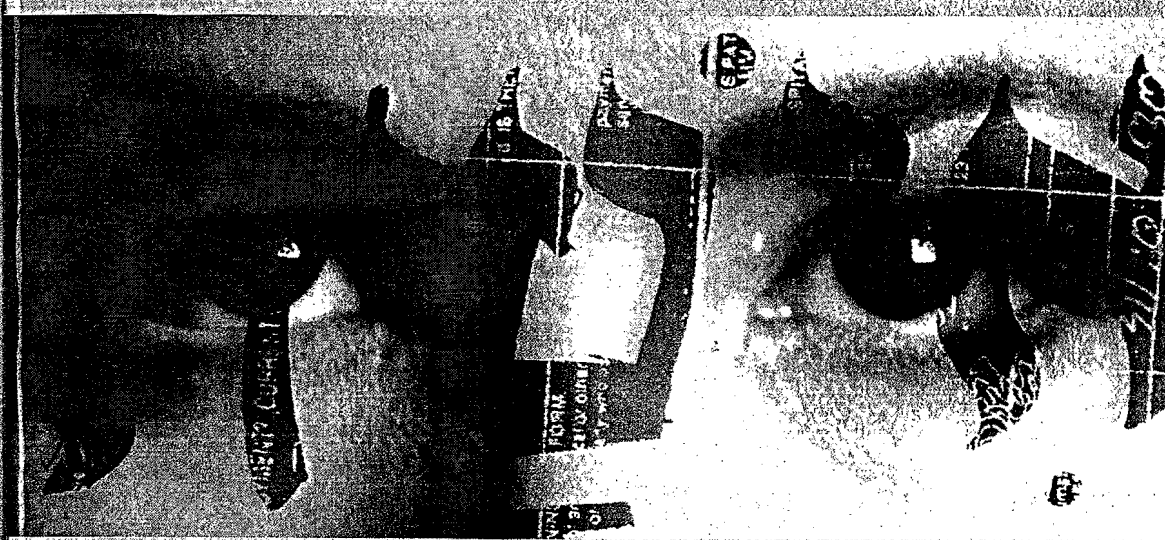


ISRAELI  
WOMEN'S  
STUDIES

A READER



EDITED BY  
ESTHER FUCHS

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"A valuable resource for scholars and students of Judaic, Israel, Middle Eastern, and women's studies. There is no single volume currently available that represents such a broad range of historical, political, religious, and cultural approaches to Israeli women. This book will fill that gap for years to come!"

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Israeli women do not enjoy the equality, status, and power often attributed to them by the media and popular culture. Despite significant achievements and progress, as a whole they continue to earn less than their male counterparts, are less visible and influential in the political arena, do not share equal responsibilities or privileges in the military, have unequal rights and freedoms in family life and law, and are less influential in shaping the nation's self image and cultural orientation.

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Providing balanced perspectives from the social sciences and the humanities, this comprehensive reader reflects both an emerging consensus and exciting diversity in the field. It is the definitive text for courses in Israeli women's studies.

**ESTHER FUCHS** is a professor in the department of Near Eastern and Judaic studies at the University of Arizona and the author of *Israeli Mythologies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction*

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# Israeli Women's Studies

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*A Reader*

ESTHER FUCHS, EDITOR



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*New Brunswick, New Jersey and London*

*For my students—past and present*

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that Oriental women and men, whatever their differences, are nonetheless victims of the same policy. The woman's violence is presented within the context of a violent policy and, as a consequence, takes on significance different from the stereotype of Oriental irrationality. This woman expresses the anger and violence of a subjugated group which is first and foremost a reaction and rebellion against violence, the violence rooted in the asymmetries of power.

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## The Woman as Other in Israeli Cinema

ONE OF THE DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS of Michal Bat Adam's film *Moments* (1979) occurs when the underlying sexual tensions between Yula (Bat Adam) and Ann (Brigitte Catillon) hover at the breaking point on a hotel bed in Jerusalem. After touring the unfamiliar city together, the two women, one a Tel Avivian, the other a French tourist, laze indulgently on the bed, opening up emotionally to each other and, perhaps, lightly touching.

The scene develops into a love scene but not before another, apparently necessary, element is introduced—Yula's boyfriend, played by the definitive male of the Israeli cinema, Assi Dayan. What began as the prelude to an intentional and dramatic climax of intimacy and sexual love between two women turns into a trite display of pornography. It begins with the most basic of all situations in this genre: a man observing two passionately aroused women, partially undressed, about to make love. The act becomes pornographic as it is performed before the penetrating gaze of a man who derives sexual gratification from observing the scene. He is using the women for his voyeuristic pleasure. They are thus transformed from subjects of love into objects of exploitation. The scene continues as Dayan sleeps with both of them—another model in the genre. As a result of this form of intercourse—and the film does not offer any (lesbian) alternatives—the ultimate connection between the two women is achieved by means of the male organ: the movement of the phallus from one woman to the other. Only the phallus, we are being told, has the power to constitute female and interfemale sexuality.

*Moments* is a film in which the main characters are women, and the main theme is women's experience. The constitution of the female subject is the heart of the narrative and the subject of the dialogue between the women: everyone has told Yula that she has no talent; her boyfriend has told her that she wrecks everything important; Yula goes to Jerusalem to try to fulfill herself by writing, and there she

The film was written by a woman, directed by a woman, and a woman stars in it (and in this specific case, the viewer/critic is also a woman). Yet despite this, the constitution of women's sexuality is achieved through the "penetrating gaze" of the voyeuristic "peeping Tom"—the reifying male. Thus, the representation of women in this film is no different from that of most other films in which women are not the main subjects, are not central to the narrative, and have no part in its creation.

In film theory, the concept of the penetrating gaze has been used to describe the apparatus both for film enjoyment in general and for representing the female in particular. Expounded by Laura Mulvey (1975) in an article that is regarded as a classic, the concept has been discussed, criticized, and updated by, among others, Mulvey herself (1981). According to this concept, woman's specific "otherness" differs from the otherness of other minorities in that the core of her otherness consists in her being subjected to a penetrating gaze. This gaze reifies her as it turns her into the object of the male's voyeuristic pleasure. Under the penetrating gaze of the male, women are not experienced as active flesh-and-blood persons. Whether under the penetrating gaze of the man in the film, the male viewer in the audience, or the male camera/director on the set, the woman becomes a thing, a displayed object to be used. This is the dominant mechanism through which the cinema marginalizes women as the Other.

In films, as in culture in general, the marginality or otherness of women is not simply the result of specific moments or situations. Rather, the text constructs a normative world in which the woman is always perceived as inferior. Lacking any position at the center, she does not function as an autonomous, coherent self. Instead, her entire existence depends on and is marginal to that which lies at the center, that is, the normative phallogocentric system that sees that which the phallus represents as perfection. Thus, the female (margin) is not a counterpart of the male (center), but an object to be used by him. She exists solely to fulfill a function for him: to be the object of his sexual voyeuristic gratification.

The problem raised by feminist scholars is, how is it possible for women to enjoy films like Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990) or Luc Besson's *Nikita* (1990), two modern Pygmalion-like tales in which the women are tamed and shaped to fit precisely into the molds required by patriarchal society, or Howard Hawks's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), in which, as in so many other films, the woman's body is commercialized and put on permanent display—the very display of which becomes thematized—for the enjoyment of the viewer?<sup>1</sup>

Mulvey, in her later article (1981), formulated her psychoanalytic explanation, comprised of three components: Freud's concept of masculinity in woman; the identification triggered by the logic of a narrative grammar; and the ego's desire to fantasize itself in a certain, active manner (in Penley 1988, 72). Of course, this

absence as *un homme manqué*, as devoid of or lacking a penis. However, this Freudian view has been severely criticized through feminist readings of the case of Dora (see Bernheimer and Kahane 1985) and critiques of the Oedipus complex.

A film like *Moments* seems to indicate that women do not necessarily position women in a different way and that the female gaze is not necessarily different from that of the male. It is not the sex of the filmmaker that determines the positioning of the women characters (or the women viewers), but rather the normative world created by the text. The most potent factor in defining the woman's position in the normative world built by a text is the depiction of the character of women in it. The way the text positions and judges the female characters transmits to me, the female viewer, my position and the way I am to be judged in the real world. Through this positioning, I become aware of my otherness. Thus, just as women can create a text in which women are marginal, it is theoretically (and not only theoretically) possible for a man to create a text in which the woman, constituted as an autonomous subject, is positioned at the center. The opinions of some feminist theoreticians notwithstanding, women do not necessarily read texts differently than men. Reading and viewing are acquired skills and not functions of biological differences. Insofar as women, like men, learn to read and view within the hegemony, any difference between the way men and women read/view can only emerge within the context of that system.

Therefore, a possible mechanism for a non-patriarchal form of reading/viewing is the technique of subversive reading, which becomes, ipso facto, feminist reading. In such readings, the woman reads against the grain of the text. Such readings, which challenge the plain meaning of the text, permit the woman a coherent autonomous existence. Nevertheless, just as there are many women who do not write subversive texts, so there are many women readers who, contrary to the opinions of some feminist theoreticians, do not perform subversive readings (Lubin 1993). A hegemonic text, adhering to a set of norms defined by the center, situates woman at the periphery. A feminist text is not simply a text that focuses on woman's experience but is one in which I, the female reader, can constitute my subjectivity as I read without having to struggle against it. A text can also be subversive. While establishing a hegemonic set of norms, it can simultaneously, through the same words, expose their hegemonic character. Thus, by exposing the norms as humanly constructed rather than naturally given, it can provide the female reader with the means to resist them. Similarly, a text that purports to be feminist can actually be hegemonic.<sup>2</sup> While seeming to position women at the center, it can subvert this positioning through negative judgments and negative consequences. The focus of this analysis, therefore, is twofold: first, the devices employed by the text, such as the penetrating gaze and the positioning of women, that reify women and establish the otherness of the female character and, through her, the female viewer;



camera/director—in those instances where they, subvert the hegemonic norms. The number of full-length feature films produced in Israel—three hundred eighty—permits a fairly accurate generalization concerning the way in which women are represented in them (Schnitzer 1993). Virtually all of these films were made by men. While women have made a large number of short films, the number of feature films made by women is quite small—only fourteen (six of them by Bat Adam).<sup>3</sup>

The device of the penetrating gaze is employed in almost every Israeli film in which there is a female character. In almost all such films, women's sexuality is displayed—not as a central theme or a plot catalyst, but as a contingent prop. However, careful analysis reveals that despite the recurring use of this mechanism to position women as inferior, it is not the dominant one. In Israeli films, the dominant mechanism is not the penetrating gaze but rather social positioning—women's professional standing, their place in the community, and their role in the family: the war widow in Gilberto Toffano's *Siege* (1969), the soldier's wife in Yossi Somer's *Burning Memory* (1989), the girlfriend of the soldier who is killed and who then marries his best friend in Shimon Dotan's *Repeat Drive* (1982), the prostitute and the housewife in endless films, and the helpmate in Shmuel Imberman's *Don't Give a Damn* (1987), and in Amos Gutman's *Himmo, King of Jerusalem* (1987), or women in such stereotyped female professions as teaching or nursing. Frequently, however, no mention is made of a woman's vocation: either she has none, or her working only occurs off-screen. Even when the woman has a profession—for example, the physical training teacher in Uri Barbash's *Where Eagles Fly* (1990)—it is irrelevant to the plot and inconsequential to her life and to her relations with the world. Furthermore, as is the case in this film, her profession is only used as an excuse for displaying her body. Even when the woman fulfills an economic function equal to that of her husband—as in Jacob Goldwasser's *Over the Ocean* (1991), where both run a family business—her main function, in terms of plot and theme, is as the sister of a fallen soldier. While her husband, who is responsible for the financial well-being of the family, is anxious to emigrate, she feels prevented from doing so because of her responsibility to visit her brother's grave. Thus, while the husband's actions are based on his central function as a provider, her actions derive from her role as a man's sister.

In short, most Israeli films construct a normative world in which the woman is positioned, socially and professionally, at the margins. There are, however, a few films in which a woman is positioned at the center of the action. These include *The Summer of Aviya* (1988), a joint enterprise of the writer and leading actress Gila Almagor and the director Eli Cohen which deals with a child (marginal) and a mentally disturbed woman (also marginal) whose heroic past is mentioned and then forgotten; Isaac Zepel Yeshurun's *Noa at Seventeen* (1982), in which strong women deride and emasculate the men; and Avraham Heffner's *Laura Adler's Last*

state of decline. There are also films in which the women are less stereotypical, such as Eitan Green's *American Citizen* (1992), where, in addition to a stereotypical nymphomaniac groupie, there is a serious career woman, a pianist who initiates all of her professional and romantic pursuits, creating her own world. But in most Israeli films, as already pointed out, women are not central and their marginal positioning is determined by their place in the community.

In Hollywood films, the mechanism of the penetrating gaze dominates the portrayal of women. In these films, the objectification of women by using them for sexual pleasure is the dominant mode of marginalizing women on screen and, by extension, in the audience. The mechanism of social positioning is also actively used but is not dominant. In Israeli films, on the other hand, the mechanism of social positioning is dominant, although the penetrating gaze is very active as well. This circumstance results primarily from mainstream Zionist culture's suppression of the sexual body and the privileging of the body of the worker attached to the hoe or the plow.<sup>4</sup> Thus, sexuality and eroticism are subordinated to the national project. When the sexual body again appears in Israeli culture, it functions as an act of subversion. Unable to constitute an autonomous female subject in the spheres privileged by Zionism—that is, community and work—poets, writers, or those filmmakers discussed here who seek to represent female experience will often have to turn to the sphere of sexuality.<sup>5</sup> However, in the very act of rendering the sexual body as Other, Zionism has provided women artists with a space in which to constitute the female subject. Whereas the power of Zionist culture renders difficult any effort to position women at the center socially and professionally, its silence regarding the sexual body leaves a space into which women artists can move. And, in the case of film, the move to place the sexual body at the center entails the mechanism of the reifying penetrating gaze. Only now, the penetrating gaze serves to subvert the hegemonic, patriarchal culture by representing the woman as a sovereign and autonomous being with her own center. This is a subversive rather than a revolutionary act. A revolutionary act would be to represent the sovereign autonomous woman functioning professionally and socially. Restoring women to the center by focusing on the sexual body is, rather an act of subversion—that is, an action that subverts but does not overthrow the hegemonic system.

A film in which the sexual body and the penetrating gaze are used subversively is Dina Zvi-Riklis's 1984 short film *Coordania*. This film tells the story of two families left behind in an immigrant transit camp (*ma'abara*, from the 1950s). The heart of the film is the experience of a female adolescent and the story is told from the young girl's point of view. The young heroine witnesses her mother being raped by her father and her mother's pregnancy and difficult childbirth, and she experiences the loss of childhood love and her first menstrual period. Desire and its absence, sexuality and the beginning of puberty, and the significance of female sexuality

is basically sexual—is evident in a scene showing the awakening of desire between the girl and a boy. In that scene, the girl, bathing alone in her underwear, is unaware of the presence of the boy on a hilltop overlooking the sea. The boy gazes at the girl and, in an act that literalizes the metaphor of the penetrating gaze, uses his hands like binoculars. The camera also literalizes the metaphor as it thematizes the penetrating gaze: no longer an abstract description, the penetrating gaze is now an actual event. This transition from metaphor to literalness uncovers and subverts the power mechanism of the gaze. It is as if the film were saying: If, in order to constitute the female subject, one must abandon the social scene and operate in the realm of the body—constituting a sexual subject and introducing the penetrating gaze—we shall subvert the power of this mechanism—the gaze—by exposing it.

The camera, however, does not focus on the girl from the boy's vantage point, that is, from above to below. Instead, it persistently views the girl at eye level. Furthermore, the camera does to the boy exactly what he is doing to the girl: it gazes on him from below rather than from the height of his eyes. This twofold act—showing him as observer and as the object of observation—exposes the penetrating gaze as a power mechanism. Moreover, Zvi-Riklis integrates the ethnic issue into the film alongside the gender issue. The boy, an Ashkenazi, concentrates his gaze on the girl, a Sephardi.<sup>6</sup> By intersecting the gender-sex axis with the ethnic axis, the camera exposes the penetrating gaze as nothing but a power mechanism, a human construct that can be used to oppress any minority or group. In thematizing the penetrating gaze, the film also reveals its inherent limitations.

Zvi-Riklis uses a similar juxtaposition of axes—this time nation/gender—in another short film, *Lookout* (1991). An Israeli soldier, posted on a roof in a refugee camp in the occupied territories, is preoccupied with a young Palestinian woman living across the street with her family. He follows her fortunes obsessively as she is forced into a marriage and becomes pregnant. Moreover, her father is jailed by the occupation authorities and her husband, involved in radical activities, uses her young brother to carry a grenade, concealed in a shoe box, to another radical outside. Upon seeing his father return from prison, the boy drops the box and is killed by the explosion. Appalled, the soldier shoots the husband. From the beginning, the camera follows the soldier manning the lookout as he observes the surrounding area. Besides the family across the way, he also watches people in the street. By using the penetrating gaze simultaneously on a Palestinian woman in the street and another Israeli soldier patrolling the area, the camera/director positions them on the same plane. This thematization of the gaze exposes it as a device that can be turned on whomever the power behind it chooses. The camera thus maintains its own position of power, filming the world from the soldier's vantage point, and filming him as well. In this way, the camera, in the act of photographing him, subjects the soldier to its own gaze. Thus, the position of power

of binoculars, and those of the director, both of them white Israelis—that is, citizens of the occupying nation—and apparently heterosexual, bourgeois Jews. On the other hand, one is a man and the other a woman. And the woman, despite her being a citizen of the occupying country, observes the soldier from an alienated position. The overriding, oppressive power of the gaze derives from its capacity, as already noted, to reduce and reify the object it is observing. If that gaze is turned on me and I stand naked before it, I am both my physical body and an object, as I cannot return the gaze: powerless, I lower my eyes. The gaze represents established power, as Foucault (1977) has pointed out, while I am transformed into an object of gratification. The female director's subversive act is to thematize the subject. As a result, the film is not about the occupation but about the mechanisms for controlling others. Turning the mechanism of the gaze into the subject thus exposes it as a mechanism, discloses its limitations, and reveals ways in which one can defend oneself against it.

The film presents the major alternative modes for dealing with the penetrating gaze. The first, the simplest and most common, is to continue living under it, aware of its presence but ignoring it. The second is to block the gaze. Thus, in *Lookout*, the shutters of the family's apartment across the way are closed twice in the face of the soldier's binoculars, once by the young Palestinian woman who has aroused the soldier's interest and once by her husband. A third and more rebellious mode of coping with the gaze is to return it, refusing to lower one's eyes. This is done by the young Palestinian woman in an obvious and determined manner at least twice in the film. But above all, the film exposes the inner contradictions of the colonialist's position of power. The soldier, who apparently occupies an Olympian position of power, seeing and controlling everything, is ultimately revealed as someone who knows nothing and does nothing. In the middle of the film, Israeli troops break into the apartment that has so absorbed the soldier's attention. Having no advance knowledge of the break-in, he contacts the troops to find out why they are doing it. Helpless, he neither takes part in the break-in nor is able to prevent it, although it appears that he would have liked to. Later he has neither the foreknowledge of, nor the power to prevent, the blast that kills the young woman's small brother. Similarly, he lacks the power to prevent the girl from being married off against her will. The only power he has is the power to react after the fact. Not having generated the events, he can only react to them. Thus, he reacts to the death of the young boy by killing the husband who gave him the grenade. He reacts, just as the soldiers who broke into the apartment react, to something that has apparently happened somewhere else. Thus, the occupying Israeli can only react to that which others around him have caused to happen. The thematization of the penetrating gaze is a subversive act that reveals the gaze as a mechanism of oppression while at the same time exposing its limitations. One is thus

it out, or undermine it. When the soldier kills the person responsible for the child's death, he is making a twofold statement: he is not responsible for the boy's death—"they" kill each other, he had no part in it—and he is the one who restores the moral order by killing in the name of universal justice.

The order that he has restored is that of the Zionist ethos, the ethos of selective killing. While soldiers (the occupation) are responsible for the situation that results in the killing, it is not, the film asserts, the occupier who has bloodied his hands. The occupier can distinguish, even in the heat of battle, between justified and unjustified killing and between moral and immoral killing. It is this order, this code, which the soldier seeks to restore. From the heights of the lookout, surveying everything except himself, he—and with him the camera—observes the world through a closed, coherent moral system that refuses to consider the Palestinian native's own moral system. The positioning of the native-born Israeli in this lofty moral position thus precludes any criticism of the occupation. Not only is there no discussion of the roots of the situation that led to the killing, but the occupation is presented as providing a foundation for implanting a superior system of moral norms—a traditional position of the colonialist toward the inferior native. But the absence of concrete political criticism does not diminish the criticism of the mechanism, the unmasking of the limitations of the power mechanism.

This absence of political criticism is linked to the one power position that cannot be avoided but is in no way subversive—that of the penetrating gaze of the camera. The power of the camera's eye cannot be nullified. True, the thematization of the penetrating gaze neutralizes its force, subversively exposing the mechanisms of power and oppression contained in the penetrating gaze of the soldier. Nevertheless, the fact that the camera remains with him all the time, seeing everything from his viewpoint alone, never taking the position of those who are subjected to his gaze, makes it into a full partner in the restoration of the Zionist moral order. This is the hegemonic side of this subversion. The subversive stance in *Lookout* does not, therefore, challenge the Zionist moral or communal ethos. Instead, it works in the space left by Zionism, the space of the sexual body. Although not focused on the sexual body, *Lookout* nevertheless uses the related apparatus, the penetrating gaze, for its subversive ends.

A good example of the subversive use of the sexual body to constitute the female subject while leaving the hegemonic norms intact is the film *A Thousand and One Wives* (1989), adapted by Michal Bat Adam, who also directed the film, based on the story of Dan Benaya Seri (1987). In this film, a woman filmmaker adapts a story written by a man about male experience into a film about female experience. The film centers on the sexual awakening of Flora, Naftali Siman-Tov's third wife. In both the story and the film, Naftali's two previous wives have died before bearing any children (he has apparently murdered them). Anxious about the fate of

Flora, therefore, he only masturbates into a towel that she brings him every night. Afterward, she wraps herself in the towel, laundering it the next day. Into Flora's life comes Hamedian, a textile merchant, who gets Flora pregnant, although Flora herself is not entirely aware of what is happening. The rabbi points out Flora's pregnancy to Naftali, who, realizing that he is not the father, murders Flora too, thus restoring order. Although Seri's original story centers on Naftali, there are also allusions to Flora's desires. Bat Adam's film, on the other hand, centers on Flora's sexual awakening and her subversive actions. In the transition from story to film, the point of view does not change. Both Naftali's and Flora's points of view are represented in each. The difference, as noted, lies in the thematic emphasis. In the film, the transition in focus from Naftali to Flora is made by the camera alone, without dialogue. We do not hear Flora's voice: the camera merely observes her actions, her face, her movements. And silence is precisely what Naftali wants of Flora: "Why are you never quiet?" he asks. "Shut up!" (Seri 1987, 64). Lacking a voice, Flora cannot tell her own story. Thus, it is not she who constructs her biography but Naftali, and her attempt to digress from the lines of his story brings about her punishment. It is the camera that makes it possible for Flora to tell her own story—that is, to constitute her own world—and, in so doing, to subvert the original story's intention. However, the camera is used subversively, not rebelliously in a revolutionary manner. The only voice the film gives to the woman—aside from a few irrelevant pieces of scattered dialogue—is through her singing. The film opens and closes with a woman singing. Although the song also provides her with a voice, it is not a speaking voice, a logical voice, a voice that can formulate grievances against the world. It is simply sound. The change of focus achieved by the camera, the transition from the *telling* by Seri's omniscient and authoritative narrator (as shown by Hever 1990) to the *showing* in the film, endows the characters with more authority. Insofar as Flora is the film's dominant character, this narrative device enhances her authority. It now becomes her story rather than the narrator's even though it is told wordlessly. The omniscient narrator, whose irony in the story is pitted against Flora's naiveté, is replaced by a camera which, by providing a visual and authoritative presence for the woman's perspective, privileges it over that of the man. Herein lies the essence of the subversive act: in both the story and the film. Flora, even though she does not fully understand what she is doing, seeks sexual satisfaction with another man and becomes pregnant by him. At the same time, the film enhances this subversion by visually representing both the sexual awakening as well as the crystallization of a model of subversive female sexuality—thus bypassing the voicelessness of the heroine.

Flora's first act of subversion is to limit the effectiveness of the penetrating gaze. As Flora undresses on her wedding night, Naftali peeks through the keyhole. But Flora has placed a towel over the handle, thereby blocking his view. It is this

while he is asleep. Finally, a moment before her death, even as she cries out, she refuses to avert her eyes from his penetrating gaze. Flora's second act of subversion is to go to another man in order to fulfill her sexual desires. In the story, her sexuality is described in only a few words. Her sexual desire is awakened after the wedding when, on a walk, she finds Naftali's appearance pleasing and notices "that strange superfluous motion in his pants." "A dense smell filled her nose" (Seri 1987, 16), a smell that becomes the main metaphor for male sexuality, which is concretized in the smell of Naftali's semen: "The strange smell which so engrossed her the whole night again filled her nostrils. She believed, without knowing quite why, that this was the sticky smell of aged trees and indeed, when she brought the towel to her nose, all her hopes were realized [!]-carob jelly" (35). Naftali quickly hides the towel, "her new possession," under her clothes. The towel becomes a substitute for sex: "She never tired of looking at it . . . she only wanted to stretch out her arm and touch. Each time, excited by her loathsome craving, she would secretly draw the towel across her belly and rush off to the steam of the bath" (37). She demonstrates her strength through a penetrating gaze, and in place of the desired sexual contact she clings to the towel, which smells of carobs and which she takes with her to the bath—to do what? It is the camera that executes this action: the combination of laundering the towel and masturbating with it provides the main sexual scene of the film. Here Flora vents her sexual desires in a semi-masturbatory simulation of the sexual act. When she meets Hamedian, she feels "in her heart the sticky taste of carob jelly" (46). From that moment until she faints after apparently having had intercourse with him, the story presents her point of view: from her joy after the first meeting to her agitation at home in anticipation of the second meeting to her thoughts and her attempts to please Naftali retroactively, and through numerous images of rain, downpours, and droughts that, from the beginning, are constructed as an analogy to intercourse and fertility.

The film builds a much more complex story than the text, introducing an important event that does not occur in the story: Flora's act of injuring herself in anticipation of her second meeting with Hamedian. The act itself is an allusion to a story from the traditional text, *Sefer Hayashar* (Book of the Righteous), which recounts the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife, Zuleika. In the film that story is introduced through the character of Zuleika, a spinster who once gave up her lover and subsequently died, an allusion to Potiphar's wife. After falling ill out of longing for him, she invited her friends in to explain her actions: "She gave them citrons and knives to peel them and eat them with. And she gave the order and they dressed Joseph in fine clothes and brought him before them. And Joseph came before them and all the women looked at Joseph and saw his beauty and were unable to take their eyes from him. And they all cut their hands with the knives they held and covered all the citrons they had in their hands with

At the center of this story is the female penetrating gaze. A group of women (a group, and not a singular woman) gazes at a man who has been brought before them as a displayed object. While the text alludes only to Potiphar's wife's name, the film alludes to the entire story: Flora takes a sharp instrument and, intentionally cutting herself, draws blood. Her maddening desire connects her with Zuleika and her friends. Her desire must be satisfied. Whereas the book alludes to fertility, the film stresses sexuality and desire, thereby undermining the story through images, again, without sound. After the subversive act of constituting the sexual body comes the act of abolishing the body's limits, annihilating the distance between the body and what lies outside of it by mutilation, by the eruption of the body fluids. At this point one can contrast the positioning of the woman in the story and in the film. In the story it is her social position that is emphasized. In the film it is the sexual body.

Both texts, the written and the visual, are based on commonality and seriality. The title "The Thousand Wives of Naftali SimanTov" (changed in the film to *A Thousand and One Wives*) indicates an undifferentiated and serialized mass of women. The number one thousand is equivalent to unlimited (the thousand wives of King Solomon) or unparticularized. "In a thousand tongues people lay in wait for him [Naftali] under the bed" (Seri 1987, 24). And "even if you wait a thousand years you will never see her [Flora] dead," Naftali consoles himself (27).

In the story, Flora attempts to end the cycle, whereas Naftali seeks to thwart this attempt by restoring order by destroying her. Seriality is at the heart of woman's social positioning. To be a good woman means to be one of Naftali's wives, one of a group of undifferentiated women all of whom fulfill the same role, one in a chain of objects designed for his sexual satisfaction and for the constitution of his social position. "You are a good woman," says Naftali to Flora—until she becomes pregnant—and he repeats this before the murder. Flora disrupts this seriality by going to another man, thereby breaking the chain of good women and emerging as a woman undifferentiated from the mass, but her subversive attempt fails. Even the seriality itself is a simulation, a substitute, a transformation: all of the women in the series are interchangeable. The very act of placing them in a row is a simulation. The subversive—not revolutionary—act of female survival is an act of substitution: substituting sex for a towel, one man for another, a fetus for the anti-Christ. However, by turning to the body, the singular, the particular, the film brings this process of simulation to an end. Thus Flora, unable to overcome the power of social positioning, subverts it by choosing the sexual body for self-fulfillment. The film, acknowledging the impossibility of overcoming the force of social positioning, chooses, instead, to subvert it through the suppressed region of sexuality. But the film's subversion is much greater than the story's. Whereas the story focuses on the restoration of order, the film focuses on the sexual body;

fertility—the film focuses on sexual awakening. In the story, the only threat to seriality is Flora's act of going to another man. In the film, the threat is greater, involving the constitution of the sexual body and sexual awakening.

But the greater the subversion, the greater the failure. First of all the story, unlike the film, leaves open the possibility that the cycle will be broken, if only after the death of Flora. In the story, following the funeral, the rabbi says, "This interest in women, Mr. Naftali, even though the Torah demands it from us, perhaps it would be better to let them alone a little" (Seri 1987, 78). This sentence was cut out of the film, thereby eliminating the hope that the seriality would end. Furthermore, the fact that the film—though not the story—opens and closes with a funeral gives one a feeling of unending repetition: everything that happens after the first funeral will happen after this one, too, ad infinitum. The second thing that indicates the continuation of seriality in the film is the change in the positioning of Zuleika. In the story, she refuses to marry any of the handsome men who ask for her hand. After her death, it is revealed that she had been in love with a Torah scholar, who loved her in return. His grandfather, however, begged her to leave him alone, and she died of a broken heart. None of this remains in the film.

In the film, Zuleika, pursuing a married man, refuses to relinquish her earthy life. Gazing at Flora like a vulture, she awaits her turn in the chain of wives. As Flora lies dying inside, Zuleika follows Naftali to his doorstep. Thus, Zuleika serves as an agent for continuing the cycle, ensuring the victory of familial and communal positioning over female sexuality. In the most subversive act of all, Flora, through her body, allegorically actualizes an act of redemption—the birth of the Messiah—whereas Naftali takes the unborn child to be the devil or the anti-Christ. Naftali notices something and, when Rebbi Duak explains to him that Flora is pregnant, Naftali tries to explain it away as something that happens among the gentiles. He tries to convince Duak that there once was a woman who conceived from a spirit and not from a man. But Duak rejects this explanation, thus denying the possibility that Flora could be the Holy Virgin Mother, uncontaminated by any "snake poison" (as Naftali considers his own semen). Consequently, Flora must die.

Here again, neither the character of Flora nor the film as a whole has the power to overcome the social positioning of women. Any attempt to do so is doomed to failure. If one adds to this the attempt of the film to build upon the suppressed sexual body, the failure is magnified: the seriality that Flora has attempted to break is destined to continue. In other words, the transition from the male text (of Seri) to the female text (of Bat Adam) is also a transition of focus from the family-society positioning to bodily subversion, from the good woman to sexual awakening, which ends in the bodily concretization of the myth of redemption. The battle of the sexes thus becomes a battle between bodies: that of the Messiah and that of the woman. This intertextual element deflects the discussion to an area in which

ideological reading that sees the body as central to the gender plot. The female text, which attempts to crystallize a model of female sexuality, to constitute a female subject, is forced to do this in the margins, through suppressed elements: through the sexual body. It has not succeeded in successfully creating an alternative to the powerful Zionist model of social-professional-familial positioning, which is the dominant mechanism for turning the woman into the Other in Israeli cinema.

In the secular Zionist ethos, the body is mobilized for the historic event of redemption, the core of secular, messianic Zionism. Consequently, the body, valued primarily for its social-national function, is deprived of its privacy, its sexuality. However, in the subversive act of turning to the sexual body, Flora privileges a non-secular Sephardic messianism, a Sephardic otherness, which contrasts with Ashkenazi secular messianism. In this, Naftali, also a Sephardi Other, stands with her. His view of messianic redemption is also opposed to Zionism's secular version. Here, too, as in *Coordania* and *Lookout*, two kinds of otherness are portrayed, female and ethnic. Thus the focus of *A Thousand and One Wives* on the sexual body subverts the Zionist hegemony.

An attempt to challenge directly the dominant mechanism of social positioning is made in the "Divorce" episode of the film *Tales of Tel Aviv* (Ayelet Menachmi and Nirit Yaron, 1992). In earlier episodes, the women's professions are stereotypical. In "Sharona Honey," Sharona is an assistant art director in a country where this is not yet considered a real profession. In "Operation Cat," Zofit is both a reporter for a local journal who is fired from her job and a poet with a small modicum of success (one of her poems has been set to music). The first two episodes of *Tales of Tel Aviv* deal with the constitution of female sexuality ("Sharona Honey") and the constitution of an autonomous female subject ("Operation Cat"). At the end of the first story, Sharona screams "Why don't you listen to me?" at three of her four lovers, who insist on courting her contrary to her wishes. She insists on her right to choose her own sexuality and the kind of relationship she has with them. She does not want them bothering her all the time, making demands and proposals (especially for a common child) while ignoring what she has to say. She insists, in other words, on getting her own voice back, of being able to write her own story even if it does not jibe with that of her friends. And when she does not get what she wants, she leaves on the garbage truck that has come to clean up the city, ridding it (and her) of all the garbage that has accumulated. But, of course, this is a film about Sharona's sexuality and her sexual biography. Once again, in order to constitute the female subject, the film turns to the sexual body and the relevant mechanism—the penetrating gaze. Here it takes the form of the gaze of a male friend—through binoculars—on the roof across the street, and Sharona's gaze at the parade of men among whom she functions. While it is too difficult for her to challenge the social structure, she can, however, smash the binoculars, thus eliminating the male

This is the case in "Operation Cat" as well. Zofit is a stereotypically fragile, passive, helpless woman: she fails at a suicide attempt, loses her bank card, and finds that her job is not only not central to her life but also interferes with what has become central—rescuing a cat that has fallen through the grid of a sewer. The fact that the cat has become the focus of her life deflects her attention from far more serious matters, such as tending to her job and completing the arrangements for separating from her husband. The cat, which she succeeds in saving, is her only area of success. Zofit has applied to all the bureaucrats who run the municipal services, all male, except for the woman veterinarian of the S.P.C.A. She, by the way, is the only one whom Zofit dares to threaten. Finally, Zofit realizes that she alone is capable of saving the cat (saving herself?) and she does just that. She reaches this realization with the help of another woman, an assertive, creative career woman who is dying.

It is as if the film wants to say that such women have a place in this world only as disembodied mentors and not as real living creatures. Again, the constitution of an autonomous female subject—one who is not dependent upon or subservient to the surrounding male milieu, who is able to choose her own goals and attain them by her own efforts—cannot take place through a woman's social or professional positioning. It can only take place when this kind of positioning is nullified or at least marginalized through female solidarity or through the encouragement of a coveting male—in this case, one who not only covets her body but also appreciates her poetry. And in any event, the constitution of the female subject occurs through an act of simulation: saving the cat instead of herself. Only through the analogy of transformation can the female subject be constituted. Thus, Sharona constitutes herself as well as her biography around her sexual body and her sexuality. Zofit constitutes her subjectivity by projecting her world onto the travails of a cat. But neither of them can do it directly, just as the film itself cannot, by confronting the dominant mechanism of their marginalization—their social positioning. And then comes Tikva, the protagonist of the third episode, who tries to construct her own mechanism for obtaining a divorce. Tikva is a policewoman who does her job well, even managing to challenge the patriarchal rules of the game, which dictate sexual submission for job advancement. Tikva refuses to show favoritism in distributing parking tickets. She also performs well in her community role as a mother. Raising her children alone since her husband departed five years ago, she always keeps her promises to them. Thus, her social position is simultaneously that of a good woman—a perfect mother, holding an acceptable job—and an unflawed person—professionally honest, good parent. In short, she is a success. Tikva has not seen her runaway husband for five years. Although deserted by him, she cannot, according to rabbinical law, get a divorce without his consent. One day she spots him in a tall office building and begins to chase him. Here, too, she

her husband to agree to a divorce. When her husband succeeds in escaping, she takes hostages and refuses to release them until her husband is brought back. Thus, she takes her destiny into her own hands and, for the first time in her life, determines her husband's destiny as well. Moreover, she is ready to accept the consequences of her action and pay the price—a jail sentence. Tikva begins her odyssey by choosing divorce, thereby remaining within the rabbinical system. When the security guard offers her another option—freeing herself from the established order by having an affair—she refuses to consider this option. She wants a divorce, to be set free not by an act of her own volition but by the rabbinical establishment that has imprisoned her in the first place. She tries to create her own mechanism for liberation by forcing the police to find her husband and bring him before the rabbinate. When that does not happen fast enough, the rabbinate—in the person of one of her hostages, a rabbi—gets the religious establishment itself to go after the husband. Returning the husband to the place where she is holding the hostages, they are now willing to perform a divorce on the spot. Although Tikva has succeeded in constituting herself as a social subject and forging the mechanism for her divorce, at the last moment she relents. She is unwilling to undergo an instant divorce and now wants her husband jailed. In the final analysis, she still needs the official sanction of the establishment, which, she feels, is preferable to her own.

The female gaze, the female camera/director, in "Divorce" attempts to constitute the autonomous female subject but stops short of challenging the dominant mechanism for the reification of woman, the mechanism of community or social positioning. A more accessible option is found in what has been suppressed, the sexual body, with its accompanying mechanism, the penetrating gaze, and its thematization. At this point, in accordance with the critical traditions of feminist theory, the question arises, how can one eliminate the penetrating gaze of the camera, considering that it is itself the active cinematic apparatus? Is, therefore, the feminist cinematic project doomed to failure, or does an alternative model exist, one that includes the power struggle as a legitimate component? One can assume that it is the second alternative that we are seeking—not to distance ourselves from the penetrating gaze but rather to internalize its operating mechanism and use it to our own ends.

### Notes

1. See also Turin 1990; Seneca 1990.
2. Most recent Hollywood films in which women play leading roles are of this type. On the one hand, the woman, at the center of the movie, has some feminist traits. She has a non-stereotypical job, is autonomous and develops as a sexual being. However, these norms are subverted through the normative world of the film. This is accomplished by making negative judgments of the woman or by calling into question her profes-

(Kathryn Bigelow, 1990); *Shirley Valentine* (Lewis Gilbert, 1989); *Always* (Steven Spielberg, 1989); and *Indecent Proposal* (Adrian Lyne, 1993).

3. The reasons for this are not certain. It may be because the number of women who finish higher studies in cinema, and therefore produce short films, do not enter the film industry in as great numbers as men. Or, it may be that fewer funds, national or commercial, are entrusted to women directors. There does appear to be a correlation between the situation in the Israeli film industry and literature worldwide. In general, women seem to choose the short story form over the long novel. Perhaps the amount of time required by the shorter genre is better suited to women's economic and social situation resulting from family and home responsibilities. Similarly, until such time as women's artistic creativity is encouraged, they are not likely to embark on full-time film careers.
4. In Abraham Shlonsky's 1920 poem "Yizrael" (the valley), which praises the *halutz* (pioneer) of the Third *Aliyah* (coming of the Jews to Israel for permanent residence), he transposes physical identity into the discourse of national rhetoric. And in Bialik's poetry, eroticism was almost always read in terms of national issues. On Zionism and the erotic, see also Biale (1992, 176-203).
5. For an extremely blunt, and controversial, example, see Yona Wallach's poetry.
6. On changes in the balance of the racial power structure between Ashkenazi and Sephardi in this scene, see Ben-Shaul (1987).

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## Feminism under Siege

### *The Vicarious Selves of Israeli Women Writers*

*I live on the top floors now, she summed it up to herself,  
where there is a constant commotion, workrooms, children's  
rooms, the kitchen, the living room, all kinds of things.  
[Only] the cellar is locked, and I don't even know where the  
key is [any more]. Perhaps one should not know.*

—FROM SHULAMITH HAREVEN, *A City of Many Days*<sup>1</sup>

IN THIS PASSAGE the age-old metaphor of the house as the image of its tenant is given an added twist. The vertical division of this dwelling, whose upper floors are full of movement and light in contrast to the locked cellar below, offers a clear analogue to Freud's topographic model of the human psyche. The female voice using this metaphor, however, seems to question the very foundation of the Freudian quest when she suggests that one may do better to leave the underground room of the unconscious inaccessible.

This questioning of the usefulness of introspection grows out of the experience of Sarah Amarillo, the protagonist of the novel in which Shulamith Hareven reconstructs life in Jerusalem under the British Mandate, before and during World War II. Although the impulse for self-knowledge is quite palpable here, it clearly stops short of breaking into the locked psychological "cellar." Self-knowledge is thus displaced to externally observable facts, and a potential psychological exploration turns into a socio-cultural inquiry. Situated as it is a few pages before the end of the novel (184 in the Hebrew edition; 199 in the English translation), this arrested introspection functions as the author's culminating reflection on the uneasy coexistence of modern psychology within a society of collective persua-