



# Trauma, guilt, forgiveness: The victimizer as witness in the cinematic and televisual representations of conflict in Israel

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## Abstract

This article deals with the cinematic and televised representations of the Israeli victimizer. The authors seek to examine the political and cultural meanings of these representations in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. They consider the evolving changes in the testimony of the victimizer as they have emerged in major works produced by and broadcast on Israeli television during the past two decades. This change has been expressed primarily in the transition from direct testimony about horrors or atrocities to a reflective process that takes into consideration the testimony’s validity, its evasiveness, its aesthetic nature and perhaps even whether the testimony itself is a matter of aesthetics. The article focuses on a number of case studies through which the authors seek to examine the boundaries of the witness’s trauma and the possibilities for the forgiveness he seeks. These cases offer an in-depth look at the collective Israeli psyche, which is haunted not only by the desire to glorify the victim but also includes a narrow space in which the victimizer is able to maneuver. Documentary and semi-documentary works such as these portray the naked Israeli psyche, revealing its repression, its ethical self-flagellation and its strong desire to build a humanistic discourse that takes into account the inability to achieve complete absolution and atonement.

## Keywords

forgiveness, Israeli–Palestinian conflict, testimony, trauma, victimizer, witnessing

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Witnesses and their testimony are both elementary components of the discourse regarding trauma (see Felman and Laub, 1992; LaCapra, 1998; Laub, 1995). The moving picture, in all of its forms, serves as a means for conveying the testimony; for instilling its representations amongst the masses. And while victims of the trauma and their testimonies still remain the loci of the discourse, recent years have seen an increasing interest in the trauma of the wrongdoing *victimizer*.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the majority of televised content regarding recent history in Israel is composed of eye witnessing, where a special place is reserved for holocaust survivors – who represent the victim's discourse. At the margins, a new possibility for the televised representation of the wrongdoer's testimony seems to start taking its place: a testimony which portrays the wrongdoer as another victim of the national trauma. This, in turn, adds a new layer of complexity to the media's discourse of the 100-year Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Our article deals with the cinematic and televised representation of the victimizer, who is possessed by trauma and longs for forgiveness. We seek to examine the political and cultural meanings of these representations in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. We aim to draw a connection between the changes in the witness's media standing and a wide variety of cultural texts – texts that signify vast changes in Israeli society. These changes encourage the current generation of creators to deal with the traumatic mythologies of the past. Our article therefore deals with confession as a central mode in popular culture. In more detail, this article focuses on two possible levels of confession: *the traumatic confession*, which links both victims and victimizers on a political and moral level, and *the entertaining confession*, which conceals the moral problem and transforms it into an escapist practice, such as in reality shows. Hence, the purifying element, which is always present in the practice of asking for forgiveness and confessing, is converted into a practice of entertainment, whose sole purpose is to provoke emotional voyeurism and strong feelings of sympathy.

One could find a long discussion on the question of the responsibility of the media and its role as observer or actor. However, our focus here is mainly on a different topic, i.e. the nature of confession and seeking of forgiveness by soldiers in operations.

In this article we will examine the paradigm that lies at the base of the forgiveness–atonement–purification process through cinematic and televised texts. These texts vividly express the sense of emotional and moral fatigue that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict provokes. Our aim is to investigate – from a philosophical and cultural perspective – a certain kind of political mentality that leads peace seekers, on both sides, to an emotional dead-end. Using a psychoanalytical approach we want to reveal the inner conflict in the Israeli and Palestinian psyche. We believe that by a close following of the aesthetics of some documentary texts we will be able to reveal the importance of the victimizer's testimony in this sense.

## **Confession, testimony and atonement in television and cinema**

The Holocaust, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japanese cities during the Second World War, the ethnic cleansings and genocides of Armenia, Biafra and Sarajevo, the apartheid regime of South Africa – all of these atrocities and more that humanity has

witnessed during the past century, have all helped to create an urgent discourse about horror and its circumstances. Questions regarding the different relations between victim and victimizer, confession and forgiveness, testimony and representation, have become central to the psychological, political and philosophical agenda of our times. The confession is the present culture's state of mind; it is a part of the collective mentality, of the drive to constantly change, of the imperative to 'be someone else', 'someone better', to cast off the traumatic yolk, to purify oneself – both on the political level (the unspeakable acts between nations) and the personal level (poverty, grief, the existential dangers present to the individual).

Confessing, regretting, repenting have all become the main motifs of the personal and collective drama, they have all become effective tools for creating excitement, empathy and catharsis. All of these come about in the main genres of popular culture: from the courtroom drama to reality television shows via commercials and the news – all of these use the forms of confession and testimony as their most basic elements. Eye witnessing – which presents a credible façade of reliable information, is combined with the victims' testimony in order to ignite an emotional reaction in the form of empathy and pity, from the viewer. This form is now a common component in the media's framework.

The desire to enter wrongdoers' minds, to supply a reasonable explanation for their deviation, to find a purpose and meaning for their actions and maybe even bring them to repent – these are all manifestations of society's need for closure, for accepting and bringing back under its control what it had once lost. Such expressions can be found in a wide range of texts in cinema and popular culture.<sup>2</sup> The centrality of confession in popular culture is reflected in television entertainment shows and different internet practices. Genres such as reality and 'make-over' shows also express this discourse. In this case, the entertaining confession discourse is meant to play on viewers' emotions and, by doing so, to expropriate them from the realistic political–moral arena into the fictional–entertainment one, thus relieving them of their responsibility for any injustice which takes place outside the realm of entertaining representations.

In Israeli cinema and film, a new genre is developing which attempts to protest against this fictitious injustice discourse, largely accepted by the conformist apolitical audience, and transfer it to its true level: the relationship between victimizers and their victims is not meant to provoke laughter or emotions, rather it is intended to portray the trauma in which both Israelis and Palestinians are entrapped. The discourse that arises from the trauma is discussed in order to make a separation from the past, through the processes of confession, atonement and purification. A mapping out of the discourse surrounding forgiveness will enable us to examine the philosophical, psychological and political effects of the process. The theoretical paradigm will serve as a basis for a close analysis of televised and cinematic confessions which deal with the trauma of the conflict and its political meaning in Israeli culture.

## **The discourse of forgiveness in culture**

This article examines the victimizing subjects and their testimony in regard to the question of their guilt. At this point, a distinction needs to be made between different types of victimizing witnesses; between those who refuse to take responsibility, confess their

crimes and ask for their victims' forgiveness and those who use their testimony as an act of self purification, which is done through the means of excessive self punishment. The first type of witnesses refuse to deal with the question of the injustice inflicted by the wrongdoer and seek to blame the other side for it, either for reasons of apathy, psychological repression or lack of imagination. The second type consists of wrongdoers who fanatically keep self-flagellating themselves, blocking any possibility for dialogue with their victims. Their monologous perception deprives their victims of the right to confront their victimizers, from expressing their pain and anger, since the wrongdoers have already severely punished themselves.

Another typology is the distinction between wrongdoers who recognize the injustice they have caused and attempt to publicly grieve with their victims, and the skeptic wrongdoers who recognize the futility of the forgiveness–atonement cycle and use this recognition as an object of artistic reflection. The former, by picking up the act of confessing and its inherent suffering set out on a path of catharsis and cleansing, a process of purification that vindicates for them the righteousness of their path and actually enables them to commit further wrongdoings. This is a process of *limited remorse*, which doesn't reveal any political conclusions. Its only meaning is that of legitimizing the injustice by preserving the current situation.

The *sceptical wrongdoers* on the other hand, are aware of the trap that is present in the confession–atonement–forgiveness discourse. These remorseful wrongdoers are already aware of the forgiveness pattern, which is anchored in the collective world of images that both sides share and its depiction in the media. They acknowledge that the forgiveness discourse that they offer is only a discourse of images and representations. They also admit their own helplessness to overcome the 'theatre of forgiveness' and to directly move their fellow men and women. This acknowledgment of the impossibility of a true dialogue of forgiveness therefore turns into an object of aesthetic representation.

The result is paradoxical: on the one hand, there is a tragic recognition of a political and emotional helplessness which is beyond any reflective representation of the conflict, while on the other hand, the actual declaring of a 'no way out' position – the recognizing of the angst which arises from the reflective consciousness – may itself serve as a cathartic force and a humble mechanism for mutual understanding and cooperation.

Along with an understanding of the wrongdoer's function in the act of forgiveness, it is also important to lay out the possibilities and components of the discourse itself. The main question we should be asking is whether the forgiveness discourse is a utilitarian one designed to appease wrongdoers' consciences by purifying themselves and enabling a placated acceptance by the victim; alternatively, should an attempt be made to purify both sides, by offering moral and political advantages, trying to define their basic human essence – which is the ability to forgive when forgiveness is not possible.

The first option views the act of confession as being in the interest of the *wrongdoers*, since after they have vocalized their confessions and gained atonement, they achieve a moral peace and political recognition from their victims. The second option opts for a discourse of forgiveness that is beyond any kind of self interest. This discourse is not supposed to improve any party's position by bestowing peace upon the wrongdoer and the power of sovereignty to the victim who has forgiven. Rather this is a case of a utopian discourse that is beyond any belligerent expression; this discourse defines by its own

virtue what is human within us; our humanity will be expressed when we content ourselves with the paradox inherent in forgiveness, when we will forgive the most heinous crimes, those that are defined as ‘crimes against humanity’. Only forgiveness of this kind, which was attempted in post-Apartheid South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission activities, allows the different sides to arrive at the ‘impossible reconciliation’ – its practical manifestation being the right for life.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida, distinguishes between two types of forgiveness: *conditional forgiveness* and *unconditional forgiveness* (Derrida, 2001: 25–60). *Conditional forgiveness* is always part of a rational deliberation which Derrida identifies with the concepts of *amnesty* and *reconciliation*. In this situation, both wrongdoers and their victims enjoy personal gains. Wrongdoers long for a purifying cathartic experience; through the act of confessing their wrongdoings, they wish to clear their conscience, to atone for their sins and be reconciled with their soul. Necessarily, this can be achieved only through the victims’ allowance of such forgiveness, yet even this act is a utilitarian one in the eyes of their victims, since through the act of forgiving, the victims are spiritually elevated, thereby granting themselves the power of *sovereignty*. The *unconditional forgiveness* lies outside the rational–utilitarian deliberation, it is beyond any psychological, political or legal gain. The wrongdoers, when asking for forgiveness, are not supposed to ‘profit’ from it, just as the victims are not supposed to experience their newfound sovereignty.

On the other hand, the French thinker Emmanuel Levinas makes two central claims: one, against Derrida, states that any kind of forgiveness is conditional and thus an expression of the different sides’ needs to achieve some sort of balance which they can perceive as justice. The sins or crimes that one side committed can only be annulled through logical deconstruction; each sin ‘demands its payment’ (Levinas, 2001[1968]: 26). The second argument states that every act of forgiveness is also conditioned by the wrongdoers’ awareness of their own guilt, and when this is not the case, there is no reason to expect them to ask for forgiveness.

As will be seen later on, when we discuss how the dilemma of forgiveness is reflected in the television and cinema of the current generation, we shall see that a possible obstacle for dialogue lays in the party’s blindness to the power of their own subconscious.

## **The wrongdoers’ discourse of forgiveness and its representations in cinema and television**

In this section, we examine the different ways in which moral and political conflicts have been represented in Israeli cinema and television over the past 20 years. At the core of the reviewed texts lies a desire for confession; however, their position in relation to forgiveness is not altogether clear.

The earliest example is the film *Eduyot* (Testimonies) which confronted soldiers and military officers who participated in the first *intifada* (1987–1991) with the consequences of their actions. In the film, the participants are asked to respond ‘on camera’ to the significance of their past activities, or to describe a specific act in which they participated. The film adopts an eclectic cinematic approach: most witnesses are shot in a range between a close-up and a medium shot, with a black screen background, while delivering

long monologues which are only occasionally interrupted by the interviewer's questions. In the second part of the film, two archived news clips, which portray an especially violent act of Israeli soldiers against captive Palestinians, are screened before the witnesses who actually took place in these events. Altogether, 14 soldiers and officers, and one news cameraman (who shot one of the two news clips) are interviewed.

The creator of the film, Ido Sela, displays a high awareness of the fact that, ultimately, any testimony is only a representation and, therefore, every testimony relates to a representation; hence the attempt to cope with the issues of sin, guilt or forgiveness is already/always a confrontation and verification vis-à-vis the display of images. The opening scene, for instance, is a realistic news shot even though it is actually a representation of a televised ritual which signifies and frames the *intifada* as it was captured in the Israeli and universal collective memory.

Later on, when the images of the violence that a wrongdoer had committed are shown to him on a television screen, which is available during the interview, the reflective stratagem (the bothersome presence of the image) turns into a blunt and direct presence. Here the wrongdoer is required not only to confront his own actions, but also the collective memory, as it is framed by television and reviewed from a historic perspective. The testimony of the cameraman who filmed the display of violence and abuse of the captive Palestinian in the town square that is shown on camera, as one of the interviewees, intensifies the reflective issue and turns it into an even more radical moral issue. Does the recorder of the events have any moral obligations? Is the camera itself a weapon? Or is the action of recording actually an action of hiding behind the camera, an evasion which enables avoidance of taking any action under the obligation to record? Is not the photographer, who continues to film the horror, and does not stop even in order to help the victim, actually collaborating in fact with evil?

These reflective issues become even more urgent when the question of the wrongdoer's willingness to take responsibility for his actions and ask for forgiveness is considered. Although the creator's will to protest the injustice that is done in the name of security cannot be doubted, almost all of the interviewees (if they do in fact accept responsibility for their injustice) concentrate on their own post-traumatic reality which they are sentenced to live with as a result of their actions. Most of them claim that they are sentenced to live forever with their unjust acts, and their victim's image will haunt them wherever they will go. However, almost none of them wishes to concentrate on the Palestinian victim and the grave injustice that was inflicted upon him – let alone take responsibility, by acknowledging their moral failure, and ask for forgiveness from the injured side. As we have argued, anyone who cannot ask for forgiveness and instead blames the victim for his or her own moral failure is beyond the limits of the discussion that this article seeks to deal with.

We will now focus on the main testimony, that of Reserve Major Matti Ben-Tzur, whose civilian training is that of a clinical therapist. His testimony appears only once during the film and lasts for about seven minutes, it is frequented by long pauses and a fair amount of questions which are directed towards him. The interviewee obviously has strong feelings of guilt following his firing of a tear gas grenade into a Palestinian house. It turned out that a child that was in the house started to suffocate and, as a result, there is a severe concern for her life.

- Interviewer:* Matti, I am interested in the process of confession. You speak of it as a thing you did over and over in a letter and orally. I think you are doing it here in some sense, too. I'm almost reminded of Catholic confession. And I ask myself if this confession doesn't let you go back and do just the same thing over again?
- Matti Ben-Tzur:* What's your score for cruelty? [long silence] Yes I think it does, to a large extent, yes.
- Interviewer:* But you actually should have asked the forgiveness of the family.
- Matti Ben-Tzur:* I didn't think of it that way, then.
- Interviewer:* You asked the forgiveness of the whole world ... You asked the forgiveness of those people who might be the most critical of this act and you didn't ask the forgiveness of the family where the baby was actually hurt.
- Matti Ben-Tzur:* Even now it does not sound appropriate to me ... they have to ask my forgiveness too ... for the fact that they led me into such a situation.

Against expectations, it seems that this interviewee who is professionally familiar with the experience of therapeutic confession and who probably excels at being sensitive, in fact, at the moment of truth cannot ask for Derrida's unconditional forgiveness.

It might be assumed that the actual participation of the interviewees in the film – their actual intent to face the camera and confess their actions in front of both the Israeli and Palestinian public – has, *in their view*, a declaration of sorts of their willingness to ask for forgiveness and purification. This is a *desire* for forgiveness, the fantasy that a public confession on its own merit will bring about 'self purification'. However, it is obvious in this case that this is not even Derrida's conditional forgiveness: if the victim has not answered the request for forgiveness, the act cannot be realized.

In this kind of reality there is no act of forgiveness – not the interested forgiveness which serves to benefit both parties emotionally, let alone an unconditional forgiveness. In this case also, Levinas's form of forgiveness does not apply since there is no dialogue between the parties regarding the questions of justice which the forgiveness should address.

In this early film, the conditions for forgiveness do not exist at all. The wrongdoer does not ask for forgiveness and sometimes, as we have seen, even blames the victim for his own wrongdoings. Also, the victim has no direct dialogue with the wrongdoer, and his voice is not heard at all, there are no words that represent his pain. In the light of this harsh reality, it should be asked where is the creator's own ideological voice?

In 1998, the Israeli Broadcast Authority (IBA, channel 1) launched a 22-episode documentary called *T'kuma* (revival) which dealt with Israeli history between the years of 1948–1998. In one part of the episode 'A fracture at home', which dealt with the First Lebanese War (1982), the commentary gives an almost official account:

On the fourth of September Bashir Gemayel was murdered. The following day Tzahal (IDF) set out to defend western Beirut. The cleansing of the refugee camps was imposed on the Phelange militia. Tzahal closed down the perimeter of the camps.

Simultaneously, one of the junior officers, Itai Shiloni, who was at the scene, is interviewed about the rumors that have started to circulate about a supposed massacre that is taking place in the refugee camps:

Even if there was any kind of talk, I didn't give a damn, it was just some more stories from those Lebanese that wanted to move from here to there, and were disrupting us from fulfilling our mission. Only later it turned out that these were people fleeing from the refugee camps where the massacre was taking place.

Later on, his indifference is replaced by a strong sense of guilt, and he continues by addressing himself:

How did you, Itai Shiloni, an officer of the army, stand at that crossroads and not call for a translator and ask or inquire what was going on? So what if you received an order? I saw multitudes of people suffering. What did you do – Lieutenant Itai Shiloni, in order to stop this from happening? In this trial I would have been ... convicted.

It seems that Lieutenant Itai Shiloni's testimony is the only expression found here of a witness who is suffering as a result of his own deeds. At the level of the testimony, as well as at the level of the editing of the scene (which reflects the narrator's voice, the ideological voice that derives from the text) there is a minor admission of the blame – but there is no remorse. The scene is presented in a technical and cold form; in daytime lighting within a space which seems to be a home, the lieutenant testifies in a reserved and cautious manner. The testimony is about his own suffering ('What did you do – Lieutenant Itai Shiloni ...') and not that of his victims. His on-camera testimony is jump-cutted several times to clips of anguished refugees. Some of them cry out: 'Where are the Arabs?'

This editorial choice can be seen as a further distancing of the responsibility for the case and an attempt to point the blame in a different direction. It seems that the integration of the text with the testimony is more concerned with trying to portray the sensitivity and misgivings of the 'good Israeli soldier', rather than making a genuine attempt at taking responsibility and asking for forgiveness, while keeping in accordance with the 'shooting and weeping' theme. It seems that this case does not even come close to the boundary from which a moral perspective is possible. In Derrida's terms, this is not forgiveness at all, not of the conditional and utilitarian kind and certainly not of the unconditional kind, which refers to the demand of forgiving the unforgiveable.

The First Lebanese War, and especially the massacres of Sabra and Shatila which were the subject of the testimony above, are also the main theme of Ari Folman's semi-documentary film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). By dramatically combining 'fantastic' distancing (through animation) and journalistic naturalism (see Figure 1), Folman attempts to hunt down his own elusive painful memory which climaxes in the scene of the massacre in the camps. This movie centers on the sufferings of the witness who has failed morally in real time. This failure is expressed by his helplessness to 'stop the awful wheels of history', to stop the unstoppable: the moral horror which history has determined as an irreversible fact.



**Figure 1.** Still from *Waltz with Bashir* (2008, dir. Ari Folman). Reproduced with permission.

Folman's tormented consciousness leads him to virtually retrace his footsteps during the war all the way up to the site of the trauma – the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. Gradually, the closer he gets to the inner circle of the massacre, to its perpetrators and spectators – the more he starts to develop a guilty conscience. This is expressed by the questions he asks his interviewees and himself and by his wondering out loud about the meaninglessness of what they have all seen there. Essentially, this is one man's attempt to return, after a considerable passage of time (about 25 years after the massacre) to a traumatic event in his life as a young soldier during the First Lebanese War. The unfolding of the story is identified with the hero's ability (Folman plays himself in the film) to recreate the trauma and thus redeem himself from the process of repression and distancing. During this journey he is helped by the stories of the traumas of his 'damaged' friends, who each tell him a different, personal story which helps to form a collective narrative – one that Folman, as a character, is part of.

During his investigation, which is fed by the traumatic nightmare, Folman acts as a sort of investigating detective who is obsessive about trying to rummage through his own reluctant memory. As is customary in the film noir genre, the detective may share the feeling of guilt with the criminal. The different people he interrogates (Folman's friends and accomplices in the Beirut events) are supposed to relieve him from the feelings of guilt when they tell him – in the words of Folman's friend who functions as a 'lead therapist' of sorts – 'You couldn't have done more than you did.' But it seems that Folman doesn't accept this answer at face value and continues to keep on displaying a strong need for agonizing and blaming himself. Folman almost asks: Who is the murderer? Who is responsible? Who is guilty? Is the murderer myself (even if I was far from the location of the massacre!)?; How guilty is someone who helped the massacre, albeit indirectly – by setting off light bombs to help the murderers? Is the passive observer also guilty?



**Figure 2.** *Waltz with Bashir* (2008, dir. Ari Folman. Reproduced with permission.

The question of guilt, therefore, is at the center of this narrative. Recognizing guilt is a basic condition for the wrongdoer's capacity to identify his or her crime and take responsibility for it. During the movie, Folman makes a conscious effort to accept his responsibility, to mark himself and his fellow witnesses as being at the very least partially guilty for the massacre. However, the film's aesthetics, its innovative visuals (see Figures 2 and 3), the richness of its images and its eclectic soundtrack – all of these necessarily create a further distancing of the pain. The beauty creates a sense of peace and reconciliation, almost fondly reminiscing the suffering. Thus we are prevented from dealing with the 'true material', *the real*, that which is not overwhelming with its aesthetic allure.

An extreme example of this problem is found in the film's closing scene. In this scene, there are two apparently opposed movements; on the one side, the film's emotional pathos climaxes, when the horrific images of the massacre are revealed to the viewer and to Folman (as a soldier at a checkpoint) who watches them in the last animation shot of the film; the self is confronted with the most awful thing from which he had supposedly tried to escape during the whole length of the film. On the other side, Folman, as the director, as the creator of the film, the ideological consciousness behind the film, still wants to offer some sort of aesthetic consolation: the change from the stylized animation of the film to the harsh realism of the archival footage turns the attention towards the film's making and style. The possibilities for moral and political discussions that the film opens up are almost defeated by this shocking aesthetic effect. One may understand the director's wish to use the realistic form – the traditional representation of the horror – in order to avoid the objection that he is 'flattening' the horror to simple animated effects. However, it seems that this mostly reveals only a position of mistrust towards the audience. Folman spreads before the audience a 'moral safety net' yet, paradoxically, this has a pacifying result since the audience is faced once again with the obvious, tiresome



**Figure 3.** Still from *Waltz with Bashir* (2008, dir. Ari Folman). Reproduced with permission.

familiarity of television aesthetics. Thus the viewers gain a dismissal from their *duty to rethink*; to rethink the situation by using the revolutionary aesthetics that the film offered up to that moment.

The hero of *Waltz with Bashir* is a suffering witness; however, despite the film's innovative aesthetics and perpetual attempt to establish a moral discourse regarding injustice, in the end, there is nothing new in its discourse that may persuade the audience to change its original position. It is possible that this is only an 'inner' discussion, only 'amongst insiders'. Its main issue is the affinity between memory and trauma and, more precisely, the linkage between the Jewish victims' trauma of the Holocaust and the injustice they inflict on the Palestinians. Asking for forgiveness from victims always demands that they be approached – even more in this case since Folman describes the acts inflicted upon the Palestinians as genocide and hints at Israel's connection to it. However, asking the other side for forgiveness is not on the agenda. Folman seems to be dealing with 'self forgiveness'; his interest is in his own suffering in light of the brutally exposed horror of the color footage of the final scene.

In his 2008 film *Z32*, Avi Mograbi delves into the story of a witness known as Z32, a soldier, who during his military service in the Second *Intifada* was an accomplice to the killing of Palestinian policemen, which was part of an Israeli act of retribution for the killing of Israeli soldiers at a checkpoint. The witness, haunted by his conscience, testifies before the camera about a war crime he thinks he was a part of (see Figure 4) and pleads for forgiveness from his girlfriend, who listens to his confession.

Since the confession takes place in front of the camera, the director – the man behind the camera, also turns into a recipient of the confession. At the same time, the director himself appears as an actor in his own film, and proceeds to get into different personas which characterize a forgiveness–remorse discourse, and even discusses the possibilities of forgiveness in front of the confessing soldier.



**Figure 4.** Still from *Z32* (dir. Avi Mograbi). Reproduced with permission.

The director also painfully ponders, on camera, whether in the end, his film is nothing but an exploitation, which uses the pain of other people for the sake of aesthetic excellence. The portrayed system of suffering creates a general reflection on the question of forgiveness and, in an even more general way – a reflection on the place of film as an art – between crime and forgiveness: let's admit it, the camera yearns for crimes; it tries to hunt down the dramatic allure which is tied to the sights of extreme violence. On the other hand, Mograbi asks, is it a decent proposition to demand the impossible from the cinematic artist? Is *silence* – 'the silence of the camera', the silence of the artist, better than the *testimony*, even if it is an ambivalent one, about the question of evil? It seems that the mere making of the film reflects the artist's response.

The testimony of the soldier Z32 is taken throughout the course of the film. In different variations and with a fair amount of repetition, the full unraveling of the testimony occurs. It is given in a series of conversations, filmed by the witness, between him and his girlfriend, which apparently take place at their own home (see Figure 5). Another testimony, which is given in the form of a direct monologue is given at the film maker's house, and is part of the interview which he conducts with him. Yet another testimony is taken during a car ride to the scene of the crime and during the reenactment of the killing itself which follows.

It is in these four spaces that the witness is slowly revealed. His *identity* remains hidden, but apparently his *appearance* gets clearer and clearer. The issue of concealing the witness's face, a common legal procedure as well as a popular aesthetic image, turns in this film from a constraint to a main aesthetic device, and thus raises philosophical questions. 'Conceal his face!' the director sings at the beginning of the film and goes on to present different technical ways of face concealment, some of which are based upon advanced video technology. Z32's mask continues to hide his real face until the end of the movie; the question if after his testimony it is his true face that is revealed, continues



**Figure 5.** Still from *Z32* (dir. Avi Mograbi). Reproduced with permission.

to bother the viewer. This question is doubled by the criminal's mask – a black nylon stocking which the director wears on his face, which he proceeds to slowly take off.

Mograbi expresses the ambiguity of the relationship between the interrogator (the director) and the witnesses. On the one hand, being someone who needs a witness Mograbi befriends Z32: he hosts him at his home, he drives him in his car, and talks to him in a peaceful manner; by implication he has forgiven him. On the other hand, his awareness of trying to turn the testimony into an aesthetic representation, into a 'film', an expressionistic fictitious documentary, creates a distance between him and the witness who is acting in his film (see Figure 6). These ambivalent relations may block the viewer's ability to establish a clear and consistent position towards the witness. This sense of confusion and dissociation together with the shifting attitude towards the witness/victim, the person who is suffering on account of his sin, all of these turn out to be the main subject of Mograbi's film, the object of its aesthetic representation.

Two questions remain unanswered at the end of the film: first, if and how can the traumatic moment be represented? Is the actual on-location reenactment, which the witness carries out with the film's crew any more real than the witness's verbal recollections in his confessional discussions with his girlfriend? In other words: does the director's presence, which will reflect his words forever, successfully attend emotionally to the horror? Does it help to overcome it and bring the witness to connect to the traumatizing experience on an emotional level? Or is the awareness of the camera and the theatrical mechanism which describes the horror (which is even sung in the context of an alienated cabaret) precisely the reason for the successful realistic manner of portraying the unspeakable (as well as the indescribable – the horror itself)?

The second question is the moral issue which stands at the center of the film: the question of atonement and forgiveness. Here it should be noted that the dialogue about forgiveness takes place on the same side – amongst the Israelis themselves. The soldier asks



**Figure 6.** Still from *Z32* (dir. Avi Mograbi). Reproduced with permission.

for his girlfriend's forgiveness; in another sense, the soldier asks for the director's forgiveness; the director asks for forgiveness from an imaginary court which deals with questions of aesthetics and morals. At this level, the question of whether the viewer will forgive Avi Mograbi for his manipulative and perhaps exploitive dimension within the film is also raised.

The Palestinians, who are the victims who have suffered most, are not addressed at all within this discourse of forgiveness. However, and this is in accordance with Derrida's approach, the movie offers a paradoxical solution: on the one hand, it presents the impossibility of testimony, whilst on the other hand, it calls for an obsessive pursuit for it against all odds. It is possible that this moral question of the unfeasibility of forgiveness does not surface in an explicit way in the movie, but it is definitely implied by the creator's concealed position at the ending of the film. It seems that the ending aims to leave the viewer helpless to reach a decision regarding the question of forgiveness. This could be seen as Mograbi's aim – to disclose the absurd situation entailed by the moral discourse of forgiveness. Mograbi's film is therefore a testimony to those boundaries that keep getting entangled amongst themselves: between good and evil in a tragic conflict whose end is nowhere in sight.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to outline the subject of the victimizing witness, the Israeli fighter who longs for redemption, in a number of televised and cinematic texts which differ from each other in a number of aspects: either works that can be described as 'real documentary' (*Eduyot, T'kuma*) or, in contrast, a documentary film with an experimental, reflective overtone (*Z32*), or a film based upon an innovative approach (animated documentary), which challenges the traditional split between the feature film

and documentary (*Waltz with Bashir*). In addition, these works also differ as to when they were produced. The earliest production that we reviewed was made in 1993 (*Eduyot*) while *Waltz with Bashir* and *Z32* were produced in 2008. Some of the works (*T'kuma* and *Waltz with Bashir*) focus on a specific event – the Sabrah and Shatila massacres which took place during the First Lebanese War, while the rest of the films deal with the violent conflict in the areas of the West Bank during the First (*Eduyot*) and Second (*Z32*) *Intifadas*.

The forgiveness discourse is tangled up with emotional problems which do not go unnoticed by the creative consciousness. In other words, the questions that victimizing witnesses pose to themselves and their fellow men are at the same time also posed to the creators; in what way do the films themselves serve as a realm of testimony? What defines the creator's approach towards the question of forgiveness? And how is the creator's unique ideological approach reflected in his work? The question of whether there is a dominant perspective or ideological approach throughout the different works is worth examination. Can these films, despite their many differences – in witnesses, events and genres – supply a profound view of the collective subconscious which forms the forgiveness and atonement discourse?

The fact that the presence of the forgiveness discourse in Israeli film and television is highly prominent in recent years indicates a searching of the soul as well as an aesthetic uncertainty regarding if and how this discourse can be represented.

At first glance, it seems that the different texts indicate the possible existence of two different approaches. The first, which is possessed by the creator's/witness's guilt, either consciously or purposely, or even as a result of repression, skips over the possibility of asking for the victim's forgiveness, which is present in the situation. The other approach does not disregard the paradox. In its way, it refers to the limits of asking for forgiveness, to its impossibility, to its lunatic and self entangling boundaries. More than anything, it seems that the works examined here provide only a narrow possibility for forgiveness.

Reinforcing these pessimistic conclusions is the meager public response aroused by these films. From the political perspective, which sees the cinema as a means of enlisting public opinion, these movies have certainly not generated any new discourse among the Israeli public regarding the issue of possible forgiveness as a basis for resolving the conflict between the opposing sides. This is true for both Israelis and Palestinians. One exception to this rule is the public discussion in the Israeli media regarding Ari Folman's film, *Waltz with Bashir*. The many responses this film stirred up should be understood as an expression of the Israeli consensus, which sees the First Lebanon War as a failure. The fact that this film focuses on a war that is already over may explain the gap between the responses to this film and to other films discussed here, which in effect focus on the ongoing and ever-present bloody conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. At least in this regard, when it comes to politics, the power of confessional art is quite limited. The effect created by the confession is indeed therapeutic, but only for the artist himself and much less so for his audience. Hence, it appears that the function of the films reviewed here has been reduced to satisfying the yearning of the individual – the artist, the wrongdoer – for absolution. Effecting political change, creating a new perception of the conflict influenced by the wrongdoer's confession and, in the final analysis, making a significant impact upon audiences

viewing the confessional films – all these potentially positive developments, at least for the time being, continue to belong to a distant utopia.

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## Notes

1. By using the term ‘victimizer’, rather than the word ‘perpetrator’, we aim to highlight the agonized dialectic of the victim/perpetrator in a conflict zone where victims are/become perpetrators and perpetrators also become victims.
2. The book *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Little (2009[2006]) created a widespread public discourse about whether it was right to vocalize (albeit fictitiously) the murderer’s point-of-view – in this case, an SS officer during the Second World War, for instance. The complex relations between the victimizing witness, forgiveness and the moving picture are treated in many documentary films and television programs, among them *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, dir. Marcel Ophüls, 1969) dealing, among other things, with the French collaboration with the Nazi regime during the war, or the 2000 documentary film *Long Night’s Journey into Day* directed by Deborah Hoffmann and Frances Reid, which deals with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission activities in post-Apartheid South Africa. The victimizer’s drama is also at the center of many feature films – a central example would be that of Clint Eastwood, who after having a long career in which he played the roles of the violent policeman or the fearless cowboy, started to take an interest in the character of the victimizer and the question of his atonement. His films: *Unforgiven* (1992), *Flags of our Fathers* (2006), *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) and *Gran Torino* (2008) are all examples of this dramatic change.

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