

Victimhood, Protest, and Agency in Contemporary Mizrahi Films in Israel

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Introduction

Scholarship on Israeli society, culture, and politics has shown a growing interest in the predicament of the Mizrahi/Sephardi community which comprises of Jews whose origins are largely in the Arab/Muslim Middle East and North Africa. [\[1\]](#) The socio-cultural marginalization and displacement of the Mizrahim in Israel is often contrasted in this scholarship with the status and privileges enjoyed by the hegemonic Ashkenazim -- Jews of a European descent. Seminal works in the late 1980s by Ella Shohat -- *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989), Shlomo Swirski -- *Israel: The Oriental Majority* (1989), and Daniel Elazar -- *The Other Jews: The Sephardim Today* (1989), set the parameters for the ethno-political counter-hegemonic discourse and have inspired the recent scholarly commitment to examine the ethnic dilemma of the Mizrahim.

The earlier, mostly benign views regarding the Mizrahi/Sephardi issue in the nascent state tended to attribute this community's inferior socio-economic status to the following factors: (1) general harsh economic conditions during the time of the immigrants' absorption in Israel, mostly in the 1950s and 1960s; (2) the role of seniority -- (Mizrahi) newcomers vs. (Ashkenazi) old-timers -- in determining social mobility and political clout; and (3) the Mizrahi immigrants' baggage of the putatively "primitive" traditions which have hindered their full integration and assimilation into the modern Israeli life and its western-oriented ideology and culture. The abovementioned critical works undermined these heuristic models and maintained that the marginalization of the Mizrahi has been ideological and structural rather than episodic and circumstantial, namely, that from the outset, Zionism was a colonial movement where its lofty socialist ideology merely obfuscated its pernicious agenda and practice, and that its very modernist project was predicated on and made possible by labor exploitation, discrimination, and the oppression of Mizrahim (and Palestinians).

"Victimization" and "victimhood," terms which I intend to explore here, loom large and inspire various artistic, journalistic, and scholarly works on the Mizrahi community. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between victimhood and agency in contemporary Mizrahi cinema. Challenging the widespread positioning of the former against the latter, in my analysis of Mizrahi cinema I seek to point to the relevance of victimhood to agency and of the relations between the two to the formation of group identity. My contention is that victimhood, the formation of the subaltern's collective self, and agency have more to do with a lived experience than with people's origins. In the following section, I will identify the roots of the compartmentalization of the discourse about victimhood away from articulations about agency. I will suggest that protest -- motivated by a sense of victimhood and, congruently, also meant to effect change -- epitomizes the link between the two. Consequently, I will expound on three films about Mizrahi protest that clearly upset the

binary positioning of agency vs. victimhood but which also raise questions about the relations between theory and cinematic praxis.

Victimhood and Agency

Contemporary scholarship in media and cultural studies often favors works whose emphasis is on agency, change, and social consciousness. The coinage "beyond victimhood" is meant precisely to supplant the trudging, even uninspiring work on victimhood with the zestful politics of empowering and agency. What then triggers this lopsided focus on agency? To a large extent, the limited discourse about victimhood derives from contemporary cultural studies' disenchantment with "top-down" conceptualizations about people's cultures, societies, and politics as articulated by orthodox Marxism and the Frankfurt School. This is clearly not meant to suggest that recent scholarship discounts the severity of displacements, deprivations, and oppressions that have taken place in the modern era, but rather to point to the emergence of theoretical models that problematise a monolithic reading of history and power. One of the most significant contributions of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was its effort to articulate and situate agency within pre-given, deep-seated, structural power imbalances. Congruently, one of the central dilemmas tackled in the most recent issue of *History and Anthropology*, titled *The Politics of Victimhood*, is "[H]ow do claims to passive victimization come up against counter-claims of agency or perpetration?" (eds. Laura Jeffery and Matei Candea, 2006: 287). In this context, if victimhood and victimization are likely to connote passivity and *fait accompli*, agency, as a social praxis, signifies change (or at least the determination to effect it), empowerment, and a process by which collective identities are becoming.

Arguably, another related factor that has further contributed to the gradual diminishing of scholarly interest in victimhood pertains to postmodernist and poststructuralist conceptualizations that deem cohesive individual and collective identities as social constructs only and thereby eschew notions of "natural" or essentialist identities. In contrast, expressions about victimhood can be, albeit too simplistically in my view, interpreted as derivative of an essentialist stance. For example, we may look at a position adopted by those afflicted by the perpetrators' heinous deeds; in professing their victimhood, the victims are likely to argue that "we are discriminated against because of who we *are*" (e.g., African-Americans, Mizrahim, or women); the oppression or victimization is understood by its victims as a targeting of their group based on their racial and ethnic origins, even on biology or sex, namely, on "pre-given" categories. In claiming such discrimination, they proffer a position that smacks of essentialism, even when the essentialist stand is attributed to the dominant group and intends to challenge it. It is precisely this adaptation of predetermined essentialist categories of which the contemporary theories I alluded to are suspicious.

Yet Diana Fuss (1989:xi-xii) and Robert Stam and Ella Shohat (1994:346) remind us that the construct "essentialism" has no essence; rather, it is a polysemic sign that is deployed differently in different contexts and for different purposes, and hence "strategic essentialism." Similarly, bell hooks postulates that a critique of essentialist stances "can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency" (1990: 28). Addressing the concern that postmodernist critique of essentialism would rob African-Americans of their "specific history" (including racism and victimization) and "unique sensibilities," bell hooks offers, "[A]n adequate response to this concern is to critique essentialism while emphasizing the significance of '*the authority of experience*'" (1990: 29, emphasis added). These conceptualizations of essentialism call, therefore, for a modified and more nuanced reading of

the relations between victimhood, lived experience, and agency whereby the latter can no longer be posited as the binary opposite of the former and whereby victimhood need not be articulated along rigid and monosemic essentialist stances. The following discussion is then meant to steer away from two problematic positions: one that altogether elides any discourse on victimhood and focuses only on agency, and the other, a view that draws a categorical distinction between victimhood and agency. In my view, these positions often overlook the formative power of shared experiences (e.g., victimization) in the forging of identities, bonds, coalitions, and awareness (i.e., agency). Importantly though, the latter position has been central to the Zionist narrative and constitutes yet another key explanation for the condemnation of victimhood in the Israeli socio-political discourse and praxis. In order to explicate the position I offer here and the alternative it provides, we need to examine the specific modalities of "victimhood" in the context of the Israeli psyche.

Zionist ethos figures centrally the *sabra* -- a native-born Israeli who is independent, assertive, strong, healthy, and active rather than reflective. Oz Almog's *The Sabra - A Profile* (2004), provides a comprehensive account of the mythic-like *sabra* figure and explicates its casting as the radical inversion of the diasporic Jew, perceived as dependent, rootless, and meek. In this binary positioning of the native-born Israeli against the diasporic Jew, the Zionist movement sanctioned the birth of the *sabra* as the "new breed of Jew"; if the *sabra* is isomorphic with agency (and masculinity), victimization, associated with the Jewish diasporic experience, conjures up passivity (and femininity). Accordingly, in the years immediately following World War II, Zionism saw mostly shame in the Jewish experience of the Holocaust; in contrast to the glorification of those who participated in the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1944, the overwhelming majority of Jews exterminated in Europe were berated for being a submissive mass that was "led like lambs to the slaughter." Importantly though, I would argue that the fate of Holocaust survivors ("human dust" in the words of former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion) and the dead is associated with victimization, not with victimhood, and I wish to distinguish here between the two. Whereas victimization often focuses on the action itself (e.g., the physical or emotional violation and abuse of subjects) or its experience by those on whom this action is inflicted, victimhood attests to a condition and a state of mind of the victims. A sense of victimhood, at least from the perspective of the hegemonic group (or perpetrators), often connotes not only victims' fixation on their predicament, but also the exploitation of their condition to gain various societal and financial benefits they may not deserve. Therefore, if "victimization" generally arouses sympathy toward the victims and underscores their innocence, "victimhood" is often meant to elicit disapproval and even contempt.

A significant number of recent studies about the Mizrahi community of Israel, including Sami Shalom Chetrit's *The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel 1948-2003* (2004), Yehuda Shenhav's *The Arab-Jews* (2003), and Aharon Yitzhaki's *The Mask* (2003), attest in unequivocal terms to the cultural displacement and discrimination that Mizrahi Jews have faced mostly in the early years following their immigration from North Africa and the Middle East. Importantly though, broaching the Mizrahi plight in Israeli discourse is still often dismissed as yet another cry of victimhood. The Hebrew term "*korbanoot*" denotes precisely what "victimhood" does in English, but it has a strong connotation of people's undue whining and an unjustified sense of entitlement. In other words, if being a victim has been reproved in Zionist discourse, betraying sentiments of victimhood is even further reproached; these subjects are seen as flaunting their pain, already a social taboo, where it is assumed that other members of society have suffered no less. It is in this context that, in the Israeli realm, victimhood has been construed in opposition to the willingness to sacrifice one's self for the state. Whereas

sacrifice signifies, paradoxically one may say, agency as well as the readiness of individuals to give away their goods for the collective and even to risk their lives for a national cause, victimhood is associated with passivity and neediness; with groups that persist in getting what, in the first place, it is doubtful they deserve.

Clearly, we may suggest that the dominant group's dismissal of victimhood, as conceptualized here, is meant precisely to silence protest and, thereby, to re-inscribe power imbalances. But in the films explored here emphasis is given not so much to the designation of victimhood by the hegemonic group as much as to its construction in recent films made by first- and second-generation Mizrahi/Sephardi immigrants. I will focus on *The Black Panthers (in Israel) Speak, Have You Heard about the Panthers?* and *Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle*, all documentaries that explicitly explore the Mizrahi predicament and struggle. These films betray, at least to an extent, a sense of victimhood which both lends itself to rigid essentialist positions and alternatively, is implicated by them. Indeed, I would argue that Mizrahi subjects in these films are initially motivated by a sense of victimhood and that the films' construction of Mizrahi identity is predicated mostly on ethnic and geographical origins. Yet, I am most interested in discerning the filmic presentation of the interrelations between structure and change, victimhood and consciousness/agency, and essentialist and constructionist positions. As we shall see, in the last account, all three films guide us to rearticulate Mizrahi victimhood and to reassess essentialist conceptualizations of *Mizrahiyoot* ("Easternness"). My analysis will suggest that the films also attest to a Mizrahi struggle that is consciousness-based, rather than prescribed or predetermined by genealogical origins.

The Black Panthers (in Israel) Speak (ha'Panterim ha'Sh'horim Medabrim) (2003)

The film *The Black Panthers Speak* assembles the founders and the most prominent figures of the Israeli Black Panthers ethnic movement of the early 1970s. Together, they reminisce on the origins of the movement, the sociopolitical realm in which they operated, and the racial and social struggles that inspired them, such as the American Black Panthers whose name they appropriated. Haim Hanegbi, an activist in the radical movement Matzpen, which was established in the early 1960s, provides his perspective on his movement's collaboration with the Black Panthers. The film and its speakers explore these issues as a springboard to assess the movement's legacy and its relevancy to the Mizrahi condition at the present. *The Black Panthers* begins with the caption, "This independent film was produced with no financial assistance from Israeli cinema foundations, all of which have rejected it." (After the completion of the film, it received a grant from the Israeli Makor Foundation). At the very outset then, the film evokes a sense of victimhood by creating a subtle analogy between the (negative) reception of the film by the Israeli media establishment and the discrimination of the Mizrahim in general. Consequently, over still pictures of the Musrara neighborhood in Jerusalem where the Black Panthers' revolt burst forth in March 1971, crawling titles provide information about the dire state of the Mizrahim. The communities of the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi are depicted in binary opposite terms -- for example, "1970 -- Israel is divided. The economy and power dominated by Ashkenazim while Mizrahi Jews were exploited as cheap laborers." Statistics about Mizrahi unemployment, education, and poverty are interspersed throughout the film, again, often to starkly contrast them with the socioeconomic status of the Ashkenazi. The emphasis on unchanged conditions (the continuity between past and present), the homogenization of each of the two groups, and the references to ethnic/geographical origins, seem to re-inscribe essentialist formulations of the two groups.

I would argue that, like other films discussed here, *The Black Panthers Speak* does not fall into a reactionary form of essentialism; not only does it use essentialist positions strategically, but it also facilitates a refreshing conceptualization of "essentialism." Historiographic and discursive contextualization of a position, movement, and struggle often render simplistic and sweeping generalizations associated with ahistorical essentialism untenable. The film (like the study *The Mizrahi Struggle in Israel 1948-2003*, authored by the film's co-director Chetrit) explores the modalities of the Mizrahi condition and strives to reveal the evolution of ethnic protest over the years and the connections between its outbursts -- indeed, to attest to change through continuity. Former Black Panthers, Reuven Abergil and Haim Hanegbi, claim in the film's first interviews that the Black Panthers' revolt was a direct offspring of the Wadi Salib riots of 1959 where economically deprived Mizrahi immigrants clashed with Israeli police. [2] Later, the Mizrahi Orthodox party of Shas is understood to rise to power due to the efforts of the Black Panthers. (However, most of the film's participants render this trajectory of the movement detrimental to the Mizrahi cause). The progression of the Mizrahi struggle and the allusions the film makes to the various political and social positions the Mizrahim have taken over the years, encourage complex, dynamic, contingent, and multilayered formulations of *Mizrahiyoot* and ethnic struggle and make the link between victimhood and agency explicit.

This "de-essentialization" of the Mizrahi in *The Black Panthers Speak* is further illustrated in some of the interviewees' views of their struggle. Kokhavi Shemesh, one of the Black Panthers' ideologues, reveals that his movement had to confront Mizrahi organizations which were co-opted into and collaborated with Israeli authorities' repression of the movement. Similarly, he is dismayed that, at present, no Mizrahi revolution can take place because many of the potential "soldiers" of the revolution -- the Mizrahi poor -- have turned to drugs rather than to social and political activism. In these references, Shemesh not only eschews notions of Mizrahi unity and comity, but he broaches the possibility that Mizrahi agency is highly imbricated with awareness, positions taken, and choices made, and is hardly determined by pre-given origins.

Have You Heard about the Panthers? (Shama'ta al ha'Panterim?) (2002)

In this film, Mossek incorporates clips from his 1973 film about the Black Panthers -- *Have You Heard about the Panthers, Mr. Moshe?* -- with a journey he is taking in the present with three of the movement's leaders to find the whereabouts of the movement's other founders. Again, this film engages the victimization of the Mizrahi and the film characters' sense of victimhood. In the first few scenes, the film addresses the Israeli authorities' ill-treatment of residents of the Musrara and Sham'aa Mizrahi neighborhoods in Jerusalem. In addition to the dire housing conditions there, the film implies that the settling of the new immigrants in this neighborhood near the border rendered them cannon fodder in the years prior to the '67 War. Locals of these neighborhoods attest in the film that, triggered by increased property values in these areas after the '67 War, the government attempted to evict them. Also, they relay their sense of anger and frustration following Prime Minister Golda Meir's and Mayor of Jerusalem Teddy Kollek's disparaging and condescending responses to their pleas at that time. Similarly, Charlie Bitton, one of the three leaders featured in the film, maintains that, on his way to screen the film abroad in the 1970s, Israeli *Shabbak* (GSS -- General Security Service, the equivalent of the American FBI) agents stole what was believed to be the film's only copy from his suitcase. [3]

However, like *The Black Panthers Speak*, this film does not dwell on victimhood; instead, it is designed to raise consciousness, and ultimately, it centers on the residues and the relevancy of the 1970s struggle to Israeli society today. Mossek and his interlocutors contemplate the possibility of re-establishing the movement to fight injustice in present-day social and ethnic power disparities. Importantly, the titles of both films on the Black Panthers bespeak the filmmakers' intent to expose a voice that had previously been elided, ignored, or unknown ("have you heard"/"the Black Panthers speak"); the films, literally, provide a stage for the Panthers to speak and to be heard in what amounts to "presencing" the absence of this movement and to advocate agency which is propelled by a sense of victimhood.

Ancient Winds: Moroccan Chronicle (Ru'ah Kadim: Cronica Maroka'it) (2002)

The film (shown on Israeli television as a mini-series) features six Moroccan Jews who immigrated to Israel in their formative years: former Black Panther Reuven Abergil; poet, scholar, educator, and social activist Sami Shalom Chetrit; Ezer Bitton, resident and former secretary general of a small settlement near the Lebanese border; Ovad Abutbul, an activist in the public-housing campaign; Arieh Deri, former leader of the Shas party who was removed from office and convicted on charges of embezzlement; and Labor party member and ex-government minister Shlomo Ben-Ami.

More than the other films discussed above, *Ancient Winds* provides an elaborate chronicle of victimization. The film opens with the Moroccan national anthem, thus situating the film, from its outset, outside the hegemonic Zionist discourse. The Moroccan anthem is played over images of the demonstration on September 3, 1999, when Deri's supporters gathered to say farewell to their leader who was about to start his time in jail. In this rally, Deri's reference to this day of conviction as "The Bastille Day of Sephardic (Mizrahi) Jewry" is meant to conjure up images of group persecution and repression (and, as we shall see, also of a Sephardi revolution), themes to which he returns throughout his film interviews.

In other scenes, Deri and Ben-Ami express their disappointment with their Ashkenazi political partners; Abergil reveals the systematic selection (filtering out) the Israel absorption authorities enacted in bringing Moroccan Jews to Israel, often allowing only the young to immigrate; and Abutbul points to housing policies that blatantly discriminated against the Mizrahim. The film intensifies the mode of victimhood by underscoring the public apology made by Barak (the head of the Labor party then and the parliament's opposition leader) in September 1997 to the "transient camps generation" (read Mizrahi) for the wrongs inflicted on them by previous Israeli Labor governments. Similarly, in the following sequence, the camera lingers on a mass demonstration following Barak's election for Prime Minister in May 17, 1999; the crowd supporting Barak keeps chanting "anything but Shas" in a plea for the elected Prime Minister to form a coalition government without the Orthodox Mizrahi party, which at that time has just won the substantial number of seventeen seats in the Israeli parliament. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these last scenes impels us to interrelate the events and, thereby, it confers an additional meaning on our reading of each. A prolonged audio overlap of "anything but Shas" leads from the first scene to the second in this sequence. Not only does Barak's apology in the earlier scene seem hypocritical now, but, in turn, the anti-Shas sentiments are understood within the ethnic framework of that apology; namely, within the context of discrimination and an ethnophobic attitude. The racial aspect of this demonstration becomes explicit when Deri, Shas's leader until later that year, suggests in the film that had the demonstrators called "anything but Yisrael ba'Aliya" (a party of and for Russian newcomers), the Russian immigrants would have turned to the U.N. to condemn

Israel for its racism. But whereas the film unabashedly resorts to victimhood predicated on originary essentialist positions (best illustrated in the film's structuring around the stories of six Israeli Jews, all of whom are of Moroccan descent), its agenda lies elsewhere; as the next section illustrates, the film calls for swift, radical, and revolutionary sociopolitical changes, including the termination of Ashkenazi hegemony.

In concluding this discussion about victimhood and consciousness, it bears noting that the filmmakers whose works are discussed here -- Hamo, Mossek, and Benchetrit -- conveyed in my interviews that they eschew notions of *Mizrahiyoot* (and thereby of ethnic struggle) predicated on origins; rather, they deem it a state of mind, awareness, and sensitivity which is also open to Ashkenazim (interviews with Eli Hamo, 6/2/2004, Nissim Mossek, 5/14/2004, and David Benchetrit, 6/24/2004). Accordingly, they proffer that Ashkenazim can actually have "Mizrahi consciousness" and participate in the Mizrahi struggle. Conversely, they suggested that Mizrahim who lack this awareness and do not protest the Mizrahi condition either choose to collaborate with the oppressive hegemony or comply with it; either way, they are not to be the soldiers of the ethno-political strife the filmmakers envision. By undermining *Mizrahiyoot* as a default condition for the Jewish immigrants from the Arab/Muslim world, these filmmakers point to agency that is inspired by a full awareness of the victimization of Mizrahi Jews and is informed by the larger ethno-class power disparities in Israeli society.

This analysis is not meant to render yet another set of binary oppositional concepts -- geographic origins on the one hand and "Mizrahi consciousness" on the other. What should figure centrally in these conceptualizations about group identities are the experiences the members of the groups have in common, and, in the case of the Mizrahim, the experiences pertaining to their immigration and settlement, such as life in the *ma'abara* (transient camps), the forced settlement in development towns, and the limited professional and economic opportunities. It is noteworthy that *Mizrahiyoot* was formed in Israel, first by the government administration (coining *edot ha'Mizrah* -- Mizrahi communities) and, later on, as a self-designated identity implying some cohesion and a sense of belonging. It is clear, then, that in the case of the Mizrahim, the identity marker -- and, one would argue, by extension the actual emerging identity -- defy unequivocal articulations of Mizrahi identity as predicated either on its origins in the Arab/Muslim world or as an invented construct. Indeed, time and again, Jewish immigrants from the Middle East have attested that in their countries of origin they were not considered Mizrahim or Sephardim, but simply Jews -- a designation meant to distinguish between them and their mostly Muslim and Christian cohabitants of the Middle East. It is precisely in this context that we need to look at the Mizrahi protest; for many Mizrahim, the protest itself has become a formative experience and a catalyst in the emergence of a collective identity.

The Modalities of Mizrahi Protest

The language used in the films discussed here often proffers a specific form of agency by conjuring up a struggle tantamount to a civil war, a coup where Mizrahim ought to forcefully grab power rather than comply with the present social/ethnic order. Participants in these films employ terms such as "outburst," "explosion," and "uprising" in their allusions to the change they call for. Former Black Panther Victor Alush angrily cries in *The Black Panthers Speak*, "you take your rights; you don't receive them." Importantly, the Hebrew title of Benchetrit's film (literally "Eastern Wind") is taken from Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezekiel:19) about destruction and doom. The images and editing strategies employed in *Ancient Winds* further

the participants' ominous tone. The film opens with a dedication to David Ben-Harush, the leader and instigator of the Wadi Salib riots. Following the dedication is the sequence of the protest against Deri's impending imprisonment. Importantly, Deri starts his address in this scene with "Remember this day, friends? The revolution day," and then he repeats "The Bastille Day of Sephardic Jewry" twice. Deri has also the last say in Benchetrit's film -- over images of fire burning to venerate the grave of Sephardi spiritual leader the Baba Sali, the former government minister and Knesset member Arie Deri prophesies, "I have no doubt that, eventually, a great explosion will take place here."

Contemporary Mizrahi protest is intimately implicated in a "radical leftist" politics vis-à-vis the Palestinian dilemma. Former Black Panther Shemesh relates in *The Black Panthers Speak* that he used to encounter people who suggested that he and his fellow activists needed to avoid politics and focus instead on ethnic and social issues, a plea that is encoded in the attempt to wrench the social from the political. His response to them has been, "Why not [engage in politics]? Is it an Ashkenazi privilege?" Haim Hanegbi of Matzpen expresses similar sentiments in the film. For him, the history of Israel is rife with instances in which social issues had to give way to "security emergencies." (The Black Panthers movement itself dissolved with the start of the 1973 War). It is in this context that Black Panther Sa'adia Marciano professes in this film that waving the social and the political flags together is essential. In their heyday, the Panthers understood that one dilemma -- the ethnic and social discrimination -- cannot be solved without attending to the other -- the oppression of the Palestinians. Similarly, former government minister Ben-Ami decries in Benchetrit's *Ancient Winds* what he deems the fiction that the social is Mizrahi and the political is Ashkenazi. Although he held various portfolios during his political career, Ben-Ami maintains that in years past the expectation from him as a Mizrahi was, as he maintains, "to worry about how to provide [also, divide] bread and not how to divide Jerusalem" (in a possible peace treaty).

Again, creating the link between the dilemmas of the Mizrahi and Palestinian, a theme clearly explored in Shohat's works (most explicitly in *Israeli Cinema*, 1989, and *Anomalies of the National*, 1989), and in Yosefa Loshitzky's discussion of "alternative coalitions" in her *Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen* (2003), attests to alliances and a collective social consciousness that transcend the putative passivity which is implied in both victimhood and victimization. As I have maintained here, a broad social consciousness of this kind redefines the relations between victimhood and agency, to wit, the shared experiences are indeed the fodder for the latter and this emerging dynamic in the form of coalitions is clearly not based on rigid essentialist positions pertaining to ethnic or national origins alone.

Protest Films and Films about Protest

My focus in the following discussion of protest films is motivated by two considerations: (1) Protest films are posited to explore the dialectics of power, i.e., victimhood and agency, because by their very nature they are meant to empower and mobilize those who have been victimized; (2) Because protest cinema is an exemplar of the medium's formulations of struggle and agency, it can serve as a litmus test for the potency of the theories addressing social or cinematic intervention and subversion.

I would suggest the following characterizations of a protest film in the context of Mizrahi cinema. (1) The film explicitly contests the hegemony and, relatedly, the protest is a constitutive element of the film. (2) In order to challenge the dominant Ashkenazi-Zionist group, the film has to articulate aspects of the Mizrahi dilemma and offer a solution and

agency. In other words, victimization and the sense of victimhood need to be imbricated in the action sought. (3) The film maker has personal stakes in the film's social agenda. In this context, Alcoff's (1991/2: 23) preference for "speaking with" over "speaking for" is relevant and useful. (4) The film's focalization -- the structural and cognitive mode from which the story is told, not only its point of view -- is anchored in the underprivileged Mizrahi group. Additionally, in evaluating protest films we should ask what a film does, not only what it contains. Therefore, guided by Downing's assertion that in defining radical alternative media, "context and consequences must be our primary guides" (2001: x), in my analysis of Mizrahi protest cinema I will explore the reception and framing of a film among film critics, social activists, and the general public. It should be noted here that my discussion of Mizrahi protest cinema is not meant to propose that there is a quintessential protest film nor that protest films are more likely to effect change; rather, it is meant to explore the different dimensions of agency the films discussed here propagate.

Given the abovementioned considerations, *Ancient Winds* and *The Black Panthers Speak* should certainly be considered protest films. As my discussion of these films has suggested, not only do they meet all the criteria outlined here, but they were clearly received by audiences and critics alike as protest films. Conversely, I would suggest *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* is of a different ilk; a comparison between Mossek's *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* and Hamo and Chetrit's *The Black Panthers Speak* reveals that while Mossek's film significantly enhances our understanding of victimhood and agency, it is hardly a protest film.

One of the criteria I addressed earlier for protest cinema is the extent to which the makers of the films are politically or socially invested in their work and in the struggle in which their characters engage. On the face of it, Mossek is heavily committed to the Black Panthers' cause -- he made a film about their struggle over thirty years ago, and he reminisces in voice-over in his newer film about his collaboration with the Black Panthers in the early 1970s, "I joined them to make a *protest film*", and he subtly prods his subjects to re-unite and re-form the movement. Likewise, Mossek includes himself in the film's diegesis -- he provides first-person narration, appears throughout the film, and he instigates some of the encounters. But it is precisely here that we can distinguish between *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* and *The Black Panthers Speak* to articulate their different treatment of the Black Panthers' protest. I already pointed to the significance of these films' titles, but it is as important to reveal the latent meaning of each. To put it flatly, Mossek's title can be understood as a literal prefatory question -- "Have you heard about the Panthers?" -- whereby if the assumed answer is "no," the filmmaker presents his film as if to say "OK, let *me* tell you about them." In contrast, the literal interpretation of Hamo and Chetrit's film title may be one of duty -- "The Black Panthers speak, so let's be quiet and listen to them." The former clearly creates a cinematic and discursive distance between the filmmaker and his subjects which, I would argue, has the effect of detracting from Mossek's full engagement and investment in the Panthers' protest. Ironically then, Mossek's presence in the film and his interventions in his subjects' story derail the focus from the Panthers' protest to the filmmaker's tale about making a film on the Black Panthers. Occasionally, Mossek challenges the former Black Panthers and he even questions Charlie Bitton about his ability to lead a struggle considering his comfortable life at the present. Conversely, Hamo and Chetrit's absence from the film's diegesis intensifies their commitment to the cause of their subjects. As Chetrit indicated in a public screening of his film (3/9/2005, University of Texas at Austin), in making *The Black Panthers Speak*, he and Hamo genuinely sought to let their subjects speak, which, in turn, necessitated minimal intervention on the filmmakers' part.

Certain aesthetic devices employed in *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* are constitutive of the filmmaker's distanced position from the struggle he depicts. In the footage from Mossek's 1970s film which is used in his recent film, locals walk by the graffiti "the Black Panthers," positioned at the center of the frame. "Have You Heard about" is then keyed in above the graffiti and "Mr. Moshe" below it to create the full title of the original film. We may interpret this device in the original film to fuse the pro-filmic and extra-diegetic materials as an attempt to erase the aesthetic and discursive difference between subjects from both ends of the camera. Yet, "the Black Panthers" is self referential -- the former Panthers are directly signified by their graffiti; conversely, the filmmaker's addition "Have You Heard about"/"Mr. Moshe" creates an aesthetic and positional gap between him as a "speaker" and those the film is about.

Relatedly, *Have You Heard about the Panthers?* opens with the former Panthers gathering in their childhood neighborhood of Musrara and, as if to rekindle their protest of three decades ago, they plan to repaint the Black Panthers' graffiti on the same wall on which it was once painted. Following these opening scenes, the film returns to that wall toward the end as the former Black Panthers now actually repaint the graffiti. Then, at the film's conclusion, the same wall is shown again, only this time the graffiti is gone (the police erased it) -- an image that coincides with Mossek's somewhat condescending voice-over, "but the Panthers movement itself was anyhow erased." Their erasure, therefore, is conclusive both literally and figuratively. However, whereas the plans to re-form the movement are not materialized, the film *does* reach a completion, a resolution, precisely because it employs the graffiti/movement erasure as its climactic point; to put it bluntly, I would argue that the failure of one -- the re-formation of the movement -- is the (dramatic) success of the other -- the film. This assessment of the two films bespeaks the shortcoming of "insiderism"; the belonging of filmmakers to a certain group (Mossek is of a Balkan Sephardi origin), their commitment to its cause, and their knowledge from inside of that group may still end up in the filmmakers speaking for that group rather than speaking with it.

Afterword: On Theory and Cinematic Praxis

The aptness of cinema to guide us in reconceptualizing the power of the margins and to offer sites of intervention and struggle is encoded as much in its fundamental form as in its narratives. The cinematic notions of "mimetic surplus" and the unresolved tension between a film's narrative and its discourse (as articulated for example by Stephen Heath, 1975: 49-50) deem impossible a dialogic closure and render a textual field ripe for subversive and radical readings. This indeterminacy includes the film's subjects. In 'A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema' Laura Marks's strives to articulate agency that is devoid of essentialist positions and asserts that the subversive voice should not be unitary, intended to offer an ultimate truth, nor be appropriated as such:

[T]he power for the people in the process of becoming is the power of the false, an assertion that will not privilege *their* experience as truth either, only undermine the hegemonic character of official images, clichés, and other totalizing regimes of truth.? In the cinema, 'powers of the false' are at work when there is no single point that can be referred to as real or true. (1994: 260, original emphasis)

"The power of the false" in Mark's discussion of diasporan cinema/people is intended to undo the double colonization (i.e., subjugation predicated on internally and externally produced

discourses); the subversive discourse alternative should steer away from either an imitation or inversion of the hegemonic one in order to "destroy [the] myth[s] from the inside" (Deleuze, in Marks, 1994: 262).

Protest cinema may then be thought of as the distilled form and centerpiece of subversive or resistant political films. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, an analysis of Mizrahi protest films reveals that their (sub)texts are hardly congruent with the formulations of (discursive) struggle and the construction of alternative narratives as articulated in the works of Homi Bhabha who argues that intervention and resistance are predicated on ambivalence (1985:154) and proposes that agency is the activity of the contingent (1994:185-187), bell hooks, who advocates a community of resistance that *chooses* marginality (1990:149-150), and Marks (1994). *Ancient Winds* and *The Black Panthers Speak* have no interest in proffering one more version of truth as Marks envisions minority cinema; Benchetrit, Hamo, and Chetrit recruit an array of cinematic devices to inscribe their narrative as a replacement to and displacement of the Zionist prevailing discourse, not a supplement to or merely a different reading of it. For example, these films do not include views of contesting parties (one form of which would have been to juxtapose existing interviews with adversarial agendas); thus, again, they frustrate any possibility of a dialogical discourse. Indeed, film reviewers of *Ancient Winds* generally underscored (whether critically or not) the filmmaker's effort to do away, once and for all, with the deception embedded in the Zionist discourse, and they noted that the film is not simply an effort to mend Israel's historiography, but an enterprise to rewrite it (Gal, 9/13/2002:24-28, Ohovski, 9/18/2002:7, Alfer, 9/20/2002:A16). The interspersed quotations from Zionist leaders' degrading statements about Mizrahim (e.g., "a European Jew is worth twice a Kurdish Jew", and "the divine presence has deserted the Mizrahi Jews and their influence on the Jewish people has ceased") in *The Black Panthers Speak* is clearly not meant to open up dialogue or a discursive exchange; the sole purpose is to use those statements (mostly from the pre-statehood period or immediately following the creation of the State) as exemplars of the Zionist discourse at large and to rebuke it altogether. Furthermore, these films reject the multivalent facets of power and the plurality of voices. As I have shown, the two protest films discussed here may have taken a nuanced, non-essentialist stand on group identities, but the struggle they depict and wish for is formulated in diametrically opposite ethical and political terms of the "us versus them" ilk. These dichotomist constructions in the films discussed here should not surprise us then; *Ancient Winds* and *The Black Panthers Speak* make little attempt to articulate intra-ethnic differences, Jewish inter-ethnic commonalities, or to attend to the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender.

In my view, the gaps between the discourses rendered in protest films and some of the contemporary scholarship about political struggle should not necessarily be attributed to the latter's (at least partial) irrelevancy to the analysis of resistance cinema at large. Rather, perhaps protest films are an extreme and unique form of resistance in cinema and, therefore, are *atypical* of the genre. Indeed, a rather significant number of Israeli films about Mizrahi protest (e.g., Duki Dror's *Café Noa*, 1996, Rami Kimchi's *Cinema Egypt*, 2003, Ronen Amar's *My Family's Pizza*, 2003, Rino Tzror and Doron Tsabari's *Underdogs: A War Movie*, 1996, and Erez Laufer's *Zehava Ben: A Solitary Star*, 1996) fashion their resistance to the hegemonic narrative in ways that are more congruent with the prominent postmodern and poststructuralist scholarship, as outlined above, on ethnic and political struggle.

Yet, in conclusion, I would also like to broach the possibility that the discrepancy in the understanding of struggle and intervention to which I allude here derives from an actual gap

between the abovementioned theories and practice in (Mizrahi) cinema. Indeed, it is rather tempting, for example, to interpret Marks's "power of the false" (or for that matter, Bhabha's "intervention" and bell hook's "community of resistance") as her inclination and desire that the subaltern's struggle should take a route markedly different than that which is normally adopted by radical groups. Interestingly, Marks and other poststructuralist and postcolonial scholars often resort to subjunctive pronouncements in their analysis of a radical social change and, thus, they become more advocates or promoters of certain kinds of societal and ideological changes rather than mere commentators on an existing phenomenon. This issue is evocative of a broader dilemma, namely, whether cinematic practice lags behind theoretical advances or, alternatively, whether theory, or in our case, theories of struggle and identity, operate on a level often somewhat detached from people's praxis and art.

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Notes

[1] Mizrahim (lit. Easterners) are Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origins. Occasionally, I will employ "Mizrahim" and "Sephardim" interchangeably, despite some differences between the two terms. The ending "im," as in Mizrahim, is a Hebrew marker of the plural form. Today, the Mizrahi/Sephardi community constitutes approximately half of the overall Jewish population of Israel.

[2] Wadi Salib is a neighborhood in Haifa populated at the time of the riots mostly by North African Jews who had been brought there to take the place of its former Arab residents. Due to problems of overcrowded housing, poverty, and unemployment, tensions between residents and authorities ran high even prior to July 9, 1959. On that day, a policeman shot a drunken and unruly denizen of a local café after failing to stop him. What started as an orderly protest, led by David Ben-Harush the following day, turned into violent riots where demonstrators destroyed and burned public and private properties. The police reacted with harsh force, but the riots spread to other parts of the country and lasted several weeks. (I use the term "riots" here, but depending on the position one takes, other terms used are "uprising," "rebellion," "events," and "revolt)." For a more complete account of the events and the terms used to define it, see Chetrit (2004:101-112) and Dahan-Kalev (1999:149-157).

[3] The original film was never screened and is considered lost. But then, a few years ago, a second copy of the film was found in the archives of the Jerusalem Cinematheque.

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