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BOOK REVIEW

New Israeli Horror: Local Cinema, Global Genre

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Professor Gershenson's book on the unprecedented and unexpected emergence of Israeli horror films in 2010 displays her impressive knowledge of world cinema as well as her intimate familiarity with the unique culture and economics of the Israeli film industry. Throughout the text, she identifies a wide range of international films as influences on Israeli cinema and hardly limits those films to horror genre. She develops an innovative system of adaptation, which can be summed up as "conversion, subversion, aversion, and inversion."

Horror film fans will be surprised to learn that the horror genre did not exist in Israel until 2010 and will undoubtedly wonder why a genre that is so commercially successful in other cultures was essentially absent in Israel prior to this turning point, while specifically Jewish horror stories have remained alive for centuries without being fossilized into history. In discussing (relatively) contemporary Israeli films, the author elaborates on Jewish tales about the *Dybbuk* or the Golem, and their recurring retelling. Those stories predated before the establishment of the modern State of Israel and existed long before Hebrew, the language of the holy texts, was adopted as the *lingua franca* of Israelis.

She reminds readers of an *X-Files* television episode about unsettled parasitic souls known as *dybbuks*, and she alludes to German silent film classics about *The Golem*, by Paul Wegener and Henrik Galeen, which were made, remade, and sometimes lost. However, she circumvents discussions of famed Yiddish film versions of *The Dybbuk* or *The Vow*, which were made in pre-Holocaust Europe. This omission possibly reflects the fact that Israeli culture marginalizes Yiddish, the everyday European language of the Diaspora, which nearly disappeared when most of the world's Yiddish speakers died under Hitler's hands. Instead, Israel valorizes the ancient yet revitalized Hebrew, which is today's official language.

Rather than attributing this rise in horror film production (however modest it was) to reigning cultural or political factors, the author explains the profound role played by economic factors related to government control, which provided public subsidies for more "worthy" genres. The horror genre film was not deemed deserving of official support—until a few seat-of-the-pants films by guerrilla filmmakers won international awards. To support her emphasis on financial factors, she tells us how many movie tickets were sold for horror films screened in Israel and compares their paltry ticket sales to the increasing international recognition over time.

The author identifies specific sociological events that catalyzed the sudden rise (and subsequent fall) of Israeli horror film production in the second decade of the twenty-first century. She credits the camaraderie forged among some horror-loving Tel Aviv University film students who organized a club called "Hamorotheque," a term that translates as "donkey" or "ass." Global horror film festivals also encouraged more underfinanced independent productions. We are provided with an intimate view of the lives of prominent participants in this group.

The book begins with examples of films that we in America call slashers, a genre that appeared in the late 1970s, shortly before the emergence of the AIDS epidemic. American slashers theoretically gained momentum because they linked sex with death, paralleling the outcome of the deadly sex-spread disease that ensured fatal outcomes in that decade.

Parallels between the stereotypical summer camp setting of *Friday the 13th* and the bucolic and communal kibbutz

settings—or, alternatively, the confined army barracks backgrounds—both of which are popular backdrops for Israeli horror films, are immediately evident. Adding such iconic Israeli institutions regionalizes the films and makes this global genre "Israeli." Moreover, as per Gershonson, the mostly male participants in the military movies remind spectators that it is more important to "man up" than to "defeat the monster."

Professor Gershenson offers many intriguing factoids about Israeli films and compares their region-specific adaptations to approaches used by Indonesian horror or "K-horror" from Korea. She links a film about cannibalism—*Madam Yankelova's Fine Literature Club* (2017)—to a remarkably similar short story by Israeli Nobel Laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Films made specifically for ultra-orthodox Jewish women are another uniquely Israeli film genre. Although female-centric, some such films were made by male filmmakers who later turned to horror films.

She also alludes to the immensely popular but eventually outlawed "stalag" fiction that emerged around the time of the 1961 Eichmann trial, when the horrors of the holocaust were brought to public attention by televising and translating the proceedings. Those tales typically featured female SS officers overpowering helpless male victims—until the victims turn the tables on their tormentors and then rape, torture, and even murder these uniformed women. Those transgressive titles inspired psychological and sociological interpretations, with scholars positing this off-putting subject matter appealed to audiences because it allowed readers to reinterpret the very realistic horrors of the Holocaust and harness those traumatic memories by turning them into sexualized fantasies. It would be nice if an equally succinct explanation for I-horror were available, but it is not.

Devoted horror film fans, regardless of their countries of origin, will likely appreciate this book. Those who study the horror genre and film in general will admire the detailed scholarship that underlies the text. Readers with a broader knowledge of Israeli film history may benefit the most from this book because they can contextualize this emergent movement and compare this genre to other uniquely Israeli film styles, such as the beloved and often comedic but equally short-lived "bourekas," which focus on culture clashes between "nerdy" Ashkenazi (European) and the more physical Mizrachi (North African/Middle Eastern) Israeli immigrants. Those with a less expansive knowledge of Israeli film history might be encouraged to learn more about other Israeli productions, to better understand how and why this genre contrasts with better accepted styles in the country.