Was October 7 Predicted in Israeli Horror Movies?

Israeli horror films 'can foresee something that political analysts can't,' says Olga Gershenson, author of the book 'New Israeli Horror: Local Cinema, Global Genre.' It is not about who the enemy is, she tells Haaretz, but 'about not wanting to take the enemy seriously or not wanting to think about it'

Horror TV show 'Juda.' 'Some kind of cultural force speaks through' creators. Credit: From the TV show 'Juda,' courtesy of HOT

Adrian Hennigan
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By her own admission, Olga Gershenson should have been the last person in the world to write a book about Israeli horror films.

She was born in the then-Soviet Union in 1969 and spent her formative years in Israel – two countries with no real tradition of horror (in movie theaters at least). Yet a chance viewing of an Israeli film called "Poisoned" at the 2015 Toronto Jewish Film Festival set her on a quest, in the best horror tradition, to devour everything in her path.

As she writes in her richly entertaining and informative book "New Israeli Horror: Local Cinema, Global Genre" – about Israeli horror films, but equally her own life – "psycho-killers, zombies, vampires, ghosts and other monsters entered the frame."

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The Israeli film producer fighting October 7 deniers with raw footage

So, while until then she had only seen the genre classics like Kubrick's "The Shining" or Polanski's "Rosemary's Baby," now she was cueing up Israeli horror movies like "Rabies" and "Big Bad Wolves" by Aharon Keshales and Navot Papushado, "Cannon Fodder" and "Children of the Fall" by Eitan Gafny, and "JeruZalem" and "The Golem" by brothers Yoav and Doron Paz.

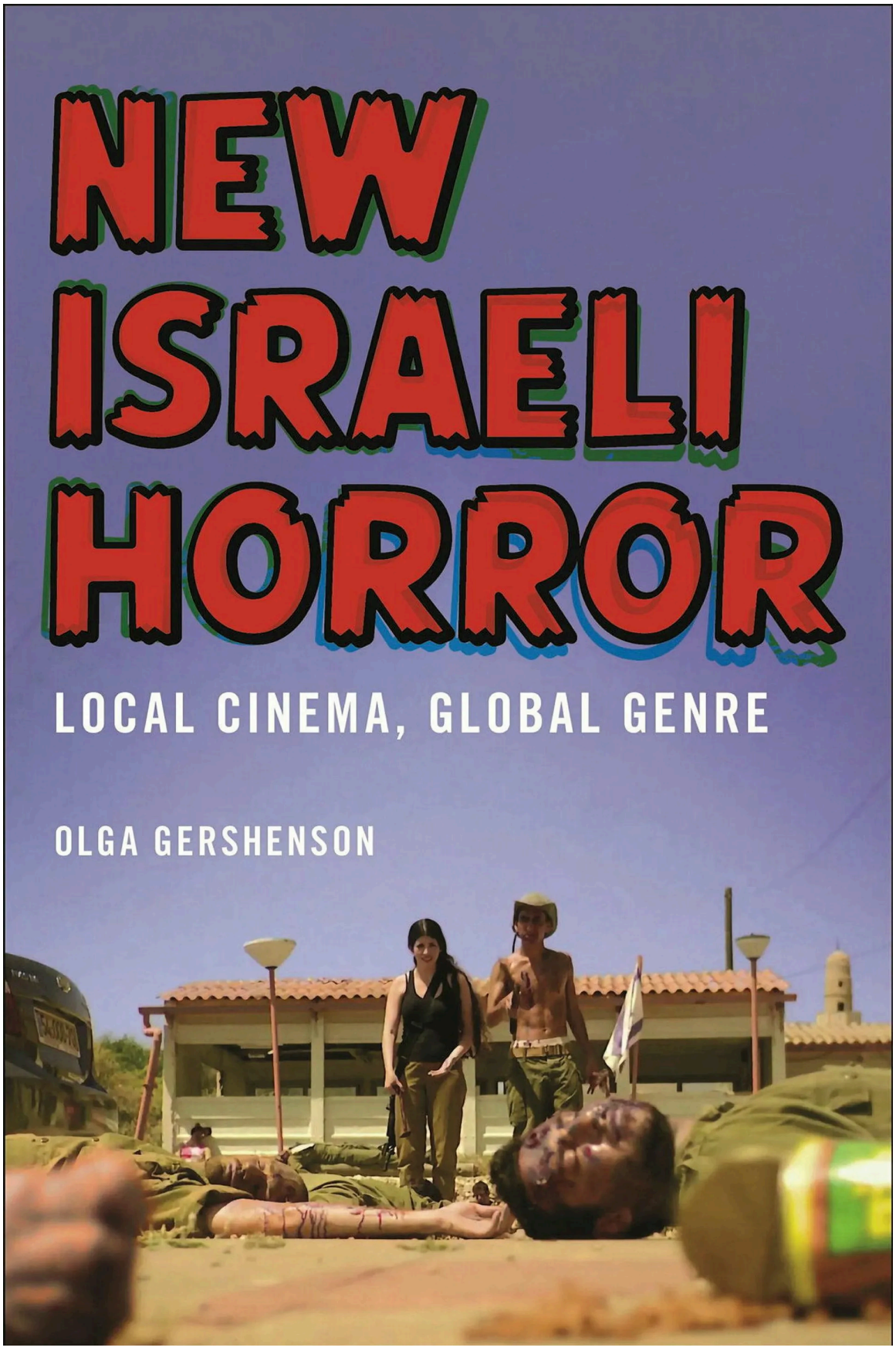
And before you could say "Behind you!" or "I'll be right back," she was writing a deeply researched analysis of the rise (and fall?) of Israeli horror and even introducing the movies in her courses at UMass Amherst, in particular for a class called "Cinema Paranoia."

“Big Bad Wolves” directors Aharon Keshales (left) and Navot Papushado (right), flanking actor Lior Ashkenazi.

"New Israeli Horror" was published last November and contains an acknowledgement from Gershenson that as she was writing the book, "real-life events made horror films seem juvenile in comparison." Although at the time of the writing she was actually referring to the COVID pandemic, climate crisis and threats to democracy, if it weren't for publishing deadlines she could just as easily have been talking about October 7 and its aftermath – which hovers like a specter over the entire book.

Olga Gershenson. Local traumas do make it onto our screens, one way or another.
Credit: Danny Prussmann

Indeed, as she herself notes, the book cover showing dead soldiers on an Israeli army base in the south, from the 2011 film "Poisoned" could have been taken on October 7 – which she doesn't see as a coincidence.



Not a coincidence that the image on the book cover could have been taken on October 7. Credit: Photographer: David Michael Shahar, from the film 'Poisoned' / Rutgers University Press

"Filmmakers are artists, they do their own thing – but then some kind of cultural force speaks through them," she says in a video interview from her Manhattan home. As she sees it, the first group of Israeli horror directors, who began emerging in the late aughts, were looking to make movies that went against the local tradition of films about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and family dramas – those critically lauded, "shooting and crying" films such as "Lebanon," "Waltz with Bashir" and "Beaufort" that proved catnip for international festivals.

It was a case of "enough with the 'shooting and crying,' onto 'slashing and laughing,'" she recalls one filmmaker telling her. Another said they wanted "to make the movies that we actually love to watch – you know, with popcorn and Coca-Cola."

Yet while the motivation may have been to react against classic Israeli cinema, Gershenson believes these young filmmakers somehow captured something far beyond the fantastical. "When I look at their films, I see that in many ways these films predicted this cultural moment. The Israeli horror film came to be reality, basically," she declares.

She references 20th-century German sociologist and cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer, who observed how horror films made in the Weimar Republic could in retrospect be seen to predict the rise of Hitler, Nazism and the Holocaust. For her, something similar happened with this wave of Israeli movies in the 2010s.

"JeruZalem" by brothers Yoav and Doron Paz. 'When people think about something like Jewish film, they oftentimes think about things like "Fiddler on the Roof" and "Yentl."' Credit: From the film 'Jerusalem.'

"I think the artists can foresee something that political analysts can't," she says. "Another thing is that all of these films – even though the intention of the filmmakers is just to create something fun with rivers of blood, drawing from their favorite [foreign] movies – when I watch them, I'm like, 'You're being profoundly critical of Israel, specifically of the Israeli military.' To me that's amazing."

As a formative experience for so many Jewish and Druze Israelis, it is perhaps unsurprising that the military looms so large in Israeli horror films – and, indeed, Israeli cinema, period. But the genre has other unique tropes too – such as drawing on ancient Judaic texts, and locations such as kibbutzim and nature parks. Oh, and one other thing.

"The really interesting thing is that most of these films are set under bright sunlight. This is a strange trope, because most of the time it's easier to create horror at night: Darkness is a natural avenue for horror. But I think Israel has the most

number of sunny days in the world, or something like that, so that's why the beach is another kind of iconic Israeli location."

Five must-see Israeli horror films, according to Olga Gershenson

'Frozen Days' (2005) A harbinger of Israeli horror, noirish psychological thriller 'Frozen Days' presents a piercing evocation of trauma in the aftermath of a terror attack, making it very relevant to the present.

'Rabies' (2010) 'Rabies' has been heralded as the first Israeli horror film. With a star-studded cast, dark humor and plenty of winks for genre lovers, it's a great introduction to the entire cycle.

'Poisoned' (2011) 'Poisoned' is a charming zom-rom-com (zombie romantic comedy) set at a military base – a uniquely Israeli setting for a horror film.

'Big Bad Wolves' (2013) A sharp satire of Israeli masculinity and nationalism, 'Big Bad Wolves' blends horror and thriller for a wild ride that Quentin Tarantino called the best film of 2013.

'The Damned' (2018) Three IDF soldiers lost in the desert are haunted by the specter of violence committed during the 1948 Nakba in this intense psychological horror.

Gershenson also points to another unique element in Israeli horror: the choice of antagonist.

"When I tell people about Israeli horror films, they think the horror comes from some kind of enemy combatant – Palestinians, Nazis, whatever. Yet if you look at these films, there is none of that. You would never guess from these films that Israel has some kind of enemy on a global scale. It's just us

Israelis, focused, as they say in Hebrew, on our *pupic,"* aka navel gazing.

"It's interesting that the source of horror in all these films is from us. Even in the 2013 film 'Cannon Fodder,' which features a zombie invasion of Lebanon where eventually the zombies come to Israel – you'd think maybe that's a metaphor for the Israel-Lebanon war. But actually it's not, because what precipitates this war is a corrupt Israeli general who rushes some kind of chemical weapon that causes the zombie disease."

She believes the films warn us of the kind of Israeli denialism that helped lead to October 7, especially the arrogance of ignoring intelligence warnings predicting a Hamas attack. "There's this element of we either don't want to take the enemy seriously or we don't want to think about it," Gershenson notes. "That's something these films told us about before we faced this tragic reality."

Palestinians transport a captured Israeli civilian, center, from Kfar Azza into the Gaza Strip on Saturday, Oct. 7, 2023. Credit: Hatem Ali/AP

In the book, the author asks whether there is such a thing as "I-Horror" – or "Hummus House of Horror," as only I appear to be calling it – in the same way there is J-Horror from Japan ("Ringu," "Dark Water" and many others) and K-Horror from Korea ("A Tale of Two Sisters," "Phone," etc.). "This remains to be seen," she writes. "The future of New Israeli Horror will depend on several factors, ranging from institutional support to the vagaries of popular success." Plus, she adds in our interview, the country's potential (existing?) pariah status in the cultural sphere.

What's clear, though, is that with the exception of a Spanish remake of "Big Bad Wolves," no international producers have been queuing up to remake Israeli horror movies in the same

way they have domestic television shows – perhaps because of that focus on the local rather than the universal. That in itself has led to a new trend in Israel, she points out.

"After 2020, the Israeli horror films kind of slowed down a little, but there is now excellent horror on television. There's 'Juda,' which is extremely successful and streamed [in America] on Hulu. And then there's 'Malach Mash'hit,' which is usually translated as 'Malevolent Bride,' which is a series set in the Haredi community – and that's excellent, so good. It's horror, but in [the ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem neighborhood of] Mea She'arim. Very cleverly done with a uniquely Jewish demon as the source of the horror. So, the films slowed down, but the films kind of legitimated the genre as something that could be done for mainstream television."

'Juda.' Excellent horror on television. Credit: From 'Juda' courtesy of HOT

We discuss how, historically, Israeli cinemagoers had little interest in the genre, with the horror movie only acquiring a Hebrew term ("*seret eima*") as late as the 1980s. And despite a growing interest in overseas horror here, triggered initially by the birth of the VHS market and movies like Wes Craven's "Nightmare on Elm Street" in 1984, there has never been a local box office hit.

I ask Gershenson if the fact Israelis only need to switch on their TVs to see the daily horrors of local life – terror attacks, brutal wars, Itamar Ben-Gvir's sneering face – might somehow make them averse to choosing to "switch off" with a horror film at their local multiplex. She is unconvinced. "We can speculate, but I would be careful to make a statement like that because I can't prove it."

What she does know is that local traumas do make it onto our screens, one way or another. "For instance, the Vietnam War was a horror that was unfolding not on U.S. soil but in a different country, but the horror movies really responded to that," she says. "There is this theory in film studies that the horror actually emerges to reflect the national anxieties and national concerns" – which might bring us back to that denial she mentioned earlier.

'Malevolent Bride,' an Israeli series set in the ultra-Orthodox community. Credit: Courtesy of Kan 11 / Anani Studio / A+E Studio

The academic cites an article in Haaretz Hebrew from earlier this year in which a cinephile called Shani Kiniso, who locked himself in his safe room on Kibbutz Be'eri and somehow managed to survive the Hamas massacre happening all around him, "wrote this sort of manifesto calling for Israeli filmmakers to find new means to speak to the horror and trauma of October 7. And he calls, among other things, for horror films to address it – because this is the idiom to portray the magnitude of this awful event."

Gershenson adds that while it is "clear Israeli cinema will respond to October 7, it will be interesting to see whether some of it will rely on elements of horror."

Her late-stage love of horror will also be noticeable in her next project: a "Handbook of Judaism and Film" that she is currently editing for Oxford University Press. "I commissioned new research that deals with Jewish and Israeli horror – like, for instance, there is a chapter on 'Juda' and 'Malevolent Bride.' There's also a chapter on Jewish horror in general, where the

author goes from 'The Golem' and 'Dybbuk' up to contemporary iterations of it – 'Dybbuk' has been remade most recently in India and Denmark," she says.

"Usually," she adds, "when people think about something like Jewish film, they oftentimes think about things like 'Fiddler on the Roof and 'Yentl.' So I thought: Okay, we need to update that a little."

"New Israeli Horror: Local Cinema, Global Genre" is out now, published by Rutgers University Press.

Screenshot from 'JeruZalem.' Credit: Rotem Yaron

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