



The Politics of Israel's Emerging Horror Genre

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According to film theorist Siegfried Kracauer (qtd. in Barak & Inbar, 2019, pg. 7):

“The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media.”

Overview

- History of Israel
- Zionist history in Israeli Cinema
- The emergence of Israeli horror
- A genre shift with *Rabies* (2010)
- Themes and Contexts of the new genre
- A genre maturing with *Children of the Fall* (2016) and *The Golem* (2018)
- The future of Israeli horror

An Almost Brief History of Israel/Palestine

- 1917 England issues the Balfour Declaration, a mandate to create a Jewish state in Palestine.
- November 1947, United Nations suggests splitting Palestine into two Nations (one Arab, one Jewish).
- 1948 after being invaded by surrounding Arab countries, Israel wins and expands its borders, expelling 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in what is known as the “nakba,” or catastrophe.
- May 1949 “Israel” becomes a country and joins the United Nations.
- June 1967 Israel wins the Six-Day War and expands its borders dramatically (primarily into the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip).
- 1978 Israel and Egypt sign the Camp David Accords, giving the Sinai Peninsula back to Egypt and largely ending the era of Arab aggression.
- Anger over a steady stream of Israeli settlers moving into Palestinian-occupied land boils over into the first Intifada (violent Palestinian uprising/Israel’s military response) in 1987 until peace talks succeed in the early 1990s.
- When further peace talks in 2000 fall apart, a second Intifada breaks out and lasts until 2005 after more than 4,000 people (roughly 75% Palestinian) were killed in the conflict.
- Hamas rises to power in 2006, and cessation of either armed conflict or colonization of Palestinian land have been practically off the table ever since.

Defining Zionism

- A political movement calling for the establishment of a Jewish nation state in historic Palestine
- Modern Zionism was led by Theodor Herzl in 1896 (though calls for a “return to Zion” had existed prior)
- Since the establishment of Israel in 1949, “Zionism” transformed into the view of supporting Israel as a Jewish state
- “...though Zionism has formally reached its main goal (the establishment of a state for the Jews) the achievement appears to be more than problematic (Klein, 2005).”

Important Clarifications

- “Until 1967, the Palestinian problem was only indirectly connected to the image of Zionism. The occupation of a large part of Palestine has completely changed the perception. Zionism is now perceived as a movement having expansionist tendencies. The settlements and their poor image are contributing to the rapid degradation of the image of Zionism which becomes more and more identified with such policies.” (Klein, 2005)
- **It is important to not equate “Jew” and “Zionist”**
- **Not all Israelis are Zionists**

Zionist Roots in Israeli Cinema

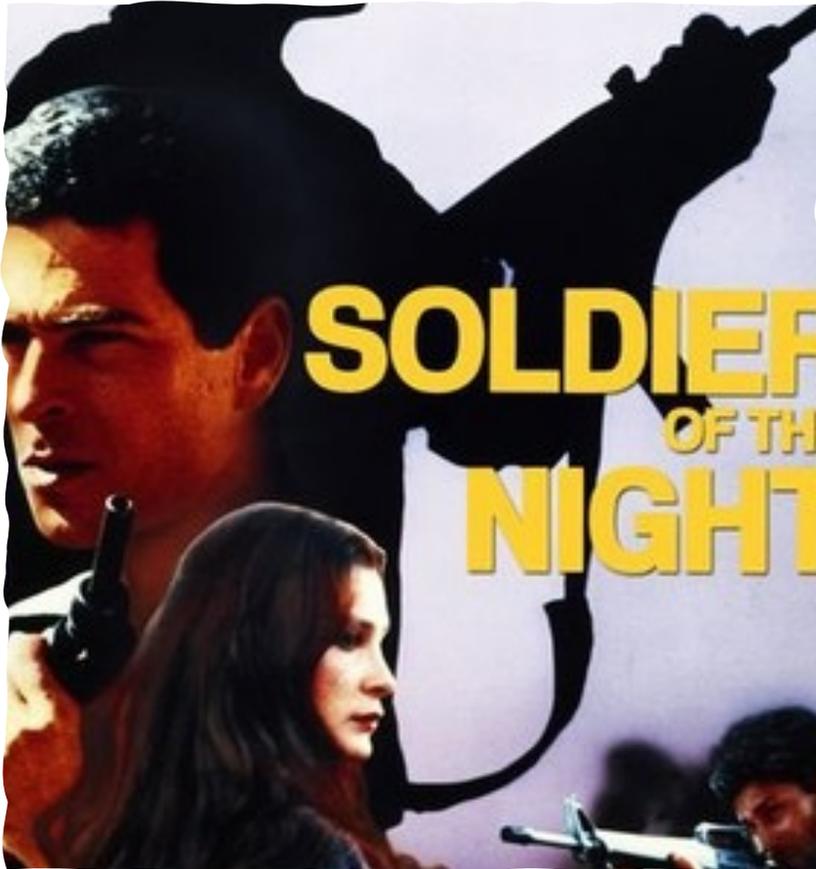
- Israeli cinema is rooted in Zionist ideology
- Early Palestinian works such as *The First Film of Palestine (1911)*, *Oded the Wanderer (1933)* and *Sabra (1933)* are Zionist propaganda films
- A quote from *Oded* exhibits the Zionist pathos of these films:

“Until just a few years ago the Valley of Jezreel was desolate and neglected until your fathers came and with their work and energy, revived the valley and turned it into a source of life and work.” (Shohat, 1987, p. 31)

The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict in Israeli Film

- Israel's conflict with Palestinians has been a staple of Israeli cinema, driving conflict in the nation's films for decades.
- One of the most visible places is in what Loshitzky (2001) calls the "Forbidden Love" genre of the 80s and 90s.
- Most of these films feature a Palestinian and an Israeli falling in love and having to overcome social, religious, and other obstacles.
- The constant "question" asked by the genre is, "Can Israelis and Palestinians peacefully coexist in such a hostile world?"

The Birth of Israeli Horror



- The horror genre was a rarity in the 20th century
- The 70s saw a few horror films emerge such as *Adam* (1974) and *The Angel Was a Devil* (1976)
- The cult film *Soldier of the Night* comes out in 1986.
- It features a man denied entry into the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) despite his strong desire to become a soldier. The only solution in his mind is to kill IDF soldiers at night in retaliation.
- Despite fertile ground for social and political commentary, neither the film nor the genre was popular when it came out.
- The genre would remain ultimately underground and unpopular among general filmgoers, critics, and filmmakers for decades.



Rabies (Keshales & Papushado, 2010)

- Rabies was marketed as “Israel’s first horror film.”
- While not technically true, it singlehandedly brings the genre to the cultural forefront and inspires a new generation of filmmakers.
- “The new Israeli wave of horror films appeared at a historical moment when a new generation felt revulsion and disappointment with the way Israeli cinema in general, and the war genre specifically, were dealing with issues of security and society, and their effects on everyday life.” (Rosen, 2020, pg. 79)



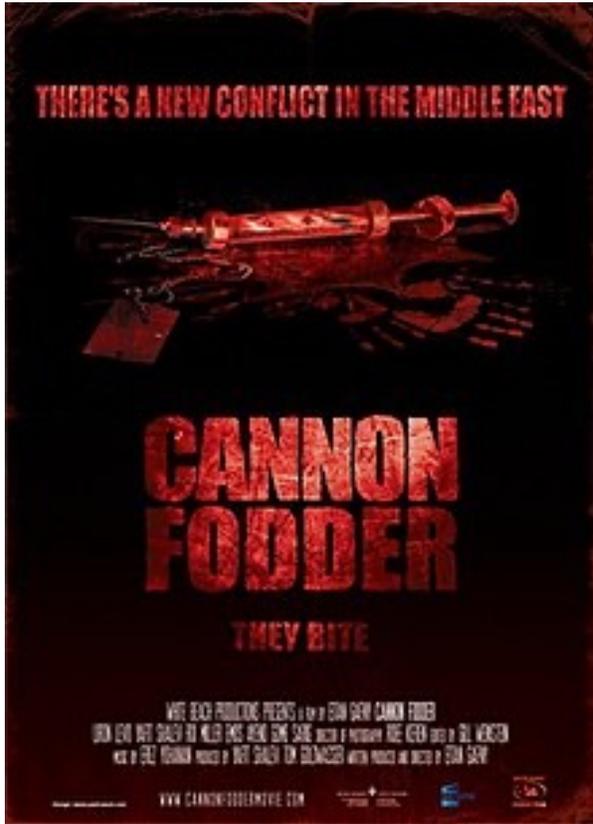
Rabies (Keshales & Papushado, 2010)

- In this comedy horror satire of Israeli society, ten people go into a forest for various reasons, but not all of them escape alive.
- Several characters get into fights and kill each other, using everything from fists to rocks to guns to sledgehammers.
- In addition to violence from each other, bear traps, forest fires, and abandoned land mines wreak havoc on the characters.
- In the end, the only survivors of the original ten are a serial killer and the virginal Pini, who killed his friend in the forest.

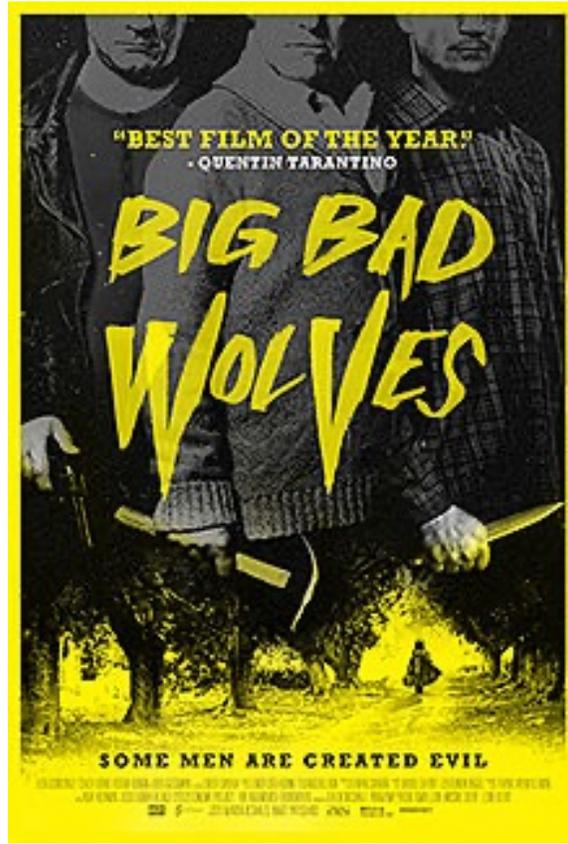


Rabies (Keshales & Papushado, 2010)

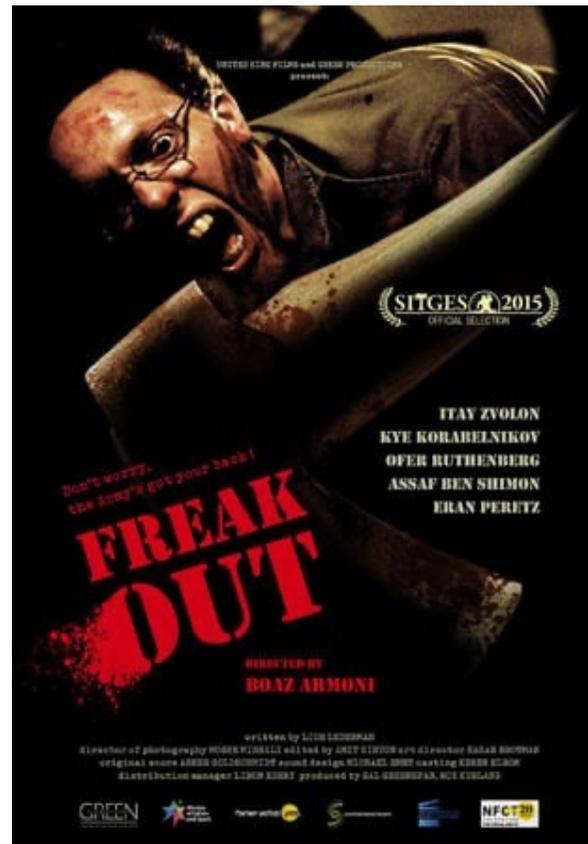
- The film establishes the commentary on the self-destructive and self-perpetuating cycle of violence that Israel and its people find themselves in within the genre (Gershenson & Hudson, 2019).
- The physical land is as antagonistic as many of the characters.
 - This can be interpreted as a representation of Eretz-Israel and its promises of beauty and new life versus the realities of war and occupation. (Gershenson & Hudson, 2019, pg. 54)
- In all instances, the characters have toxic relationships with those around them and seem pathologically drawn to violence.
- In the end, there is no tidy resolution that points toward a lasting peace.



2013



2013



2015

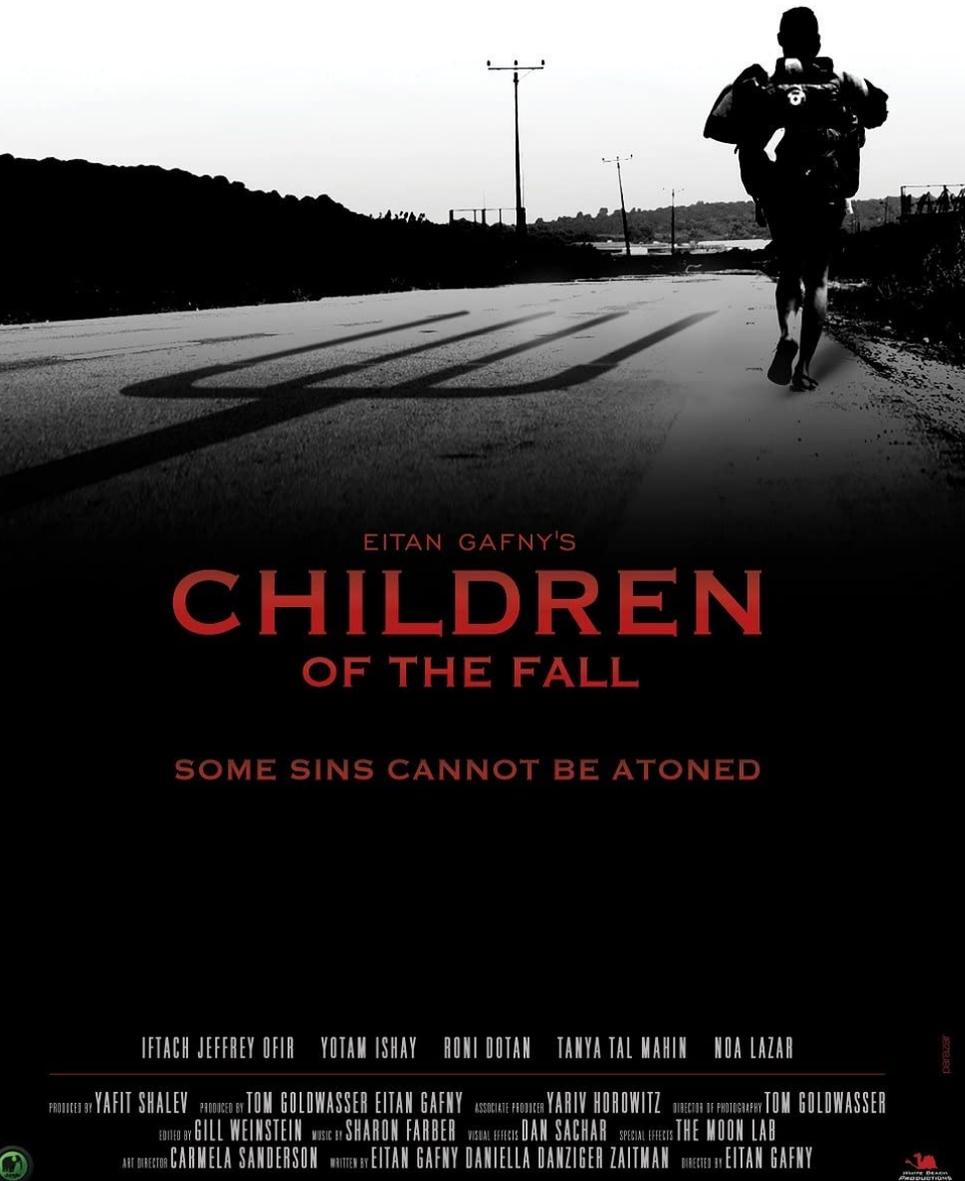


2015

The Post-Rabies Horror Boom

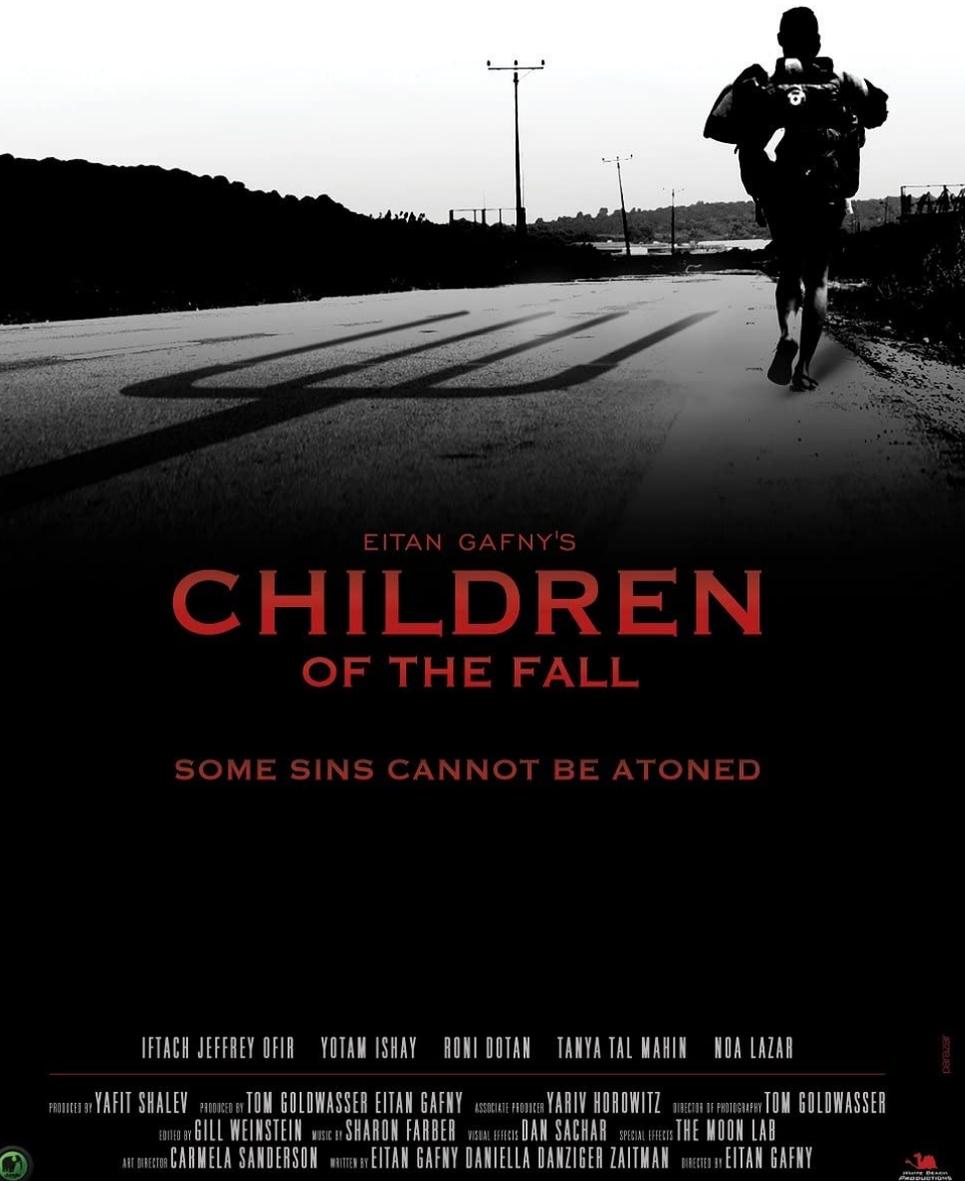
Common Themes in Israeli Horror

- The “Final Boy”
- The overbearing Jewish mother
- Fatherhood (strained relationships as a father)
- An antagonist IDF/police force (Rosen, 2020, pg. 79)
- Fear of the “Other” (Most often Palestinians/Arabs)
- The primary threat comes from within
- Lots of social commentary on the effects of violence on the individual and collective Israeli psyche



Children of the Fall (Gafny, 2016)

- Takes place on a kibbutz, a collective community in Israel that is traditionally based on agriculture (Shohat, 1989).
- Follows a Zionist American woman who volunteers on a kibbutz and arrives days before the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.
- While the Jewish kibbutz settlers are observing the first night of Yom Kippur, her fellow international volunteers party, then start dropping like flies at the hands of a serial killer.
- The Zionist American faces off against her Holocaust-survivor assailant, who killed everyone who threatened to contaminate the new Jewish state.
- In the end, the two are both killed by the same artillery shell, ending the killing spree but also killing the hopeful protagonist who saw Israel as being above violent racism and xenophobia.



Children of the Fall (Gafny, 2016)

- Centers the trauma of settlers/colonizers in Israel through multiple characters (mostly Holocaust survivors)
- Showcases the tensions between Israeli Jewishness (a sabra) and the diaspora Jew
 - Foreign-born non-Jews characterize their treatment as akin to being second class citizens.
- Criticizes Zionist xenophobia, racism, and sexism both at the hands of Israel and American-Jewish ignorance
- In pursuing a perfect Eretz Israel, the means to create a better one are destroyed
- The American-Jewish protagonist doesn't alter her view; arguably her original position is reinforced
- The film offers a critique of certain aspects of Zionism, but not a rejection of the ideology



The Golem (D. Paz & Y. Paz, 2018)

- As a peaceful Jewish village is blamed for the outbreak of plague in 1673 Lithuania, one woman goes against the wishes of her town and creates a golem in secret to protect them from annihilation.
- The Golem takes the form of the woman's dead son. Soon, the golem takes it upon itself to begin killing people within the community that the woman holds grudges against.
- In the end, the Golem lays waste to the intruders and almost the entire Jewish village. However, the scroll of God's true name which is used to give the golem life, is picked up by a young Jewish girl in the film's final shot.



The Golem (D. Paz & Y. Paz, 2018)

- Unlike most Israeli horror, focuses on motherhood as opposed to fatherhood
- The film is unique in that it doesn't take place in Israel like most of the other genre films
- The existential threat parallels the real-life fears present in Israeli society
- Even when completely innocent and on the defensive, engaging in the cycle of violence threatens to wipe everyone out

In aggregate

- After the Intifadas broke out in the 90s and early 2000s, people lost interest in the core question of the forbidden love genre: Can Israelis and Palestinians live together in peace?
- Some important questions of the Israeli horror genre:
 - Where does the violence in Israeli society come from?
 - What are the results of engaging in a cycle of violence?
 - How does Israeli society cope with Zionist mentality?
- The answer, according to the films of the genre:
 - Violence almost always comes from within, despite overt narratives that paint outsiders as the problem.
 - Engaging in violence leads to further violence that usually comes around to harm the one who engages in it.
 - Concerning Zionism, the genre is highly critical. It highlights the expansionist and colonial practices of Zionism, but in some instances, it makes the argument that there is a need for Zionism that is not destructive.

The Future

“In conceptualizing Israeli cinema as a representational form of identity construction... we should think of identity ‘as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in progress, and always constituted within, not outside representation.” (Hall qtd. in Loshitzky, 2001)

So with a possible end to the Netanyahu Prime Ministership coming in the March elections and Israeli violence against Palestinians and vice versa dominating the news cycle, what will it take to force a similar shift or departure from the new Israeli horror boom?

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