Monstrum

MONSTRUM
MONTRÉAL MONSTRUM SOCIETY / SOCIÉTÉ MONSTRUM DE MONTRÉAL

F is for Female: The Woman Soldier and the Horror of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Keshales and Papushado's *F is for Falling*

Ido Rosen

Citer ce compte rendu

F is for Female: The Woman Soldier
and the Horror of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
in Keshales and Papushado's *F is for Falling*

Ido Rosen

In the early 2010s, the duo Aharon Keshales and Navot Papushado staged themselves as arguably the most refreshing voices in Israeli cinema. Their debut film, *Rabies* (2010), was a rare successful example of local genre filmmaking and inspired a wave of new Hebrew Horror (Rosen 2014). Their second feature film, *Big Bad Wolves* (2013), was internationally acclaimed, and selected by Quentin Tarantino as "best film of the year," a seal of approval that paved the creators' route to Hollywood (Anderman 2022). After attempts at a few follow-up projects who never made it to the screens (Fleming Jr 2016; Fleming Jr 2017; Hopewell 2017), the two split. In 2021 they released two separate American productions as solo directors— *Gunpowder Milkshake* (Papushado) and *South of Heaven* (Keshales).

The media buzz and scholarly interest around their works focused on their full-length films. Yet their first international project hardly received any attention. It is a six-minutes segment for the horror anthology film *ABCs of Death 2* (2014), called *F is for Falling*. This short film features a female combat warrior in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) whose parachute gets caught in a tree in a hostile territory. A young Palestinian man finds her. She persuades him to capture her solely and enjoy all the glory for himself. The teenager climbs up the tree and cuts off her parachute. As a result, she falls and breaks her leg, and he accidently falls to his death. However, a group of armed locals arrive before she manages to leave the place, implying her misfortunate faith. Despite the gradual unfolding of the plot, and the well-planned disclosure of information, the film still hides more than it reveals. In order to fully assess the situation, viewers need further details that are not supplied: Where is this story set? Whose territory is this? (Is it in the Gaza strip? The West Bank? or in an Arab village within the borders of the Israeli state?) Was the soldier on a combat mission during wartime, or is it a routine training that got wrong?

The film attempts to present the main characters as more than a flat dichotomy of good versus bad. They operate out of anxiety and lack of trust, that leads to mistakes and accidents. The frequent plot twists create a constant need to reassess the situation and change the moral viewpoint. All these cause difficulties to anyone who try to cast judgment. Perhaps this is

exactly the point. Film viewers, filmmakers, journalists, or social media users, many people often pretend to portray a full picture and reach verdicts. But this mission might be impossible when attempting to deal with what is possibly the most complicated conflict in the world.

When Keshales and Papushado promoted their feature films within Israel, they presented a rebellious agenda, wishing to detach from the national cinema traditions, that tend to be realistic, topical and political (Rosen 2012). For example, the internationally award-winning Israeli war films from around that same time, *Beaufort* (Joseph Cedar, 2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and *Lebanon* (Samuel Maoz, 2009). However, while the duo's films, like most other Israeli horror films, present surface structures of allegedly escapist tales, they are actually allegories. They

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

comment on the growing violence in the Israeli society as a result of the stressful security situation and dominant militaristic values (Gershenson and Hudson 2019; Rosen 2017). *F is for Falling* appears to be the opposite of the duo's declared separatist approach. It is overtly tied to Israeli cinema tropes such as soldiers on a mission, its critique is softened, and the moral stand is different. What can explain the change? Unlike Keshales and Papushado's previous productions, this one was made as a product of the American commercial assembly line. Although the duo's Israeli productions were marketed as "genre films," they can also be connected to the "festival films."[1] World cinema directors often hope to penetrate the network of international quality film festivals in order to find global distribution, audience and critical acclaim. Many Israeli filmmakers have been criticized for obsequious self-exoticizing meant to fit the imagined expectations of foreign viewers (Hagin and Yosef 2021). Indeed, *The ABCs of Death* (2012)

---

[1] Keshales and Papushado's films were presented at film festivals around the world and earned prizes in esteemed genre festivals as PiFan and Fantasporto.

is associated with commercial circuits of sensational exploitation movies, and not with art house festivals. So, when Keshales and Papushado were invited to join the sequel, they were set to meet a different target audience. Nevertheless, the directors claimed that the sequel's producers aspired to ascend above the blunt vulgarity of the first installment. They also stated that they personally wished to distinguish themselves from the other segments, and to aim higher: "[The previous anthology was] so out-there, so we decided to go the other way around…With these movies, you're cheering for death—you're watching and waiting to see how people die. But what if we go the other way and show you two people you don't want to see die? […] [I]t's political and more about the humane and tragic side of death" (Barone and Lees 2014; See also Hunter 2014).

Figure 3.

The segment begins with a rapid series of shots and camera movements, each adding new information. First, the camera pulls out of a hole in a tree trunk. Daylight enters the frame, revealing the time and the location, an arid piece of land. A pair of legs in heavy military boots enters the frame from the top. The languid legs dangling above the ground create the impression that a person was hanged.[2] A cut to a long shot exposes that the legs belong to a paratrooper who tangled in the branches. Is this the death by falling which was hinted in the title? The next shot is a medium close up which shows the soldier's face as she regains consciousness—it is a pretty blonde female (Dana Meinrath), and this is perhaps the biggest surprise so far.

One of the most prominent flaws in Keshales and Papushado's earlier films, according to several critics, was inadequate female representation (Alexander 2013; Pinto 2010). Yet this time, they chose a

---

[2] The iconography resembles Keshales and Papushado's mock poster for their planned project *Once Upon a Time in Palestine*, another attempt at adapting foreign genres to the Israeli national cinema, this time in the tradition of Westerns (Hopewell 2017). Possibly, *F is for Falling* (which has several Western elements in it, such as the horse-riding gunman) borrowed some of the ideas from that project. Perhaps it even served as an exercise towards it. After all, their first film, *Rabies*, began as a mock teaser-trailer, made for a competition by HOT cable company in 2007 (Abramovitz 2010).

female protagonist. The fact that the military service in Israel is compulsory for both men and women has long been "considered one of the pillars of gender equality in Israel" (Munk 2019) and "helped create Israel's (self) image of a

Figure 4.

'nation in arms', and the Israeli army as 'the people's army'" (Berger and Naaman 2011). However, many writers pointed out that this Zionist myth is merely a "smokescreen" or a "simulacrum of equality." In the 20th century, women's enlistment has been generally marginalizing. Females played minor part in the army, and in the local national-heroic films, if they appeared in them at all. Their typical roles were helpmates who glorify the masculinity of the fighters, or serving to undermine the soldier's real purpose, or simply a decoration (Harries 2017; Munk 2019).

Over the years, roles that were previously held by men alone were opened to females: technical and instructional positions, combat supporters, and since the year 2000, also combat warriors. Women notably appeared on the battlefield in the 2006 war with Lebanon. Nowadays, at least in principle, women can perform any military role (Berger and Naaman 2011; Harries 2017). This process, along with an increase in the number of women filmmakers, led to generic changes, that introduced military films with female heroines. For example, *Close to Home* (Vardit Bilu and Dalia Hager, 2005), *Room 514* (Sharon Bar-Ziv, 2012), *Zero Motivation* (Talya Lavie, 2014), *Image of Victory* (Avi Nesher, 2021) and the TV series *Dismissed* (Nir Berger and Atara Frish, 2021-).

Yael Munk argues that these films criticize the inherent gender bias and the inevitable moral decline of women soldiers who are plunged into the violent reality of military occupation (2019). Mira Moshe and Matan Aharoni claim that the female filmmakers manage to form an alternative to the dominant discourse of militarism and sexism, and to channel their heroines to the holistic and authentic world of female solidarity (2020). Rachel S. Harries, on the other hand, asserts that in many ways the films' feminist pretension failed, and that the new representations of women soldiers are not always flattering, to say the least (2017).

Israeli horror films have a strong affinity to the war and military genres. The biggest fears in them stem from national traumas, along with the

military pedagogy and violent values which exceed beyond the army bases and shape the society. Therefore, the Israeli horror films are also gender biased. One of the most notable examples is that in contrast to the common American trope of a "Final Girl" (Clover 1987), in Israeli horror films there is almost always a "Final Boy" (Rosen 2017; Rosen 2020).

This might explain why the female soldier in *F is for Falling* is not a particularly accomplished one, and (probably) does not survive. Despite her officer ranks, she is quite inept. First, she gets stuck, hanging passively from the tree. When a male sets her free from the parachute, her graceless land on the ground results in a severe injury which cripples her. Her hopeless attempt to flee by running seems like an irrational decision. The reason she manages to break loose from her capturer is a freak accident, a coincidence. Eventually, she fails in her mission, and is probably killed by the enemies. This is because she is not a heroine of a war film, but of a horror film. In this genre, she plays the role of the victim. Constantly threatened, not threatening. This also echoes the critique about the cycle of "shooting and weeping" Israeli war films about the conflict with Lebanon from around that same time (Rosen 2017).

But it is not accurate to say that the female soldier is not scary. She is, just in an indirect manner. Judd Ne'eman (2018) noted that women in the battlefield are considered to be a threatening abject (following Julia Kristeva's notion of abject, 1982). Fittingly, in this military-horror film, the woman's body becomes a source of fright. The heroine is constantly seen bruised and stained in blood. In the goriest moment her leg 'opens up' in the form of an open fracture. By comparison, when the Palestinian boy falls from the same height, his body remains complete. Although he was seemingly hit by an unintentional bullet discharge, fell, and landed on his back, there are no visible wounds. Yes, he is dead, and a puddle of blood behind his head suggests that his skull was crushed, but his wounds are never shown. In some ways, this reflects the dichotomy of gendered death that prevailed in 20th century slasher films: women's suffering is prolonged and made into a spectacle; male deaths are quick and less graphic (Molitor and Sapolsky 1993; Weaver 1991).

Blood is not the only bodily fluid in the film. Although the dialogue is meager, some of it is dedicated to the soldier's need to pee. The male patronizingly says, "women, you never know how to hold it in." But the line is delivered as the two exchange smiles. The universal bodily need, and the helping gesture from the capturer, create a moment of fraternity between the rivals. It might even imply an upcoming intimate moment with sexual connotations (considering that one of the characters in *Rabies* claims that there is nothing sexier than watching women urinate). But what can be read as a humane moment, can also be read as another scare in the horror-war

film. As Harries noted, "the obsessive fear that women soldiers will be raped by the enemy is an expression of the deepest possible threat to patriarchy: that women's motherhood will slip out of the control of the men to whom it 'rightfully' belongs." The film suggests such a threat more explicitly in its final moment, as three armed Palestinians stand confidently and gaze at the helpless women on the ground. This kind of potential sexual assault is "an assault on the male hegemony for whom woman serves as a possession, a violation of the home, and an attack against the national womb" (Harries 2017; See also Creed 2015).

Figure 5.

The heroine is not only subject to a fetishizing male gaze by the Palestinian characters, but also by the viewers. The audiences of the international production *ABCs of Death 2* are invited to stare at the Israeli woman soldier, "an exotic fantasy about the foreign girl" (Berger and Naaman 2011). The directors admitted so themselves when an interviewer wondered about "the soldier's ample cleavage…highlighting boobs" (Hunter 2014). More recent examples of this trope became widely popular. One can think of the career of former Miss Israel who turned into a Hollywood star, Gal Gadot. Her military experience was widely emphasized in the global promotion of her roles in action films such as *Fast & Furious* (Justin Lin, 2009) and *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017) (Schleier 2011; Vilkomerson 2016). Another example can be found in social media, on TikTok and Instagram, where images of scantly clothed IDF soldiers/models, often holding weapons, became extremely popular (Dickson 2021; Michael 2016). Berger and Naaman claim that the objectification of the female soldiers belittles their violent agency (2011). In this case, it can also be seen as another device for the self-victimization by Israeli filmmakers.

The battle of the sexes is used to enhance the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinian character is first introduced through a close-up on the legs of a white pack animal. Is it a knight in shining armor coming to the rescue? Music starts

Figure 6.

playing in the soundtrack, associating the shot with the Western genre. But as the animal steps further into the frame, the leg of its rider becomes visible, and these are no cowboy boots with spurs, but white sports shoes. The next shot begins as a long shot of the soldier as she is looking beyond the camera, towards the visitor. A camera movement changes the frame into an over the shoulder shot, in which a young man is looking at the soldier. He becomes the subject, and she turns into an object to be looked at. The camera continues to move, revealing that he has a big (phallic) rifle strapped to his back.[3] The local Palestinian teenager (Tawfeek Barhom) is mobile and armed while she is helplessly stuck on the tree.

Figure 7.

The soldier teases the boy and questions his masculinity: "Maybe you're afraid of heights?... I jumped from an airplane, let's see you climb a tree." He replies with a chauvinistic cliché: "If that's how you jump off an airplane perhaps you should stay in the kitchen." This interchange might also express a certain perception regarding the status of women in each society.

---

[3] This image creates two intertextual connections to *Big Bad Wolves*. In the feature film, one of the characters, Yoram, also carries a rifle that is strapped to his back. In addition, the film similarly includes a character of "an Arab on a horse." However, in the feature film, this Arab character is unarmed and unthreatening, in a manner that contradicts viewers' expectations. The viewers are used to find expressions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in local films, yet this character refuses to fill the trope of the "enemy" or the "scare." At one point he even scolds a Jewish character for making stereotypical assumptions about Arabs.

F is for Falling plays with horror tropes. It avoids binary dichotomies and makes it difficult for viewers to classify the characters as a perpetrator or a victim, monstrous or human, good or evil, masculine, or effeminate. Outside the diegesis, on the cinematic level, it mixes together the horror genre and the war genre and defy classifications of "high" or "low" culture. This ambiguity amplifies the immense complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

_____

Ido Rosen is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, currently working on his research about digital media. Previously, he completed his MA studies (cum laude) at the Tisch School of Film and Television at Tel Aviv University and published a pioneering thesis about Israeli horror films. Rosen is a member of the Israeli Film Critics Association. His feature articles have been published in a variety of leading media in his home country, and esteemed foreign media.

References

Abramovitz, Yuval. 2012. "Hatum Binshiha." [Hebrew]. *Israel Hayom*. (March 15) [Originally published 11/2010]. https://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/34101

Alexander, Neta. 2013. "'Mi Mefahed Mehazeev Ha'ra': Eirua Kolnoyi Shel Mamash." [Hebrew]. *Haaretz* [originally *Achbar Hair*]. (August 14). https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/movie-reviews/2013-08-14/ty-article/0000017f-f856-d044-adff-fbff81a30000

Anderman, Nirit. 2022. "Aharon Keshales: Haya Kera Gadol Baemun. Ani Lo Rotze Lifgoa BeNavot Yoter Mima Sheanachnu Pguyim." [Hebrew]. *Haaretz*. (February 3). https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/2022-02-03/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/0000017f-e131-d568-ad7f-f37bf8d20000

Barone, Matt and Jonathan Lees. 2014. "Permanent Midnight: What's Crazier Than 'ABCs of Death 2'? The Twisted Minds Responsible for It." *Complex*. (October 3). https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2014/10/abcs-of-death-2-interviews/

Berger, Eva, and Dorit Naaman. 2011. "Combat Cuties: Photographs of Israeli Women Soldiers in the Press Since the 2006 Lebanon War." *Media, War & Conflict* 4, no. 3: 269-286.

Clover, Carol J. 1987. "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film." *Representations* 20: 187-228.

Creed, Barbara. 2015. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.

Dickson, EJ. 2021. "Why Are Israeli Defense Forces Soldiers Posting Thirst Traps on TikTok?." *Rolling Stone*. (May 27). https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/israel-defense-force-idf-tiktok-thirst-trap-1174211/

Fleming Jr, Mike. 2016. "'Big Bad Wolves' Helmers Aharon Keshales & Navot Papushado Exit Bruce Willis 'Death Wish' Remake." *Deadline*. (May 4). https://deadline.com/2016/05/death-wish-bruce-willis-directors-big-bad-wolves-aharon-keshales-navot-papushado-exit-remake-mgm-paramount-1201748953/

Fleming Jr, Mike. 2017. "Navot Papushado & Aharon Keshales To Helm 'Ambulance'." *Deadline*. (August 17). https://deadline.com/2017/08/ambulance-remake-navot-papushado-aharon-keshales-directing-1202150905/

Gershenson, Olga, and Dale Hudson. 2019. "Nightmares of a Nation: Israeli Horror-Satires Rabies and Big Bad Wolves." *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 1: 44-65.

Hagin, Boaz and Raz Yosef. 2021. "Fantasies of Other Desires: Homonationalism and Self-Othering in Contemporary Israeli Queer Cinema." In *Casting a Giant Shadow: The Transnational Shaping of Israeli Cinema*, edited by Rachel S. Harris and Dan Chyutin, 292-315. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Harris, Rachel S. 2017. *Warriors, Witches, Whores: Women in Israeli Cinema*. Chicago: Wayne State University Press.

Hopewell, John. 2017. "'Big Bad Wolves' Directors Set for Epic 'Once Upon a Time in Palestine'." *Variety*. (May 18). https://variety.com/2017/film/news/cannes-film-festival-2017-once-upon-a-time-in-palestine-1202433365/

Hunter, Rob. 2014. "'ABCs of Death 2' Courts Controversy but Avoids Farts with 'F is for Falling'." *Film School Rejects*. (October 9). https://filmschoolrejects.com/abcs-of-death-2-courts-controversy-but-avoids-farts-with-f-is-for-falling-ec8e9d05800b/

Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Michael, Tom. 2016. "ARMED AND DANGEROUS! Sexy Snaps of the Hottest Women in the Israeli Army Celebrated in Bizarre Instagram Account." *The Scottish Sun*. (December 27). https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/353545/sexy-snaps-of-the-hottest-women-in-the-israeli-army-celebrated-in-bizarre-instagram-account/

Molitor, Fred, and Sapolsky, Barry S. 1993. "Sex, Violence, and Victimization in Slasher Films." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 37, no. 2: 233–242.

Moshe, Mira, and Matan Aharoni. 2020. "The Silent Women: The Representation of Israeli Female Soldiers in Israeli Women's Films." *Journal of Screenwriting* 11, no. 3: 313-329.

Munk, Yael. 2019. "In the Face of Violence: A Political Reading of IDF Women Soldiers in Two Israeli Films of the 2000s." *Feminist Media Studies* 19, no.8: 1144-1158.

Ne'eman, Judd. 2018. *The Wound: Gift of War: Battlefields of Israeli Cinema*. [Hebrew]. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

Pinto, Goel. 2010. "Livnei 16 Bilvad." [Hebrew]. *Globes.* (December 20). https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000605338

Rosen, Ido. 2020. "National Fears in Israeli Horror Films." *Jewish Film & New Media* 8, no. 1: 77-103.

---. 2017. *Pkhadim Leumiim Besirtei Haeima Bekolnoa Haisraeli.* [Hebrew]. MA Thesis. The Steve Tisch School of Film and Television. Tel Aviv University.

---. 2014. "Shtikat Ha-tsabarim: Eikh Ve-madua Hefsik Ha-kolnoa Ha-israeli Lefakhed Mi-sirtei Ima." [Hebrew]. *Pas Yatsira: Ktav Et Le-kolnoa Ve-televizia* 6: 37-54.

---. 2012. "The Birth of Hebrew Horror." *Rue Morgue* 122 (May): 30-32.

Schleier, Curt. 2011. "Gal Gadot Talks Growing Up in Israel & Her Controversial Maxim Photo Shoot." *Forward.* (May 2). https://forward.com/schmooze/137439/chatting-with-fast-five-star-gal-gadot/

Vilkomerson, Sara. 2016. "Gal Gadot Is Wonder Woman: 'She Is Not Relying on a Man, and She's Not There Because of a Love Story'." *Glamour.* (March 7). https://www.glamour.com/story/gal-gadot-wonder-woman-cover-interview

Weaver III, James B. 1991. "Are 'Slasher' Horror Films Sexually Violent? A Content Analysis." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 35, no. 3: 385-392.