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Gershenson (review)

Rebecca Margolis

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# *New Israeli Horror*

## *Local Cinema, Global Genre*

By Olga Gershenson. Rutgers University Press, 2023. 234 pages.

THE HISTORY OF ISRAELI CINEMA HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF NUMEROUS STUDIES interrogating its history, ideological functions, shifting representations of gender and other markers, and movie tropes. Cinema has been foundational to the molding of Israeli identity since before the creation of the State, with movie narratives and cinematic styles both expressing and forging the nation. The evolution of the cinema has been shaped by public funding agencies and a national ethos, arguably as much or more than the artistic visions of filmmakers or popular movie trends. Within a cinema historically oriented toward realist narratives relating to war or occupation, the decade after 2010 marked the appearance of a new cycle of films featuring zombies, the supernatural, and other features of the horror genre. Olga Gershenson's *New Israeli Horror: Local Cinema, Global Genre* marks a significant contribution to the scholarship on Israeli cinema as well as to the horror genre. It does so by examining this new cycle of films through the lens of a unifying theoretical model in conjunction with analysis of the films, the perspectives of the filmmakers derived through interview, and reception history. A companion website includes trailers or short clips from the films as well as guiding discussion questions that can be used for teaching purposes.

Gershenson's coinage of "new Israeli horror" refers to a dozen movies released in the 2010s by a cohort of filmmakers with similar characteristics—male, young (born mid-1970s to 1980s), trained in film at Tel Aviv University, influenced by genre films—who simultaneously released "guerilla-style independent productions" (25) that adapted the horror genre to local contexts. Her introduction deftly lays out her adaptation model: "How do filmmakers adapt horror conventions to local settings? Here, I suggest a model of adaptation based on how the filmmakers combine global horror tropes—character types, narrative conceits, and formal characteristics—with local cultural signifiers, creating a diegetic world corresponding with recognizable

Israeli institutions and characteristics” (11). She proposes four permutations, of which three are employed by Israeli filmmakers in the New Israeli Horror cycle:

1. Conversation: combining horror genre conventions with the local setting
2. Subversion: the disruption of both genre conventions and local settings
3. Aversion: horror conventions outside of the local setting
4. Inversion: horror conventions are disrupted within a local setting (not used)

Israel’s collectivist society, where movies are popularly attended in families or friend groups, offers a limited market for horror. Further, as a “cinema of social consensus,” Israeli films have preferred a model of “shooting and crying” rather than the “slashing and laughing” horror films that offer a critique of the country’s core institutions, whether intentional or not (13). Gershenson considers the factors behind the sudden appearance of a cycle of Israeli horror films where previously there were none. These include changes to technology (cable and streaming); social factors, notably the Tel Aviv University Hamorothèque film club; and State and private funding opportunities. Gershenson proposes precursors to New Israeli Horror in films released in the 1970s by one-off nonprofessional filmmakers who struggled to actualize their visions. Although these works received a negative initial reception, they nevertheless evince the guerrilla filmmaking techniques characteristic of the New Israeli Horror cycle.

Gershenson divides her analysis of the New Israeli Horror cycle into three main sections in line with her model: subversion, conversation, and aversion. Her discussions of between one and four films in each chapter encompass the development, production, and reception of each film; the perspectives of the filmmakers; and analysis of motifs, tropes, and themes in relation to both the Israeli setting and the global horror genre. A fascinating early example of “Hebraizing the Horror” is the iconic Israeli trope of horror located under a bright Israeli sun, an incongruity that emerged during the production of an early films in the New Israeli Horror cycle (*Rabies*, dir. Aharon Keshales, Navot Papushado, 2007). While originating due to budgetary constraints (filming during the day was less expensive than filming at night, when most horror movies are set), the trope altered the strategies for evoking fear and evinced lasting influence (39). The book compares multiple films around core themes: “Horror in the IDF,” examines *Poisoned*, *Cannon Fodder*, *Freak Out*, and *The Damned*, while “Escaping Israel” deals with *Another World*, *Madam Yankelova’s Fine Literature Club*, and *The Golem* as films marketed for general audiences, but which still address specifically Israeli issues.

Gershenson’s scope extends beyond her immediate subject. She writes in her closing chapter, “I developed a model of adaptation based on the way global film tropes

interact with local cultural signifiers. This adaptation model allows us to see the pattern of so-called glocalization, the simultaneous universalizing and particularizing forces in contemporary cultural production, which I hope can be useful beyond *New Israeli Horror*" (177). Indeed, Gershenson's adaptation framework offers a productive framework through which to read other bodies of non-Hollywood horror films where the local and global intersect. For example, I employed her model in my own recent study of an international cycle of twenty-first-century horror films with Yiddish dialogue. It will be interesting to see how her model is applied to other national or minority cinemas as a way of underscoring its broader reach.

The cycle of films that Gershenson terms "New Israeli Horror" now appear as a closed unit, bracketed by 2010 and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2019, when production ceased and the filmmakers turned to other kinds of projects. Gershenson's final chapter, "Coda: Is There I-Horror?" explores how or whether I-horror constitutes its own genre as well as its potential influences. While it was published before October 7, it is impossible to avoid reading *New Israeli Horror* through its shadow and the catastrophic scale of violence and human suffering. It would have been impossible to envision the massive upheaval to every aspect of Israeli life and the extreme scale of the militaristic and social conflicts, which formed a dominant theme in the cycle of Israeli horror films from the 2010s. Given the prominence of the critique of societal violence and the Israeli army within the New Israeli horror, I imagine that next chapter of filmmaking in the horror genre will yield its own set of tropes.

## CONTRIBUTOR

Rebecca Margolis is the Pratt Foundation Chair of Jewish Civilisation at Monash University, Australia. Her scholarship focuses on Yiddish linguistic continuity and cultural production to include education, publication, performance, and cinema. She is the author of *Jewish Roots, Canadian Soil: Yiddish Culture in Montreal, 1905–1945*, *Yiddish Lives On: Strategies of Language Transmission*, and *The Yiddish Supernatural on Screen: Dybbuks, Demons and a Haunted Jewish Past*. Her current project investigates how and why Yiddish in American film and television is heard as funny.