

Pinkwashing the Occupation: Narratives of Interracial Gay Relations in Israeli Film

Written by Roni Zahavi-Brunner

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RONI ZAHAVI-BRUNNER, MAY 18 2021

The camera focuses on a soldier standing at a checkpoint, inspecting Palestinians who are crossing into Israel to work. He is holding a rifle and dressed in full uniform and protective gear, yet he could not care less. He is counting the minutes until he finishes his reserve duty and can return to his life in a liberal bubble in Tel-Aviv. "All the men, stand in two lines and take your shirts off slowly". Ashraf lifts his shirt up, revealing his naked chest to the soldier checking him out. They exchange long looks, longer than necessary, and the soldier's interest is piqued.

This scene opens the movie 'The Bubble', a tragic love story between two Israeli and Palestinian men whose relationship becomes interwoven with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The movie depicts how the interdependent and protracted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict invades all aspects of Israeli and Palestinian societies, including love, sexuality, and popular culture. 'Forbidden love' stories between Israelis and Palestinians are common in Israeli culture, yet receive outraged reactions, going as far as to ban such books in schools (Kashti 2015). The Israeli narrative on interracial relationships is dominated by heteronormative assumptions, focusing on procreation and the protection of innocent women from devious men (Engelberg 2017: 232). Therefore, gay representations of Israeli-Palestinian encounters form a unique narrative, which can shed light to the role of ethnonationalism and normativity within the Israeli gay community. The following paper discusses cultural representations of gay relationships between people from opposing ethnic and national groups. Focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a case study, I will answer the research question: *How are homosexual relations between Israelis and Palestinians represented in Israeli cinema?*

This paper will contribute to the growing body of literature on popular culture and world politics, aiming to highlight the relationship between cinematic representations and gendered discourse production. Thus, this paper relates to a broader attempt to widen the international relations research agenda beyond a narrow understanding of power and politics (Weldes and Rowley 2015). Throughout this paper, I will explore the Israeli gay discourse on interracial relations, focusing on representations of power inequalities of the occupation, sexuality, and masculinity.

Theoretical Framework:

Feminist scholars have long argued that gender and sexuality are inseparable from conflict and security studies. However, the academic discussion around sex and conflict has so far failed to address consensual sex and romance across conflict divides, as such relations are perceived as private and irrelevant to conflict studies. Additionally, most of the existing literature uses heteronormative framing and neglects the experiences of the LGBTQ community under conflict (Hagen 2016: 325). In order to address this literature gap, I will discuss the main concepts relevant to the research question and explore the existing literature on sexuality, conflict, and popular culture.

This paper is written from a poststructuralist feminist approach, which aims to understand social meanings and uncover underlying power structures. Poststructuralism argues that knowledge and science are never neutral but reproduce hegemonic interests and ideas. According to poststructuralists, the discursive production of gender is a political practice that creates hierarchical binary categories and heteronormative ideas of masculinity and femininity (Shepherd 2015: 12). Poststructuralists criticize mainstream IR for disregarding popular culture as 'low' politics, and instead

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highlight the importance of cultural artifacts in the production of national narratives (Weldes and Rowley 2015). Weldes and Rowley argue that popular culture not only reflects reality, but constitutes world politics through discourse production (ibid.). For example, states deploy pop culture for nation-branding, shaping the global image and position of the state. Laura Shepherd defines television as a particularly crucial site for the 'production, circulation and sometimes the contestation of, meanings' (Shepherd 2013: 2). Thus, critical reflections of television aim to understand the construction of knowledge and social categories (idem: 3).

In this paper, I explore the concept of masculinity (namely non-hegemonic masculinity) from a poststructuralist perspective. Feminist research is paying increasing attention to the role of masculinity in the construction of political power and militarized violence (Duriesmith 2014: 239). Masculinity structures expectations from men, creating a hierarchy that places men who fail to achieve the ideals of manhood as subordinate to other men (for example, gay men who fail to meet heteronormative expectations) (idem: 242). Thus, gay men are traditionally excluded from the masculine power structure of the state. Poststructural scholars focus on the constructed meanings of masculinity, arguing that the performance of masculinity is full of contradictions (idem: 241). Throughout the paper, I will explore how subordinate masculine identities are constructed and represented within a violent conflict context that depends on militarized masculinity.

Queer scholarship also attempts to expand the IR research agenda, by investigating the relationship between sexual norms and international power structures. Queer theories seek to destabilize binary understandings of gender and sexuality and investigate the role of heteronormative frameworks in global politics (Richter-Montpetit 2018: 225). Richter-Montpetit differentiates between a queer perspective, which is a radical commitment to destabilizing norms, and an LGBT perspective that focuses on inclusion within citizenship regimes (idem: 223). Therefore, in this paper I distinguish between queer and gay communities, with the former group disrupting hetero-cisnormative assumptions, and the latter constituting homonormative ideas (I use the term gay as this paper mainly explores the gay men community, not the wider LGBT community).

Jasbir Puar (2007: 9), a queer theorist, coined the term 'homonationalism' to define how discourse on LGBT inclusion links LGBT rights to nationalist and imperialist agendas. Puar argues that homonationalism regulates normative gayness and reinforces national norms of inclusion and exclusion, creating narrow conditions of LGBT inclusion (idem: 2). Thus, national inclusion depends on the reinforcement of white dominance and the exclusion of racial others and non-normative queers (ibid.). Cynthia Weber claims that this leads to the national incorporation of a restricted gay figure, the normal or patriot gay who is deemed respectable by the state (Richter-Montpetit 2018: 230). The nationalized gay figure is mobilized to exclude the 'perverse gay' and justify neoliberal and colonial agendas. Queer theories aim to dismantle such nationalized narratives and LGBT regulating regimes.

However, there is an extensive academic debate between postcolonial scholars about the ties between the LGBT community and colonialism. In his book, *desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad criticized the international gay movement for practicing Western colonialism and fetishizing gay Arabs. Massad argues that the 'gay international' imposes Western categories on Arab people with same-sex attraction, erasing the rich history of same-sex practices in the Arab world (Massad 2002: 364). Therefore, Massad criticizes gay Arabs for subscribing to Western discourse, which leads to repression by the state. However, Massad has been criticized heavily for cultural relativism and for dismissing queer Arab identities. Rao criticizes Massad for policing sexual and gender expressions, while Birdal highlights Massad's erasure of Arab LGBT agency.

Ritchie (2010: 566) builds on Massad's theory to argue that the Israeli LGBT community takes a missionary approach towards LGBT Palestinians. Israeli LGBT reinforce Western liberal supremacy and aim to 'liberate' gay Palestinians from their 'backwards' Oriental society (ibid.). Thus, Israeli gays attempt to regulate Palestinian gays, conditioning their acceptance to the liberal LGBT community according to a victimhood trope (idem: 568). However, Ritchie also criticizes Massad for denying queer Palestinian agency, and instead argues that queer Palestinians create radical alternatives to both Palestinian and Israeli norms (ibid.). Similarly, Byrne argues that Israeli representations erase the agency of queer Palestinians by framing them as victims of the Palestinian society (Byrne 2013: 140). This victimizing discourse is an extension of the Israeli occupation and homonationalism, pinkwashing Israeli control over the Palestinian population by framing it through progressive terms (idem: 134).

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Lastly, theories of colonialism and Orientalism are useful for understanding the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the Israeli occupation of Palestine is a unique and nuanced situation, theories of colonialism are useful for explaining the power relations in a context of Western settler occupation. Scholars of colonialism have discussed extensively the role of desire and sexuality within militarized colonial rule. According to Bryder (1998: 808), control over sexuality was a central political mechanism in British colonies and was used to maintain white privilege and a sense of innate superiority. Social and legal norms of sexual and romantic separation between races is used to maintain a binary hierarchy between the occupier and the occupied, the civilized and the barbaric (Yosef 2002: 553). Young, a postcolonial theorist who explored the concept of hybridity, argued that colonial obsession with sex arose from the exoticization of black sexuality (Young 1994: 102). Young claims that anxiety over hybridity reflects a heterosexual anxiety, since it revolves around concerns of reproduction and racial purity (idem: 24). Thus, “[racial] hybridity and homosexuality coincide to become identified with each other, namely as forms of degeneration” (ibid.). Yosef, an Israeli queer scholar, claims that racial and heterosexual anxieties are heightened in Israel by the historic context of Jewish sexuality. In the diaspora, the masculine Jewish body was seen as inferior, and Jews were associated with homosexuality and perversion (Yosef 2002: 557). Therefore, the Zionist movement is obsessed with the normalization of Jewish sexuality and the construction of a new, hegemonic, Jewish masculinity (ibid.).

Methodology:

The paper employs a case study research design to analyse the production of gay discourse on security and conflict through popular culture. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is taken as the case study, representing an extreme case of a long and interdependent conflict that has extensive direct effects on all aspects of civilian life, including culture and sexuality. By using a case study design, I aim to create a framework that is transferable to a broader population of violent conflicts. However, I also recognize the value of nuanced, case-specific understandings and the contextualization of academic knowledge.

As a poststructuralist, I believe in the importance of self-reflexivity when conducting research. As an Israeli, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always been central in my life: I was raised in a Zionist, militarized environment, yet I strongly object to the occupation. I refused to serve in the Israeli military, as an act of protest against the oppression of the Palestinian population. I constantly reflect on my identity and privileges as an Israeli, as I did while writing this paper. Therefore, I do not claim to represent Palestinian voices, but to critically analyse Israeli narratives. As a queer woman, I consider myself a member of the Israeli LGBT community. I have a deep appreciation for filmmakers such as Eytan Fox and Amos Guttman (who will be discussed in this paper) who were vital in shaping an Israeli gay identity, yet I am also able to criticize their use of nationalist tropes.

The Films:

The paper focuses on representations within gay cinema, which is a key element for understanding the main Israeli gay discourse. According to Cohen (2011: 1), “cinema, as a primary source of gay cultural production in Israel, has defined gay identity since the late 1970s”. Due to the lack of any lesbian representation in Israeli cinema (let alone bisexual or trans representation), I will only be able focus on films depicting gay men. The films were chosen according to the following criteria: commercial fictional feature films produced by Israeli gay men, that portray explicit relationships between Israeli and Palestinian men as (one of) the main relationships of the films. These criteria lead to three films:

Drifting (1982) by Amos Guttman: Roby is a young gay man who lives with his homophobic grandmother and wants to make the first Israeli gay movie. Roby’s life is very lonely, he is rejected by both the Israeli society and the gay organizations. Aside from his passion of filmmaking, he is also passionate about men, frequently going to gay cruising areas and bringing strangers home. One day, Roby brings home two Palestinian men who were injured, assumingly while attempting a terror attack. Roby takes care of them and uses them to ease his loneliness, despite his helpless grandmother’s disapproval.

The Bubble (2006) by Eytan Fox and Gal Uchovsky: Noam is a liberal gay man who lives in Tel Aviv with his friends Lulu and Yali. When Noam meets Ashraf at a checkpoint, they fall in love and Ashraf moves into their Tel-Aviv

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apartment, adopting a fake Israeli identity. After his real identity is accidentally reveals, Ashraf returns to his family in Palestine, yet Noam follows him and outs him to his brother-in-law, Jihad. Jihad, a violent extremist, plans a terror attack in Tel-Aviv which injures Yali, and the Israeli military responds by killing Ashraf's sister. Realizing that he has no future in Palestine nor Israel, Ashraf becomes a suicide bomber in an act of desperation. The movie ends when Ashraf sets off a bomb, killing himself and Noam.

Out in the Dark (2012) by Michael Mayer: Nimr and Roy meet at a gay bar and fall in love. Nimr hides his sexuality and relationship from his homophobic Palestinian family and uses his education permit to visit Roy in Tel-Aviv. However, the Israeli Security Agency finds out and threatens to out Nimr to his family if he does not become an informant for them. Unfortunately, Nimr's brother, a terrorist, finds out he is gay anyways and kicks him out, threatening to kill him if he returns. Nimr escapes to Roy's apartment, yet they soon realize that the Security Agency is searching for Nimr, and Nimr is forced to escape to France as a refugee.

Analysis:

In the analysis, I apply the theoretical framework to the films and discuss the discourse they reproduce on masculine expectations, sexuality and hybridity, and gay Palestinian identities.

The films in their historical context:

First, in order to fully comprehend the narrative of the films, I will situate them in their historical context and discuss how political changes can affect representation in pop culture. All three movies represent different time periods and phases of the occupation, revealing the changing understandings of Israeli-Palestinian relations from the 1980s until today. *Drifting*, released in 1982, took place before the Oslo Accords of 1993, which restricted the movement of Palestinians, granted autonomy to some Palestinian areas, and established the self-governing Palestinian Authorities (Rosler 2016: 55). The vague borders of the 1980s permitted the casual encounters between Israeli and Palestinian men in *Drifting*. While Roby stays in his room, he stares through the window bars and watches Palestinians sitting and talking in Arabic openly in the street, creating the image that Roby is more restricted as a gay man than Palestinians (Avitzur 2007). In contrast, both *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark* take place after the Oslo Accords and portray the complete segregation of Israeli and Palestinian societies and the heavy restrictions of movements Palestinians face. When organizing a party against the occupation, the young leftist group in *The Bubble* realizes they do not know any Palestinians to invite, or how get Palestinians into Israel.

The Bubble was released not long after the second Intifada ended, a period marked by extreme violence against civilians. Therefore, Noam and Ashraf are interconnected by the inescapable cycle of violence of the early 2000s: Ashraf's brother-in-law planned a terror attack that injured Noam's flatmate, which led to a military raid that killed Ashraf's sister, which led Ashraf to become a suicide bomber, killing him and Noam. The conflict defined every aspect of Noam's and Ashraf's lives since childhood, as Ashraf's family was targeted by house demolitions and Noam blames his mother's sickness on the difficulties of the conflict.

Representations of non-normative masculinities:

The films explore questions about masculinity, sexuality and race, reproducing masculine expectations and homonormativity. In *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark*, the main characters all represent masculine gay men and fail to challenge gendered expectations. For example, Noam judges his gay friend for listening to pop music and boy bands, suggesting the rolling stones instead. The Jewish protagonists, Noam and Roy, are both Ashkenazi (white in the Israeli context) and reinforce nationalist and neoliberal values – Noam as a reserve soldier and Roy as a successful corporate lawyer. Therefore, the main characters offer 'easy to swallow' normative gay identities that do not challenge hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing the patriot and neoliberal gay figure. Thus, the films demonstrate the limits of national LGBT inclusion and representation in mainstream pop culture. Both films represent 'femme' gay identities only as secondary characters who behave 'stereotypically gay'. In *Out in the Dark*, Mustafa, a femme queer Palestinian, meets his tragic death at the hands of the Israeli Security Agency and homophobic Palestinian terrorists. In *The Bubble*, Golan, who is dating Yali, is both hyperfeminine and hypermasculine at the same time, creating a

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caricature image of gay and Sephardic stereotypes that is ridiculed throughout the movie. Golan and Mustafa, as non-white feminine men who are denied a happy ending, represent the racialized and gendered restrictions of national inclusion.

Drifting, on the other hand, tells the story of the 'perverted' gay person who cannot be included in society. Gay life in *Drifting* is depicted as lonely and melancholic, and Roby is struggling to find a place where he feels welcomed. In his opening monologue, Roby reflects on his life as a gay man and on the requirements for societal acceptance: "Maybe if the hero was politically aware. At least have him be soldier, come from the periphery, serve on a warship, be religious, be a war widow. But if he must be gay, at least make him suffer. Don't let him enjoy it". Roby identifies a direct link between militarized masculinity and gay inclusion, criticizing the tropes he must fit into in order to be accepted. As Weber argues, the normative gay is posed against the perverted gay, regulating the acceptable ways to express sexuality based on nationalist narratives.

Narratives on racial hybridity and Palestinian sexuality:

In all films, Palestinian men are represented through the Israeli gaze, often leading to superficial and stereotypical understandings of Palestinian sexuality. In *Drifting*, the Palestinian characters are assumed to be terrorists and represent hypermasculine Orientalist characteristics: they are dark, hairy, muscular, and mysterious. The Palestinians' sexuality is never discussed, and their names or backgrounds are unknown – they exist solely to please the Israeli protagonist. Thus, the film invokes Orientalist tropes of Arabs who are fetishized by the West. By reinforcing stereotypes and assuring Roby's dominance in the scene, the movie maintains the Western-Oriental and occupier-occupied binary hierarchies even through sexual encounters. Thus, *Drifting* conforms to colonial and Zionist racial anxieties and maintains the supremacy of the Jewish male body.

Similarly, *The Bubble* also reinforces Orientalist tropes of the masculine gay Arab. In the beginning of the movie, the sexual roles of Ashraf and Noam are very clear, with Ashraf taking the role of the top who pleases Noam. However, by the end of the movie, after Ashraf lived under a fake Israeli identity and assimilated into the liberal bubble of Tel-Aviv, the sexual roles are reversed for the first time. This scene marks Ashraf's initiation into the Western gay community as he commits to the Israeli gay lifestyle and leaves the gay Arab trope behind. Thus, both films regulate Arab sexuality, dictating how gay Arabs should express their sexuality and which behaviour can be accepted by the West. The films exemplify how pop culture both reflects and reproduces discourse that oversimplifies and lessens Arab gay men, reinforcing colonial power structures.

Additionally, *The Bubble* renders tragic violence as an inevitable ending for affairs between Israelis and Palestinians, sending a warning signal against racial hybridity. The movie is full of hints towards its violent ending, for example in a conversation between Noam and Ashraf after they have sex:

Noam: "We were explosive"

Ashraf: "Explosive?"

Noam: "You don't know that word?"

Ashraf: "I do, it's when you explode something, a bomb"

Noam: "Explosion can also be something that is really good. Good sex is explosive."

This scene predicts Noam's and Ashraf's death by explosion, creating the feeling that their relationship was doomed from the start. Thus, the movie shows Israeli-Palestinian relationships as dangerous and impossible, maintaining the social taboo on such affairs.

Pinkwashing and the gay Palestinian victim trope:

For their first official date, Noam took Ashraf to watch a play about gay love in the holocaust. "I liked how they would run their finger over their eyebrow instead of saying I love you" Ashraf tells Noam, referring to a secret signal of love between men that was used in the play. "Good thing we don't need that anymore", Noam replies. "Maybe in Tel-Aviv you don't".

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This interaction between Ashraf and Noam exemplifies the repetitive comparison between Israel and Palestine throughout the film. Israel (or more specifically, Tel-Aviv) is seen as extremely liberal, a place where the gay liberation struggle is no longer necessary. Palestine, in contrast, is represented by everything illiberal: Ashraf's family refuses to accept him and he is surrounded by extreme politics and terrorism. A similar narrative is seen in *Out in the Dark*, when Nimr fears for his life and must escape Palestine in order to reach Israel's 'progressive' haven. This representation pinkwashes the Israeli occupation, seeking international support for the 'progressive Westerners' who are fighting 'homophobic terrorists'. As Byrne (2013: 136) argues, "pinkwashing skirts the human rights violations of colonial and military occupation, instead focusing its gaze upon the purported gay rights violations perpetuated against Palestinians by Palestinians".

Moreover, the storyline of *Out in the Dark* relies on homonationalist norms that assume Israeli supremacy. Roy is Nimr's saviour, giving him refuge when he must flee his family, and arranging his escape route to France. Roy takes Nimr to lawyers who can help him get travel permits and uses his father's connections to help Nimr. While Nimr sits passively and helplessly in Roy's apartment, Roy is on the phone demanding permits for Nimr. Thus, the film victimizes gay Palestinians and reinforces a 'white saviour' narrative about gay Israelis. In fact, the main criticism of the movie about the Israeli government is against the difficulties gay Palestinians face when trying to find refuge in Israel, ignoring the oppression Palestinians experience under the Israeli occupation. This narrative builds on other gendered colonial tropes – instead of Spivak's "white men who are saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1994: 93), the film presents white gay men who are saving brown gay men from homophobic (white and brown) men. This discourse resembles Massad's analysis of the 'gay international' that claims to liberate oppressed queer Arabs. Nimr's agency is taken away, and he remains powerless and voiceless next to his Western partner.

Both *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark* were screened around the world to an international audience as part of an attempt to improve Israel's global image. The Toronto International Film Festival, where both films were shown, is a known site for the 'Brand Israel' campaign (Jankovic 2013: 101). Launched by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Brand Israel' emphasized Israel's progressive and Western elements in order to gain international support (ibid.). Therefore, the global context of the films further proves their promotion of homonationalism and pinkwashing of the occupation.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this paper answered the research question: *How are homosexual relations between Israelis and Palestinians represented in Israeli cinema?* In order to answer the research question, I applied theories of queer studies, colonialism and poststructuralism to three Israeli films portraying gay relationships between Israeli and Palestinian men: *Drifting*, *The Bubble*, and *Out in the Dark*. Thus, the paper discussed themes of masculinities, LGBT inclusion, fetishization and homonationalism. *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark* represent Israeli-Palestinian relationships as tragic, as the options they present for such couples are restricted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *The Bubble* in particular serves as a warning against the violent ending that is expected for interracial gay couples, as they will never be able to escape the cycle of violence of the conflict. In all three films, encounters between Israeli and Palestinian gay men reproduce colonial and racial power structures as suggested by Young, failing to contest the Israeli narrative of Western supremacy. *Drifting* and *The Bubble* fetishize and exoticize Arab male sexuality, confirming theories of colonialism on desire and sexual regulations. Additionally, the films reinforce the mainstream LGBT rights discourse of inclusion through existing citizenship regimes by representing masculine, nationalist and neoliberal gay figures. Lastly, *The Bubble* and *Out in the Dark* serve homonationalist and Orientalist narratives of the white saviour and the brown victim. The films pinkwash the occupation by appealing to a progressive Western audience and justifying violence against Palestine by focusing on stereotypes of Palestinian homophobia.

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