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BOOK REVIEW

New Israeli Horror: Local Cinema, Global Genre, by Olga Gershenson, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2024, 220 pp., $150 (hard-cover), ISBN: 9781978837850, $37.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9781978837843, $37.95 (pdf), ISBN: 9781978837874

Discourses around world cinema(s) are as monumental and variegated as the cinemas that make it; they are replete with contrasting contextualisations—vis-à-vis culture, politics, technology, creativity, folklore, amongst a plethora of other factors—and thereby connotatively polysemic. The broadness of this discourse usually complicates any critical attempt to review any example from this humongous bracket, besides some already-globalised examples as Japanese, Iranian, or Korean cinema, that have successfully tapped into the mainstream imaginations of the global public. Unfortunately, this global sense of popularity is yet to be achieved by a gamut of minor cinemas across the world, but which concurrently impacts the public's understandings of their systems of production and reception. This is predominantly informed by a lack of information and academic curiosity about these purportedly relegated forms of cinema. Interestingly, these gaps in academic (and popular) coverage might exacerbate the processes of documenting more critical information about such cinemas; writings on such cinemas might suffer from an anxiety of instruction, more because these writings are aware of its readers' position(s) of inexperience. It, therefore, becomes extremely imperative for such writings to be as succinct, self-explanatory and unambiguous as possible. Olga Gershenson's *New Israeli Horror* certainly qualifies as one, with its reader-oriented style of writing and well-defined approaches to a recondite discourse.

The book is a riveting investigation into the nature and signification of what Gershenson deems a post-modern bracket of Israeli genre cinema which she calls the "New Israeli Horror" (p. 1). Locating its nexus within the historical tussle between Israel's long-standing associations with art cinema and the many attempts made by young filmmakers toward legitimizing genre films, the book branches out to underscore the historical evolution of the popular reputation of horror, a category of genre cinema, within the politico-cultural vicissitudes of Israel. Horror, according to Gershenson, was contextualized as a political weapon to disrobe the sanctimonious nature of the state, as constructed in the contrary tradition of Israeli art and political cinema. It voiced its makers' concerns about a variety of sociopolitical issues, including the perennial tensions which have existed between Israel and Palestine, and consistently situated Israel at the edge of blame. Although not explicitly stated, it is easy to imagine New Israeli Horror as a sympathetic, though indirect, consideration of foreign embodiments which are otherwise frequently vilified as agents of war and terrorism

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within the art-film canons of Israel. This context allows us to understand the intent behind introducing horror (and other popular genres) onto the vistas of mainstream Israeli cinema as an unambiguous critique of the country's art-cinema tradition(s). Operating within a national system of arthouse productions and a commercial preference for American films, the book upholds the New Israeli Horror as one of the foremost attempts toward commercializing genre cinema and situating it in-between the annals of Israel's mainstream cinema.

Gershenson, owing to the uniqueness and esoterism of her subject, structures her narrative very astutely, and thereby offers an extensive backdrop toward the development and popularization of her subject. The introduction to *New Israeli Horror* accentuates various factors that governed the establishment of horror as both a viable and experimental genre. From the Hamorotheque Club to film festivals like Utopia that promoted genres like sci-fi, fantasy, and horror, and from exclusive funding resources like the Tomer Moria Fund to talent-scouting programmes like the 'Dying to See' competition, the book appreciates the perennial influences of these 'institutions' toward the realization of this new mode of horror-filmmaking. However, at the same time, the book equally acknowledges the efforts of a previous generation of filmmakers around the 1970s who, while capitalizing on the visual aesthetics of horror, developed some striking examples of psychological thrillers like Moshe Guez's *The Angel was a Devil* (1976) and Yona Day's *Adam* (1973) which later featured as precursory models for the imagination of the New Israeli Horror.

The overarching argument of the book, nevertheless, rests upon what Gershenson addresses as the processes of "glocalisation" (p. 177), which not only situates New Israeli Horror within an ambiance of liminality, but also enables the characterization of this cinema as a hybrid product: one that juxtaposes and transplants global tropes and signifiers of horror against local specifics. The book, toward the introduction, transpires four strategies of adaptation and amalgamation through which this hybridization of global horror and particulars of culture could be visualized, and which further influences the skeletal structure of Gershenson's work. The book gets divided into three parts—with each part dedicated to one of the three strategies which are mostly used by Israeli filmmakers—and independently focuses on the strategies of conversion, subversion, and aversion. Gershenson is quick to note, however, that the fourth strategy of inversion (which incorporates the development of local horror traditions and tropes from within the society of a cinema's production) remains outside of her critical purview, as this strategy has never yet been used by any Israeli filmmaker. As for the remaining three, Gershenson defines them as follows:

> When a film combines genre conventions with the local setting while keeping both intact, the strategy is conversion. A film that combines genre conventions with the local setting in a way that disrupts both is using the strategy of subversion. When a film follows the horror tropes but eschews the local setting, then the strategy is aversion (p. 11).

Part-I is broken into two chapters: the first one discusses what could be apparently labeled as the first Israeli horror film, *Rabies* (2010), in relation to its subversion of the slasher genre institutionalized by Hollywood; while the other foregrounds its emphasis on the remixing of the conventions of Korean horror/revenge thriller—typified by Jee-woon Kim's *I Saw the Devil* (2010)—in the development of *Big Bad Wolves* (2013). Part-II discusses the strategy of conversion vis-à-vis a plethora of genre-horror films like *Poisoned* (2011), *Children of the Fall* (2016), and *The Damned* (2018). The three

chapters that make up part-II argue how these films directly incorporate generic horror tropes and transplant them onto Israeli sensibilities/realities. Thereby, viewers witness typical zombie outbreaks (as in *Poisoned*) or ominous appearances of the eerie (as in *JeruZalem*) in "paradigmatic Israeli settings" (p. 12). Part-III is an interrogation of the strategy of (ambivalent) aversion and Israeli filmmakers' failures to completely get away from donning their films with an un-Israeli look. In a combinational approach, Gershenson uses the examples of *Another World* (2014), *Madam Yankelova's Fine Literature Club* (2017), and *The Golem* (2018) as films that, in their attempts to universalize themselves by abandoning the local elements, essentially function as sociopolitical critiques of Israeli society by accentuating—as their counterparts following the strategies of conversion and subversion—the inward eruption of violence that dismantles society and culture, thereby structuring the nation as its own enemy.

These three strategies, though widely distinct from each other, function via marginal difference; this is strongly reflected in Gershenson's choice of films/filmmakers against each category, as hardly any of these films exhibit any overlaps with another strategy. Her criticism functions in a way that sustains the exclusivity of each category/strategy. One might discover an issue here, in terms of an absense of certain correlations between the films occupying the three strategies, but this absense never compromises the intellectual quality of Gershenson's work; in fact, this lack befits the tendency of the book to intertextualise. The criticisms are already permeated by several intertextual references to various examples from world cinemas, including Korean and Argentinian, that further intra cross-referencing might have complicated the reading processes.

The presence of intertextuality functions as a double-edged sword: while it allows for manifold relationships to be concretized between Israeli horror cinema and the wider traditions of horror, thereby vindicating the global dimensions of this cinema, the book also appears to suffer from an extended reliance over intertextual references which might restrict the text's comprehension for any non-specialist or layman. Moreover, these references are not made from within a closed cinematic category, but are extremely eclectic by nature. This is not to imply that the book does not flesh out those connections between its intertexts and its original subjects, but the proactive inclinations toward incorporating a corpus of variants might appear formidable and imposing, especially for someone coming from a non-film background.

I agree that intertextual thinking becomes a necessity for Gershenson for the very foundation of *New Israeli Horror* is laid upon the incoming surges of global cinematic influences that have colored the landscapes of Israeli horror. Yet, a more controlled approach to incorporating these references might have been more fitting, offering the narrative a delightful tightness. Nevertheless, despite any criticisms relating to the book's interplay with intertextuality, Gershenson's work can still be deemed a pioneering attempt toward legitimizing Israeli horror (and wider cinematic practices) as a subject worthy of academic enquiry. Moreover, the work indirectly speaks about the urgency for wider circles in academia and popular nonfiction to redirect their focus on excavating the treasures of minor cinemas. Written in a conversational tone, *New Israeli Horror* could be potentially enjoyed by both academics and general audiences, while being of special importance to academics working around the discourse of global horror and the *fantastic*. The book is truly an accessible product; the four-strategy model of adaptation, that Gershenson develops in relation to the interlocutions between the locality of Israeli cinema and the universality of modern horror, could be perceived as a springboard to explicate the ways other national or minor cinemas

interact with international inflections of horror to develop their own cinematic idioms and sub-definitions of horror.

One of the final thoughts that culminate Gershenson's work pertains to the future of new horror, and if Israeli cinema could be equally identified with an 'I-Horror' signifier (as its counterparts in Korea and Japan). While she ruminates that the end of 2010s marked a sharp decline in the production of local horror films, the book communicates her optimism about the possibility for the national cinematic landscape of Israel to witness an unusual renaissance of the horror-genre. New Israeli Horror has indeed transformed Israeli audiences' appreciation for the genre, which has begun reflecting through horror's transplantation onto television, but—as Gershenson notes—the mainstream establishment of horror (and genre cinema) would be defined by a slow waiting. In a mode of fiction, Gershenson keeps her work open-ended, allowing her readers to reflect a bit more, and which outshines as its strongest quality.

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