated on violent dispossession and genocide of indigenous Palestinians in the name of the survivors of dispossession and genocide in Europe. Israel is part of the cycle, not its solution.

The film's violence seems to originate with the sociopath, whose actions cannot be explained or rationalized, but the violence is a structural cycle that continues with interpersonal relationships for all characters. Their relationships are dysfunctional and move quickly from ordinary conflicts into extraordinary violence. Mikey and Pini get into a physical fight that ends with Mikey pummeling Pini until his face and pristine tennis outfit are bloody. Pini retaliates by bashing Mikey on the back of the head

32 Subliminal's right-wing politics were the subject of an Israeli documentary, *Arotzim shel za'am* (*Channels of Rage*; Anat Halachmi, 2003).

with a rock. The camera focuses on a deep and bloody wound on Mikey's head in close-up before he slowly collapses in a wide shot. Pini leaves him for dead. The scene suggests that there is no need for an external villain. *Rabies* conveys a society that has betrayed all of its collectivist aspirations for the most brutal articulations of individualist competition and aggressive masculinity. Departing from the characteristics of mythical Israeli masculinity, whether farmers or fighters, Mikey and Pini overcompensate for their somewhat effeminate ways—dapper clothing and fragile egos—with violence. Before Mikey and Pini fight with each other, they sexualize and objectify women. Their rivalry leads to murder, indicating moral bankruptcy. The generous use of bright red blood throughout these scenes is both horrifying and gratifying, as it visualizes the social violence that simmers under the surface of polite society.

The scene of Mikey and Pini fighting is also intercut with the stories of Danny and Yuval, who arrived to answer Adi and Shir's call for help. This plotline presents the film's most overt critique of abuses of violence within Israeli state institutions. Noticing damage to the car, Yuval is suspicious of Shir and Adi. He abuses his power, both as a man and as a police officer: he holds them at gunpoint while searching Shir's body, allegedly for weapons. He rubs his fingers under her skirt for much longer than necessary for purposes of security, taking sadistic pleasure in humiliating her and making Adi witness it. When Adi confronts him, he accuses her of lesbianism in a grotesque satire of bullying masculinity. The scenes with Yuval reflect the disproportionate use of violence in Israel—man against woman, police against civilian, and, of course, Israeli against Palestinian—which has become normalized under decades of antidemocratic policies in the name of national security. Yuval's psychological abuse of Shir and Adi basically repurposes the kinds of abuse that the state uses against Palestinians. But the women are not immune from the corrupting violence. Adi seizes a gun and shoots Yuval in the hand, severing the offending fingers. A dangerous game of hide-and-seek follows. The young women escape only after Adi impales Yuval on a stake. At first, they are distraught by the killing, but they quickly reason that it was “self-defense” and feel acquitted.

Shir even walks into the forest to urinate, and the camera turns to a warning sign about active land mines. The audience then is allowed to see in a wide shot that Shir had squatted in close proximity to a land mine. She returns unscathed, yet the film's cynicism explodes in a later scene. After Adi impales Yuval, they drag his corpse back to the car. This time Shir notices the warning sign about land mines. As she turns to alert her friend, Adi steps on a mine and is blown to bits along with Yuval's corpse. The sheer absurdity of the scene is cynically comical. The introduction of the land mines in a scene in which Shir squats with her underpants in plain view conveys the adolescent sense of humor that structures the film. Nevertheless, the representation of the minefield is both symbolic and political. The woods in *Rabies* are not only beset with danger; they are literally a minefield. The land itself, so venerated in the Zionist discourse, is polluted with violence. Historically, Israel used mines to prevent Palestinians from cultivating their land. A scene in Michel Khleifi's *Urs al-Jalil* (*Wedding in Galilee*, 1987) featuring land mines demonstrates the inadequacy of military action yet suggests a potential “basis of a shared nationalism, if circumstances were to allow it,” between Jewish Israelis and



Figure 1. Handcuffed to the steering wheel by his partner, Yuval, police officer Danny leaves a voicemail for his wife as a deodorizer emblazoned with the Israeli flag dangles in sight, in *Rabies* (United Channel Movies, 2010).

Palestinian citizens of Israel.<sup>33</sup> No such possibility is suggested in *Rabies*. In fact, Palestinians are completely absent, as are minority Jewish citizens.

*Rabies* explores how societal violence passes from one generation of privileged male citizens to the next. Yuval's abuse of the women is constantly interrupted by telephone calls from his father, who harasses him about a car that he clearly loves much more than his son. In another context, the theme of the annoying parent might offer pleasures of recognition—comical stereotypes of Jewish parents meddling in their adult children's lives—but in this context, Yuval's father seems compulsive and cruel. Moreover, Yuval continues to make efforts to appease his father even after he begins to bleed out from having been impaled by Adi. His speech is not punctuated by pregnant pauses as a rhetorical flourish; instead, he takes time to expectorate pools of blood accumulating in his mouth and enunciate his words. The scene suggests a profound misalignment of priorities: egos override survival, and being right is more important within Israeli patriarchy than being alive.

Yuval perpetuates this inherited cruelty in his violent treatment of both Adi and Shir, and also his partner, Danny, whom he handcuffs to their police car. Seemingly unconcerned by this gesture, Danny tries to salvage his relationship with his wife, obsessively leaving increasingly paranoid voicemails on their home answering machine (Figure 1). When she calls him, it is clear that she has not received his belligerent messages. The conversation turns flirtatious and sexually promising. Seeing an opportunity to reconcile, Danny abandons his responsibilities in order to erase the voicemails. Still handcuffed, he drives away until he encounters Shir on the road. Terrified, she shoots him with a gun pilfered from Yuval's corpse. Undeterred by gunshot wounds and determined not to miss the chance to expunge the record of his male fragility, Danny

33 Nadia G. Yaqub, "The Palestinian Cinematic Wedding," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 62.

opts to run over Shir with the police car. Danny leaves Shir's corpse in the middle of the road, ostensibly as "roadkill" to be discovered and dealt with by someone else, much as Pini did with Mikey's corpse after bashing in his skull with a rock. Eventually a wounded Danny breaks into his house but bleeds to death in his bathtub before he can erase the messages. Personal ego and libido thus overshadow any sense of morality and responsibility to community.

In contrast to police officers, the park ranger Menashe is well intentioned but ineffective. When earlier in the film he sees the sociopath running through the woods with Tali, he fires a tranquilizer gun. He hits the sociopath with a dart in the neck, but the sociopath is able to remove it and move to safety before falling unconscious. When Menashe finds Tali, unconscious after receiving a stray tranquilizer dart, he takes her back to his station. The hopeful note of Tali's rescue is undercut when Ofer arrives and mistakes Menashe for her kidnapper. He murders Menashe by whacking him on the skull with a big hammer without making any attempt to verify his suspicions. The film thus differentiates its critique of national institutions, for unlike the police, the park ranger does not fail in his duty. However, as an agent of the state, he fails to be recognized as such, so the result is the same: brutal violence. The agony of having struggled for hours to save his sister while enduring a gaping wound to his abdomen renders Ofer incapable of responding with anything other than violence. Presumably not trusting the Israeli judicial system to pardon the murder, despite the extraordinary circumstances, Ofer and Tali bury the evidence of the crime, Menashe's corpse, while his phone plays a cheery message from his girlfriend, informing him that she is pregnant. The words promising a new life—and a new generation of Israelis—are literally heard from the grave. This pessimism continues as Ofer himself dies later from his wounds, as Tali waits next to him for her own death in the hazardous smoke of a forest fire. They appear dirty, dazed, and defeated. Their clothes, hair, and skin are encrusted with dried sweat and blood. Theirs is the only relationship in the film that is determined by love. Yet, as siblings, their love is incestuous, a serious taboo not only in Judaism and Israel but also in most societies. Like other characters, they die unnatural, violent deaths. Unlike Hollywood slasher films, there is no moral implication to offer audiences a certain comfort in understanding violence.

Of the main characters, only virginal Pini survives, in a play on "the final girl" convention in Hollywood slashers.<sup>34</sup> He encounters a family on a car trip, who ask him for directions. He is covered in blood, but the family are socially incapable of expressing empathy or concern; instead, they make awkward small talk and bicker among themselves. Pini thus experiences the same unwillingness to help a stranger, who is clearly a fellow Israeli citizen, that he himself inflicted on Ofer in the opening scene. When the family eventually agree to offer him a ride, their concern is about their car's upholstery. But the family's car stalls, stuck in the same place as Mikey's car, suggesting the start of the new cycle of brutal violence. Pini might have survived, but he is not "out of the woods." The film allows for no viable solution to the rabies-like infection of a society. Moreover, the only actual villain—the unnamed sociopath—has slept peacefully

34 This term was developed by Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

throughout the bloody events after being shot with Menashe's tranquilizer dart. He awakens and leaves the woods during the end credits. When he fails to catch a ride while hitchhiking, his final words—"A country of assholes!"—summarize the film's overall critique of Israeli society. There is no justice in Israel and no happy ending. The sociopath is the only character to remain unscathed by the cyclical, senseless, and casual violence, the only one who stands a chance of getting away.

The film thus suggests that everything is broken: every institution corrupt or inefficient, every human relationship dysfunctional or perverted, and every love illicit. The film also satirizes elements of Zionist discourse. Veneration of nature is part of the Zionist narrative, along with an alleged historical connectedness to the land, appreciation of its beauty, and knowledge of its flora and fauna. In *Rabies*, however, the national park is not a repository of nationalist symbols and ideals but a forgotten minefield that hides peril at every step. Indeed, the shooting location in Ben Shemen Forest was a site of several Palestinian villages before 1948.<sup>35</sup> Burying this history is itself a political minefield.

The film indigenizes conventions from globalized horror to pull into focus a historical amnesia and acculturation to violence that is blurred into the background for most Israelis. By largely erasing Israeli particularities, the film pivots toward an international horror market, where films encourage audiences to think in universalizing terms of "genre" rather than particularizing terms of content and context. At the same time, *Rabies* also conveys a sense of the racial and ethnic segregation within contemporary Israeli society through absence. Absent from the screen are Palestinians, Arab Jews, Ethiopian and Russian immigrants, labor migrants, and asylum seekers. The state's professed *raison d'être* as a site for the reunification of the Jewish diaspora has been questioned in Israeli cinema and television for decades. If the *bourekas* films of the 1960s and 1970s offered narratives of racial and ethnic prejudice within Israel, *Rabies* depicts an Ashkenazi society that has no interactions whatsoever with its minorities. On-screen, the most privileged Israelis violently kill one another in a national park, an institution designed to promote the nation's health and recreation. The film represents a moment when Israeli filmmaking is no longer afraid to express, however cynically, its critique of structural violence, although it is yet unable to articulate an alternative.

**Big Bad Wolves.** Whereas *Rabies* completely erases any sense of racial and ethnic conflict between Israelis—not to mention the very existence of Palestinians—*Big Bad Wolves* shifts the very real geopolitics of self-destructive Israeli society into the realm of fairy tales evoked by the film's title. "For us, childhood essentially reflects a state of innocence and naïveté," explain Keshales and Papushado. "At the same time, the world to which we are born is saturated with violence and brutality. No matter what you do, you will always be exposed to violence. Every time violence breaks out, you soak it up like a passive smoker. You cannot escape it, and it informs your personality in myriad, mostly unrecognized, ways."<sup>36</sup> This disturbing proximity of childhood innocence and pervasive violence is a key theme in the film, pointing to how Israeli society can be infantilizing, particularly for adult male citizens.

35 Zochrot, "Khirbat Zakariyya," *Nakba Map* (2014), <https://zochrot.org/village/view?id=49152>.

36 Quoted in Alexander, "Body in Every Cellar," 4–5.

In focusing on everyday violence, *Big Bad Wolves* extends themes in *Rabies*—and even casts some of the same A-list actors—but centers specifically on crises of masculinity and fatherhood within middle-class Ashkenazi society in urban Israel. As in *Rabies*, the initial villain is a male sociopath, but he is given a name and occupation. Ironically, Dror (Rotem Keinan) is a schoolteacher of Bible studies, a field directly linked with moral values. He is cast to look like a stereotypical “Jewish sissy”: balding, mild mannered, and unathletic, with a pasty complexion and thick glasses. His clothing is unfashionable and unflattering. Dror feels like a failure as a father after his ex-wife denies him access to their daughter. He is emasculated, and it is presumably for this reason that he enacts violence against women, much like Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Dror sadistically abducts, tortures, and murders young girls, although it remains unclear until the very end of the film that he is responsible for the heinous crimes (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Dror offering a sedative-laced birthday cake to one of his young victims in *Big Bad Wolves* (United Channel Movies and United King Films, 2013).

The film opens enigmatically with an almost poetic prologue, filmed in slow motion, of young children playing games of hide-and-seek in an abandoned house. As the opening credits appear on-screen, a girl enters a wardrobe. When the boy opens it, he finds only a red shoe, which glimmers to evoke the red ballet slippers in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *The Red Shoes* (1948). Their film adapts Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale about a young Christian girl whose vanity compels her to wear red shoes to church. She is cursed to have them remain on her feet as she dances unceasingly until she is so exhausted that she elects to have her feet severed from her body. The red slippers also evoke the ruby ones in MGM’s *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) about a young girl from the economically and environmentally devastated US state of Kansas who is carried away by a tornado to a magical Land of Oz. Despite Kansas’s obvious disadvantages, she longs to return home. Eventually a witch explains that tapping the heels of her ruby slippers together will carry her home. In alluding to these films, the prologue of *Big Bad Wolves* evokes themes of children feeling abandoned or unprotected by responsible adults. Without protection, children make easy victims—a theme developed in the film, where adult Israelis are categorically irresponsible. Unlike the silent and poetic prologue accompanied by brooding music, which returns as a leitmotif in later scenes, the rest of the film features fast-paced adult



dialogue, both cynical and witty. It is saturated with irony and references to popular culture, so that even threats are linguistically playful.

The disturbing proximities of allegedly innocent childhood and violent adulthood structure the narrative as a scary fairy tale. The first scene following the prologue is a brutal police interrogation. Later scenes show police detectives Micki (Lior Ashkenazi) and Rami (Menashe Noy) in desolate woods, where they search for a kidnapped girl, a gruesome exercise that does not diminish Rami's appetite for a greasy hamburger. They follow a trail of gummy bears and gummy worms, a perverse reworking of the trail of bread crumbs left by Hansel and Gretel in the famous fairy tale about desperate parents who, unable to feed their children, leave them to die in the woods. The trail of candy leads the police to the body of the young girl, bound to a chair and beheaded. Her underpants have been pulled below her knees, suggesting sexual violation. The pink-and-white patterned fabric contrasts with the dark green and brown of the woods. The girl's pale white legs are marred with crusty and bloody wounds from being bound to the chair. Her father, Gidi (Tsahi Grad), arrives at the scene furious and tortured by guilt for his own unwitting role in his daughter's abduction and decapitation by not watching over her more closely.

Later in the film, Gidi acknowledges that his careless behavior allowed his daughter to be kidnapped. He neglected to collect her from school because he was too distracted while receiving a blow job from his secretary. After losing their daughter, his wife leaves him, much as Dror's wife has left him. Later, repeating Gidi's errors, Micki, distracted by his pursuit of the pedophile, neglects to collect his daughter from ballet class, allowing her to be abducted. The relationship between allegedly innocent childhood and protective adulthood further collapses in a scene that unfolds between Dror and his students. They taunt him by passing a note with a cartoon image of him murdering a young girl with an ax. Their small act of resistance, however, is part of a larger cycle of bullying and abuse. The students attempt to humiliate their teacher, knowing that they are themselves vulnerable in a society where their teacher of Bible studies is a rumored serial murderer.

If family and school are failing children, state security forces—the police and the army—also fail them. These institutions are portrayed as inherently corrupt. Like most Israelis, Gidi served in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Unlike earlier generations for whom combat was associated with heroism, Gidi served in “Lebanon,” an Israeli euphemism for several Israeli military attacks on members of Hezbollah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon.<sup>37</sup> Much like the imperial military failures of the United States in Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s, Israel's imperial military failures during the 1980s and 1990s mark a moment of the Israeli public's disillusionment with the national project. This is the army that Gidi represents. Even in his woolen cardigan, he is brutish. Like Dror, he is unattractive and balding, and he wears thick glasses.

37 The IDF collaborated with the Phalange, a right-wing Lebanese Christian (Maronite) party, which cast Palestinians as troublemakers. Among the war's most defining moments was the September 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps.

The film depicts the police as violent, senseless, and self-interested, evident in the first scene when police interrogate a suspect in an abandoned office building. They tie him to a chair, much like the murderer ties the young girls, and beat him. The visual repetition of techniques for ritualized torture retrospectively clues the audience to the film's implication of a militarized masculinity in the brutal murders of the young girls. The more senior detectives Micki and Rami watch as their junior colleagues attempt to coerce a confession from the suspect, but when Rami tries to interfere with their methods of "enhanced interrogation" (to borrow a right-wing US euphemism for torture), his attempt is deflected by the cops' cynical jokes. Micki then joins in the "interrogation" by hitting the subject.

This and later scenes show societal deterioration and corruption of moral norms. Older police demonstrate greater respect for legal rights and process, while younger police act like criminals. But even the senior leadership's values are repellant. When it is revealed that a young boy captured footage of the "interrogation" and leaked it online, the main concern of the police is "optics," that is, public image rather than evaluation of procedures or ethics. No one is concerned about the actual violation. To preserve appearances, Micki is suspended. From then on, he acts as a vigilante with an open disregard for police protocols. He chases and immobilizes Dror with a Taser gun, then takes him into the woods, ordering Dror to dig his own grave to extract a confession. Dror is saved only by Gidi's sudden appearance, who refashioned himself from mourning father to sadistic vigilante, ready to violate all laws to force Dror to confess where he has buried his daughter's severed head.

To enact his mission, Gidi takes both men back to his new house, acquired with that specific goal of torture in mind. Once in the house, Dror is bound to a chair in the basement, while Micki has no choice but become an accomplice. Micki asks: "Do you want to play bad cop, good cop?" Gidi answers: "There is no place for a good cop here." Dror is free to scream because he will not be heard outside. Gidi tested the house for soundproofing by asking a female realtor—the only on-screen adult female character—to scream in the basement while he went upstairs. Her voluntary screams prefigure Dror's involuntary ones. The realtor also participates in social violence, assuring Gidi that the house can be purchased at a good price because it is surrounded by "Arab villages," thus introducing the racial and ethnic prejudice that seeps into everyday transactions among middle-class Israelis. The location thus resonates with Gidi's "investigation," which includes forms of torture and humiliation generally reserved for Palestinian male youth. In some ways, Gidi's disregard for social order is necessitated by the incompetence of the police, but in other ways, like the pervasive violence in the film, it is arbitrary.

The film keeps circling back to its recurring motif of the disturbing proximities of allegedly innocent childhood and cynical adulthood. The scenes of Gidi outfitting his basement for torture are intercut with the shots of creepy celebration with a birthday cake that Dror arranges in his basement for a young girl in a pink ballet tutu. In the brutal later scenes, Gidi opens his "interrogation" by telling Dror the story of his crimes in the form of a fairy tale about a big bad wolf. To supplement this "children's story," he employs a tray of instruments for physical torture, which he and Micki use to take turns crushing Dror's fingers.

The torture, however, is interrupted by trivial distractions, thus prolonging the sadistic violence. As Gidi is about to break the bones in Dror's hands with a hammer, his mobile rings, and he takes a recess from torturing the pedophile-murderer to chat with his anxious Jewish mother. Not assuaged by Gidi's assurances that he is well, she dispatches his father, Yoram (played by legendary Israeli comic Dovale Glickman), to help their son. In another moment of imbricating ritualized violence with everyday minutiae, Gidi is about to extract Dror's toenails with pliers when he is interrupted by a kitchen timer reminding Dror to remove his cake from the oven. In sharp contrast to the subterranean world of torture in the cellar, the preceding scene of cake making in the sunlit kitchen upstairs is accompanied by the tune of "Everyday" (1957). The upbeat love song by US singer and songwriter Buddy Holly heightens the cynicism of the film's satire; it shows how lighthearted popular tunes can camouflage the brutality of military or social violence. Gidi appears to be in love with the act of torturing. His cake is laced with sedatives, replicating the methods of Dror's criminal drugging of young girls (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Gidi offering a slice of cake to Dror, in *Big Bad Wolves* (United Channel Movies and United King Films, 2013).

The brutality of torture escalates even further when Yoram arrives with chicken soup in hand. He swiftly joins the interrogation, offering to conduct a "fire test," something that he learned in the IDF. With his appearance, violence becomes a hobby through which father and son renew their familial bond, literally passing a blowtorch between generations. Gidi places the tool into Yoram's hand. Yoram lights it and burns a deep wound in Dror's chest, relishing the smell of burning flesh, which he says reminds him of the barbecued meat he's missed since his wife forced a vegetarian diet on him. Yoram's wistful comment suggests that society has become cannibalistic. Under torture, Dror falsely confesses to hiding the severed head of Gidi's daughter in a school greenhouse. Gidi leaves his father in charge as he goes to retrieve his daughter's head. While being nagged by his wife on the phone, Yoram eats a slice of cake to avoid taking medication on an empty stomach. Soon, he collapses under the influence of drugs. When Gidi returns without his daughter's severed head, he finds his father unconscious. The victimizer has become victimized. The film offers no means for its characters to escape this self-destructive social system.

Meanwhile Micki—whom Gidi had demoted from accomplice to hostage—escapes. He encounters a Palestinian (Kais Nashif) from the presumably dangerous “Arab villages” surrounding Gidi’s house. Of course, the true danger in the film is coming not from Palestinians but from the inside of core Israeli institutions, namely family, army, and police. In fact, the nameless Palestinian is the only nonviolent adult male in the film. Appearing like a romantic hero on a horse, he offers a good-natured voice of reason and a reality check to self-destructive Israeli society. He asks a visibly frightened Micki: “Why do you Jews always think we want to kill you?” When Micki asks him whether he has a mobile phone, he responds: “Why shouldn’t I? Because we are primitive?” “No,” deflects Micki, “it’s us who are primitive.” For Micki, the Palestinian represents a figure of nostalgia for a less violent moment among privileged Jewish Israelis, which notably did not involve less violence against Palestinians or other minorities.

Like the sociopath in *Rabies*, the cop expresses the position of the filmmakers. The insertion of a Palestinian man, wearing a tan jacket rather than sporting a kaffiyeh and brandishing a Kalashnikov, partly rescues his character from an exoticizing Israeli gaze. At the same time, it presents Palestinians—or “Arabs,” in Zionist parlance—as the Other, much like the “noble savage” in classical Hollywood westerns, which served not to represent Native America but to contain it in an irretrievable past. Like the noble savage, the noble Palestinian has no history or even a name. He barely has lines of dialogue. He serves to prompt some modicum of reflection on Israeli self-destruction while distracting critical attention from the destruction of Palestine, both by Israel since 1948 and by the Palestinian Authority after 1993. The figure thus offers a space for young liberal Israeli audiences to identify with Micki’s self-disparaging comment and feel good about themselves. Their politics, the film suggests, are not as violent as their parents’ or grandparents’, even though they continue to benefit from the material and political privileges of historical and contemporary violence.

Frustrated by the failure of his “investigation,” Gidi saws through Dror’s throat, using the same brutal method by which the girls’ heads were severed. In Dror’s last moments, Micki returns, having learned that his daughter disappeared, too, and makes a final attempt at questioning Dror. But Micki is too late, and the location of both abducted girl and severed head die with Dror. The camera rises to reveal his bloody corpse—and the three men standing around it—then floats away to the same brooding motif heard throughout the film. It travels through a narrow cellar hallway until it cuts to a shot of another basement, in Dror’s house. In the final scene, the cops search his house once more looking for his final victim, Micki’s daughter. They fail to find her, and she remains drugged and confined in a hidden chamber in Dror’s cellar. The film thus offers no resolution, except for the resolution of the ambiguity regarding Dror’s role in the crimes; indeed, he was the murderer. There is nothing left but the bound bodies concealed in the secret subterranean hideaways.

In the end, all systems and institutions fail. *Big Bad Wolves* is an indictment not only of the police but also of the cornerstone Israeli institution, the army. All of these hypermasculine men, so well trained in brutal interrogation tactics, fail to protect some of the most vulnerable members of society—young girls, their own daughters and granddaughters. It is a failure not only of repressive state institutions, such as the IDF and police, but also of ideological state institutions, such as school. If traditional

macho masculinity is doomed, a seemingly gentler masculinity, as represented by Dror, is equally toxic. Micki seems potentially redeemable, but he is ultimately ineffectual. The satire frames Israel as a society of violent but ineffectual men who fail their wives, mothers, and daughters. Significantly, there are rarely women on-screen. They are present through voices on the phone, as unhappy wives or nagging mothers. In other words, the family fails, too. In this way, the film conveys a very bleak collapse of Israeli society and its institutions, which are rotting from the inside. The only “outsider” in the film, the Palestinian horseman, does not signify a struggle for equal rights for Palestinians, much less one to end the occupation. Instead, he asks the Israeli audiences to rethink their assumptions, to recognize that they are a self-destructive society and violent state.

**The Ambivalent Critique of Horror-Satires.** The legacy of multiple traumas and the state’s ambivalent position as victim and victimizer, colonized and colonizer, loom large in Israeli culture. In the contemporary context of Israel’s liberalized economics and militarized society, such ambivalence is negotiated most in these horror-satires. Young Israeli filmmakers and audiences turn to horror to explore anxieties and uncertainties through antirealist stories in which everyone is a potential victim of social and political structures. These films focus on the most privileged class of Israeli Jews, those who go about their lives with the general assurance that the state protects them. The horror is that they do not fall victim to an “Arab” suicide bomber but to a fellow Israeli citizen, perhaps even a member of a national institution, such as the army or police. The arbitrariness of policies of exclusion and inclusion, segregation and integration, full and partial access to rights, and myriad other inequities within a so-called democratic polity emerge as social satire in these horror stories of sociopathic violence. Everyone is a potential victim and victimizer because everyone participates in an oppressive system. Further, these films circulate in capitalist free markets, where cynicism generates profit and the particularities of Israeli politics are reduced to a consumable style.

In her analysis of Palestinian films—including Elia Suleiman’s *Yādon ilaheyya* (*Divine Intervention*, 2002), with its flying-ninja Palestinian woman warrior and apricot-pit grenade—Najat Rahman questions whether humor can overcome “deadening political realities” and offers what Hamid Dabashi terms “emancipatory aesthetic solutions to otherwise debilitating political dead-ends.”<sup>38</sup> Similar question may be asked of Israeli films, including horror-satires. In both *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves*, horror and satire primarily emerge from within characteristically Israeli institutions that represent core national values, including collectivism, solidarity, ideals of the “New Jew,” and commitment to the land, among other Zionist ideals. In some ways, *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves* are akin to Palestinian cinema in offering a kind of humor that conveys what Rahman calls “certain death,” the “violence that delivers it,” and “deadening daily routines of oppression.”<sup>39</sup> In these films, the systemic violence of the Israeli state makes life now

38 Najat Rahman, “Humor, Loss, and the Possibility for Politics in Recent Palestinian Cinema,” in *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema*, 32; Hamid Dabashi, “In Praise of Frivolity: On the Cinema of Elia Suleiman,” in *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema* (London: Verso, 2006), 144.

39 Rahman, “Humor, Loss,” 32.

as perilous for the state's model citizens as it has traditionally made life for Palestinians, both within Israel and under the occupation.

The films not only satirize Israeli ideals; they do so through the idiom of horror, by drawing on, recombining, and localizing transnational horror conventions, figures, and tropes. *Rabies* features an isolated sociopath, predatory men, sexualized women, cars that fail to start, and deep woods that hide traps and explosives, all transposed to Israeli soil. Keshales and Papushado deploy horror not in the service of detached entertainment—in the sense of unbelievable characters and situations—but as an ambivalent and cynical mode of critique of Israeli society: every institution and character is corrupt and potentially dangerous. Innocence is possible only relative to someone else's more overt complicity. *Big Bad Wolves* anchors a similar social critique to ostensibly rational causes for irrational behaviors of individuals. Violence simmers below the surface of everyday interactions within any framework, be it family or institution. But the revenge against the murderer backfires, suggesting that Israeli society is self-destructive and unhinged. Both films offer oblique critiques of the right-wing movement of Israeli politics, showing how even the most privileged citizens cannot be protected. In many ways, the recent cycle of Israeli horror-satire films suggests an ambivalent response to the increased normalization of state and social violence under the banner of national security.

The films' depictions of Israeli society largely erase Israel's racial and ethnic diversity. The characters are almost entirely native-born Israelis, presumably Ashkenazi. By reducing Israel/Palestine to a middle-class, heterosexual Ashkenazi society, the films pose an implicit critique of corrosive notions of purity within a self-proclaimed Jewish state. There are no traces of the heroic visions of a "melting pot" or in a more recent period, slogans of "multiculturalism." *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves* question the foundational values of Israeli society. They unsettle a social order that is not restored, but their exaggeration and comedy also create distance from this criticism. In fact, rather than convey national narratives—whether heroic or revisionist—horror-satires rely on affect, ambivalence, and irresolution to convey the nightmares of a nation. They elicit complex and unresolved responses from audiences who cannot identify or easily align themselves with recognizable heroes or villains. The films suggest ongoing tensions that cannot be reduced to ethnic or religious conflicts but need to be recognized as functions of military and political systems. They reject narrative closure, not so much to enable possible sequels but to convey a sense that some stories cannot be fully understood. In that sense, *Rabies* and *Big Bad Wolves* draw on conventions popularized by filmmakers of Hollywood's 1990s video-store generation, like Quentin Tarantino, whose films are politically ambivalent, yet financially savvy. Tarantino's appropriation of styles and conventions from Asian "extreme" cinema, for example, is simultaneously culturally offensive and yet productive in parodying Hollywood's own offensive representations of East Asian cultures. The social critique in such films is ambivalent. Similarly, Keshales and Papushado's choices reflect market trends as much as political commitments. Their filmmaking is guided by citation and appropriation to emphasize self-contained self-reflectivity rather than an opening to political debates.

On one level, the new horror-satires of Israeli society suggest a moment of social maturity when filmmakers target the state's foundational values and contemporary

legacies. The films situate Israel on par with the United States, where films by Tarantino and others satirize treasured institutions, though often with some degree of ambivalence. At the same time, the Israeli horror-satires are complicit with fairly conservative discourses, which are not unique to Israel. The liberal right-wing drift of politics in so-called democracies over the past few decades—particularly the flirtation with extremist positions through the Likud Party in Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu, the Bharatiya Janata Party (widely known as BJP) in India under Narendra Modi, and recently the Republican Party in the United States under former reality-television star Donald Trump—suggests a climate of uncertainty in which horror-satire might perform a kind of social and cultural analysis. It is not by chance, then, that the films' biting social critique can find expression only through cynicism and gore, particularly for a new generation who stand to inherit the violence organized by the most conservative members of the postwar generation. The proliferation of these new Israeli horrors suggests the magnitude of the failure of past generations to voice political dissent through film. If the *bourekas* allowed the most privileged Israelis to laugh at themselves and shortcomings of the Zionist-nationalist project, then these horror-satires leave them terrified by what has transpired over the past four decades. \*